
*excerpt from*

## UNDER THE DRAGON - California's New Culture

**by Lonny Shavelson and Fred Setterberg**

**buy the book**

# The Iranian Therapist and Her Cambodian Clients

**by Lonny Shavelson and Fred Setterberg**

Dr. Mona Afari studied Lay's impassive expression as the translator rendered his words from Cambodian into English. "My mother and father," she heard the translator repeat, "…the Khmer Rouge take them. I never see again."

Mona watched Lay's eyes spark with pain as he recounted the story of his parents' murder, and she asked herself the question that had haunted her since founding the weekly therapy group: Could she— an Iranian-born, female therapist—breach the chasm separating her from these six middle-aged male survivors of the Cambodian holocaust and provide the help they desperately needed?

The Cambodian men had spilled into Oakland's largely Latino Fruitvale District like victims thrown from a terrible traffic accident—uneducated villagers battered physically and psychologically, utterly unprepared for life in America. In stark contrast, Mona was the upper class daughter of an Iranian industrialist, an educated urban cosmopolite, a Jew from a Muslim nation, and a willing immigrant to the United States.

Mona concentrated on the tone of Lay's voice. She did not understand the Cambodian language, but neither was she completely comfortable in English. She had grown up speaking Farsi—the only language that conveyed to her ears the deeper, wilder sea of feeling that churned beneath words. Lay spoke in a somber monotone about his long months shackled to fourteen other prisoners in an underground punishment cell, the terrible stench of the slop bucket, the weekly beatings that shattered his ribs—and how the soldiers pursued him in his nightmares, even now, two decades after leaving Cambodia.

Mona sat across from Lay, trying to imagine the full measure of his suffering, and she reminded herself that his story replicated, in similar horrific detail, that of each of the six men gathered around the small wooden table.

"I think, this morning," Mona announced, "we will all paint."

The translator repeated Mona's instructions and passed out sheets of cream-colored construction paper, brushes, and several sets of watercolors. The men busily daubed their canvasses with bright globs and streaks in a painterly routine that had grown familiar over the past nine months.

Mona had begun working with the Cambodians as a staff psychologist with the refugee program of Jewish Children's and Family Services—an effort founded originally to resettle Russian Jews. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the stream of new arrivals slowed to a trickle and the Jewish refugee program faced a choice: close up shop, or offer its expertise to people from other backgrounds and faiths. The agency reached out to Muslims from Bosnia, Afghans fleeing their nation's civil war, and finally, the most traumatized people that Mona had encountered in twenty years as a psychotherapist, the Cambodians.

In the corner of the room, Mona's boom box thrummed a Chopin nocturne. She slowly circled around the table, stopping at last to inspect Lay's painting.

Lay had drawn a series of thatched brown huts nestled amid profuse greenery—his village back in Cambodia. At the far left border, he had inserted a volley of furious red slashes. Mona understood that the violent strokes indicated the approach of the Khmer Rouge and the end of everything in Lay's life that had promised peace, contentment, love, and hope.

Mona let escape a small, wistful sigh. This sense of foreboding and loss—it was her story, too. For twenty-five hundred years, her own family had lived in Iran. Yet as a Jew, she had always felt a stranger in her native country. In 1977, she moved to California to attend college. Two years later, from the safety of her new home, she received heartbreaking letters about the Islamic Revolution rapidly transforming Iran. Her friends were languishing in prison, enduring barbaric tortures, slated for the firing squads. Mona longed now to tell Lay and the other Cambodians about the tragedy of her own birthplace. Most of all, she wanted to convey that she, like them, still did not feel at home in America.

On a warm saturday afternoon in april, soon after thefirst break of spring, mona drove to

Wat Dharmararam Buddhist temple in Stockton to celebrate the Cambodian New Year.

She arrived alone at the front gate of the temple grounds—a sprawling, nine-acre, plain-mowed field squeezed between several acres of strawberry patch and the area's recent swell of housing tracts. Once inside, Mona hesitated, feeling suddenly conspicuous and out of place among the crowd of one thousand Cambodians or more. Monks wearing sun-orange robes zigzagged along the pathway, their floor-length hems dragging in the dirt as they recited endless verses of Buddhist prayer. In the far corner, the fairgrounds loudspeaker boomed out shrill and unintelligible blessings.

