



They have built a tight-knit and thriving community, starting small businesses, launching churches, temples and arts groups, bringing new foods to Minnesota, and creating space for their families to thrive.

About 12,000 Cambodians live in Minnesota today, mostly in and around the Twin Cities, including Shakopee, according to the most recent data. The community has built one of the largest Buddhist temples in the country, the Watt Munisotaram near Farmington, which draws hundreds of community members for ceremonies and celebrations several times a year, according to [Sahan Journal](#).

“They [U.S.-born Cambodians] probably don’t have as much education and knowledge about Cambodian culture, traditions and Buddhism — but their parents try really hard to educate them and bring them to the temple,” Iddhimuni Moeng Sang, abbot in charge of the Watt Munisotaram, said through a translator.



Cambodians are the seventh-largest refugee population in the state. Minnesota is home to a larger percentage of refugee immigrants than other states, with 25 to 50 percent of the state's immigrants coming as refugees compared to the national average of eight percent. Minnesota, along with California, Massachusetts, Washington, and Texas, has one of the country's largest Cambodian populations, according to [Carleton College's Religions in Minnesota](#).

Soeun Ouch dedicated her life to providing for her family. Her warmth, thoughtfulness, and compassion were evident in every interaction and relationship she found. Fifty years ago, she found the love of her life, and together, Soeun and San Pao (1928-2015) showed those around them the true definition of partnership, devotion, and commitment.

At age 88, Soeun Ouch died on March 3, 2021, and was buried next to her husband, San Pao, at Valley Cemetery in Shakopee.



SHAKOPEE HERITAGE SOCIETY
2109 Boulder Pointe, Shakopee, MN 55379

952-693-3865

shakopeeheritage.org



SHAKOPEE HERITAGE SOCIETY



Soeun Ouch
1933-2021



Pol Pot (1925-1928) led the communist Khmer Rouge and was backed by North Vietnam, while the Khmer Republic with Lon Nol (1913-1985) who was backed by the United States and South Vietnam. About 2 million people were killed. It was known as the Cambodian Genocide.

During the Vietnam War (1955-1975), civil war erupted in Cambodia in 1967 between communist and democratic forces. On April 17, 1975, the Khmer Rouge entered Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia, and declared victory. This resulted in the deaths of almost 2 million people and became known as the Cambodian Genocide. In addition, it led to a mass exodus as an estimated 150,000 Cambodians fled to the United States as refugees between 1975 and 1994. Soeun Ouch emigrated from Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge, and arrived in the United States in August 1985.

On one side of the Cambodian civil war was the Khmer Republic led by Lon Nol (1913-1985) which was backed by the United States and South Vietnam. On the other side was the communist Khmer Rouge led by Pol Pot (1925-1928) (previously known as Saloth Sar) which was backed by North Vietnam.

Years of fighting ensued, including intense bombing of Cambodia by the United States. Because Cambodia was officially a neutral country, the United States kept these bombings a secret from Congress and the public. The U.S. military dropped 540,000 tons of bombs on Cambodia,

killing somewhere between 150,000 to 500,000 civilians. Some scholars believe that these bombings played a significant role in the rise of the Khmer Rouge by driving Vietnamese communist forces deeper into Cambodia and allowing them to provide military support to the Khmer Rouge. In addition, the Khmer Rouge gained support among rural Cambodians by pointing to the death and devastation caused by the bombings.

On April 17, 1975, the Khmer Rouge entered Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia, and declared victory. They set up a new government that ultimately ruled Cambodia from April 1975 to January 1979. This regime was characterized by totalitarianism and brutality. Not long after declaring victory, they executed former military and government officials. They got rid of

institutions such as markets, banks, schools, Western medicine, and Buddhism. They also abolished money and private property.

The Khmer Rouge turned Cambodia into a forced labor camp, seeking to create a rural agricultural society isolated from the rest of the world. People were forced to work on the farms for long hours under brutal conditions. Many died from exhaustion, starvation, or disease.

The United States was reluctant to accept Cambodian refugees as it was still managing the resettlement of Vietnamese, Hmong, and Lao refugees. But as international attention to the atrocities in Cambodia grew, the United States began to admit more Cambodians into the country. The 1980 Refugee Act raised the annual ceiling for refugees from 17,400 to 50,000. It also changed the definition of "refugee" to a person with "well-founded fear of persecution."

The U.S. Cambodian Refugee program ended in 1994, at which point a total of about 150,000 refugees had been admitted. Refugees were dispersed into different cities across the country. Rebuilding in the United States has not been easy. Many Cambodian refugees live with deep trauma from the devastation of their homeland, loss of family members, multiple displacements, and poor conditions in refugee camps.