Mona wandered across the temple grounds, not certain what direction to take. It felt strange to stand in the midst of such a large gathering of Cambodians—and yet most days, there was seldom a time when she did not find herself thinking about her Cambodian clients. Her agency's funding for the men's group had recently ended, but Mona continued to work with them, compelled by an urgency she found difficult to explain. She had even borrowed fifteen hundred dollars from her parents to subsidize her office rent. Mona told herself that people took out loans all the time to purchase a house or attend the university. For her, working with the Cambodians had become a similar necessity.

Within a few minutes, Mona spotted a familiar face—Lay, standing alongside some other men from her group and their families. They had all found seats on the picnic benches under a shade tree. Lay waved her toward the tables. Mona forced her face into a smile and ambled slowly in their direction.

She clapped Lay's extended hand between her two palms, squeezed, bowed, and smiled. Then she repeated the gesture with each of the men from her group and several of the women and children who stood alongside them. She wasn't certain which children belonged to whom, but she could see that everybody standing around the picnic tables knew who she was. Lay spoke rapidly in Cambodian, repeating Mona's name several times, causing each face in the crowd to turn toward her and appreciatively grin. One of the Cambodian women—tiny, wiry, perhaps fifty years old—opened a large picnic basket and began to ply Mona with treats. Mona pecked at her heaping plate of shrimp salad and sweet rice in coconut milk. When the woman handed her a steaming cup of lemongrass soup, Mona thought how familiar its sharp scent had become in recent months.

After eating, Mona thanked everybody profusely, backing away into the crowd as she waved goodbye. Lay stepped forward to shake her hand once again.

She knew that Lay trusted her; she was his only "American" friend. It didn't matter that he understood almost nothing about her background: few other Americans did either. In the center of the temple grounds, Mona recalled that when

she first arrived in California, people confused Iran with Iraq; they thought Persians were Arabs. This kind of anonymity increased her remoteness, compounded her sadness. Only twenty years old when she left Iran, Mona had plunged into a deep depression. She had stopped eating, spent days in bed, withdrawn from college. Even now, years after fighting her way through her darkest, most immobilizing episodes, she still sometimes perceives the world to be lost in a haze. Mona thought of herself as someone who perpetually mislaid her glasses and could not quite bring life's contours and details into focus. The great benefit, gone unrecognized until now, was that this affliction gave her some idea of how the Cambodians viewed their own existence.

Mona snaked a path along the busy walkway, straining to get her bearings as she peered over the sea of shoulders and heads. Soon she was caught in the irresistible drift of the crowd, and it delivered her to a story-high statue of a reclining Buddha. The sandstone figure sprawled across half the length of a basketball court, his eyes closed as though sleeping or dead. Mona had learned from the previous week's men's group that Cambodian New Year presents an opportunity to discard the year's sorrows and start over again. Alongside the reclining Buddha, a half-dozen children and adults doused one another with bowls of water tinted red, pink, and yellow—a playful ritual of washing away the past with a bright rinse of the future. A small round man about Lay's age laughed uproariously as his children soaked his starched white shirt and sharply creased black slacks.

Mona slipped out of the crowd and wound her way to the bandstand. A Cambodian pop band twanged electric guitars, while trap drums pounded out a rock-and-roll dance beat. Scores of Cambodian couples gyrated across the dance floor—the young men and women twirling and flailing their arms, amiably colliding with middle-aged couples primly executing a two-step. Mona saw in the faces of these dancers the sheer pleasure of belonging; they took for granted that whatever they had suffered in the past was understood by everybody in their midst. It was a feeling Mona rarely experienced.

She felt a hand clasp her wrist. It was the Cambodian woman she had met at Lay's picnic table, and she now pulled Mona onto the dance floor. Mona felt shy, frightened, slightly ridiculous. But she smiled graciously, throwing up her hands toward the sky in a facsimile of joyous abandon. Together she and the woman bobbled back and forth, locked together in no particular step as the guitars rang out and the drums pounded on.

In recent months, Mona had felt a change in her life. As a young woman, she had defined herself almost entirely in opposing terms—a Jew out of place in Muslim Iran, an Iranian lost in America. The hours, weeks, and months she had spent helping the Cambodians had put an end to this enduring discord and dissatisfaction. Mona knew that everything she'd given to the Cambodians had been handed back to her. In their company, she was even beginning to feel rooted in what had always been the cold soil of America. Sometimes Mona wondered: who was the healer and who was being healed?