



LIVING HELL

Democratic Kampuchea, August 1978

Text by Gunnar Bergström · Photos by Gunnar Bergström & Hedda Ekerwald

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Searching for the Truth

Documentation Center of Cambodia

P.O. Box 1110, Phnom Penh, Cambodia

Tel.: + 855 (23) 211-875 | Fax.: + 855 (23) 210-358

E-mail: dccam@online.com.kh | Homepage: www.dccam.org

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I. Bergström, Gunnar

II. Chhang, Youk

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Preface

While the Khmer Rouge ruled Cambodia, almost no one from the West was permitted to visit. I, for one, learned first hand why that was so—just a few months after Pol Pot fell from power. In 1979 my newspaper dispatched me to cover the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime and the ensuing refugee holocaust. From those refugees, suffering and dying on the Thai-Cambodian border, I learned of the predations and death the Khmer Rouge had visited on its own people. It's no wonder the regime's leaders did not want visitors to see what they were doing.

Reading Gunnar Bergström's book today, I am struck by the wilful effort he and his colleagues made to excuse and explain away what they saw there in 1978, all because they wanted to believe in the "revolution." The clues were manifest, the officials' explanations vacuous and implausible.

Gunnar and I are the same age. And like the vast majority of young Americans, I could not have been more opposed to the Vietnam War. I demonstrated against Nixon and the conflict while in college and wrote about it once I started my first newspaper job.

My point here is that I and millions of others in the West were no less angry about the war in Indochina than were Gunnar and his colleagues. But when I heard the first bits of information about what the Khmer Rouge were doing, in my head I saw crimes against humanity. One wrong, the American war, cannot be held as an excuse for another monstrous crime.

Gunnar found much that alarmed him during his visit in 1978—more than enough to raise suspicions. Was it fair, he writes, to brand everyone who lived in a city the enemy and evict them from their homes? What about the "naive idea" of turning a several-thousand-year-old culture into a corp of "new men" in a matter of a few years? What of the Potemkin-village hospital—or the peasants making "medications" from herbs, while penicillin remained unavailable. And how to explain the young

children, and "orphans," forced to work instead of attending school?

So few of us were allowed in that it seems a shame that the rare visitors were not able to put these and other pieces together.

The Khmer Rouge didn't invite me to visit—or others like me. We weren't members of the Swedish-Cambodian Friendship Association. We would not have come with a point of view pre-disposed to forgive. I'd like to think that given the same set of facts presented here, I would have come away with a different conclusion. But then, hindsight imposes a blindness of its own.

What would have happened if Gunnar had come back and "exposed" the Khmer Rouge for what they were? Given the state of the world at that time, it seems unlikely that any nation would have stepped in to stop the carnage—even if the facts had come out.

Still, every effort to sway world opinion against that genocidal regime might have chastened its leaders, given pause to their supporters, saved a few lives.

Joel Brinkley
Stanford University

Introduction

I visited Cambodia August 12-August 26 1978. At that time, the movement we have come to call The Khmer Rouge ruled Cambodia under the name of “Democratic Kampuchea”. Pol Pot was prime minister and we, a delegation of 4, came from an organization called “The Sweden-Kampuchea Friendship Association”. We were invited to Cambodia as one of the first and few foreign visitors since the Khmer Rouge came to power.

At that time I was a supporter of Democratic Kampuchea. Today, knowing better, I look back 30 years and try to understand how that was possible. The way I see it today, the trip should have not been made since it became part of the Khmer Rouge propaganda. For my part in this I am deeply sorry. But I can't turn back history. I can try to learn from it and I can also hope that this exhibition of the pictures taken during the trip, together with captions, comments and the visitors own reflections, can create a deeper understanding of the Khmer Rouge period, but also how a perverted ideology can delude so many people, even people believing they are fighting for a good cause.

I had worked in the movement against the war in Cambodia and Vietnam during the 1970s. In the Khmer Rouge we thought we saw a pure movement that took no orders from the superpowers. I, and many of my generation in Sweden, were sympathetic towards the Chinese Revolution and Mao Zedong. When we read about the Cambodian revolution we thought we had found something even better; a real egalitarian state, with no oppression, free of slavery and trying to avoid all the mistakes of the other communist revolutions.

A short time after Khmer Rouge victory in April 1975 we heard and read stories about killings and oppression. We did not want to believe them. Some of them might be true but we could excuse that as part of the turmoil after the war. Soon Cambodia would fulfill my (and some of my friends) dreams of totally different and admirable revolution.

Today I realize that even before our visit, there was proof enough that the truth about the Cambodian revolution was a story of murder, killings, torture and oppression. We did not want to believe that. And then we were invited to Cambodia to see with our own eyes. The pictures you see here is what we saw. Of course we were not taken to Tuol Sleng (which was kept secret) and we did not witness any brutality. But we did not speak Khmer, we were dependent on our Khmer Rouge hosts and there were limits to the trip – we were never allowed to stay overnight in a village. But these images, combined with our maoist biased views ended up in us seeing what we wanted to see. In this exhibition you can follow our trip, see what we saw and reflect on my comments from then and now.

We must learn from history so something like this never happens again

Gunnar Bergström

Vallentuna, Sweden in April 1978.

Pictures from Democratic Kampuchea, August 1978

The delegation's staff, 1978



Thoughts from 1978

- Someone lived in this house but has probably been evacuated from the city.
- Is this fair? Were they that kind of enemy? Couldn't they have been won over for the revolution instead of being treated as an enemy just because they were from the city?
- It feels like sleeping in someone else's bed.

Thoughts Today

- Where are these young people today?
- What happened to them later?
- Are they alive?



Bombed or blown up bridge (Chrouy Chang Var bridge) over the Mekong (Phnom Penh)

Phnom Penh, August 1978



Thoughts from 1978

- Isn't this a waste of resources – to let things go to rust and decay?
- But—we must trust the leaders, and they must have good reasons for this policy. This evacuation was a violation of people's rights. Let's hope the revolution grows up.

Thoughts Today

- There seems to have been a perverted ideology in the minds of the Khmer Rouge leadership confusing their “class analysis” with viewing almost all city inhabitants as enemies.

Forbidden Thought at the Time

This revolution misunderstands both Marxism and communism.



The Royal Stupa

The Royal Palace



Thoughts from 1978

- We visited the Silver Pagoda, which seemed intact despite rumors to the contrary.
- We asked to see King Sihanouk, but that was one of the things we were denied.
- Does Sihanouk deserve the treatment he's getting?

Thoughts Today

- Sihanouk's treatment was a disgrace.

Forbidden Thought at the Time

This revolution is misunderstanding Marxism, communism

Phnom Penh—an evacuated city



Thoughts from 1978

- The evacuation of the cities must have caused a lot of suffering—even among people who could have been supporters of the revolution. Let's hope this is temporary!

Thoughts Today

- The Khmer Rouge leaders lied to their people and to the world about the evacuations, and the excuses for it have varied over time. All of them are variations of different lies.

Phnom Penh August 19, 1978





Phnom Penh boat ride, August 19, 1978

Thoughts from 1978

- This boat ride shows how much devastation still remains after the war.

Thoughts Today

- What happened to these people on the boat later in life? What do they feel today (if they are still alive) about what happened?
- People were dying behind these beautiful walls and buildings.

**Lon Nol bunker
(according to our hosts)**



This was part of the town of Skun (according to our Khmer Rouge hosts)



Thoughts from 1978

- To understand Cambodia and what has happened here, you cannot ignore the war before 1975. Thousand of tons of bombs were dropped on the country.

Thoughts Today

- We should not use the American bombings as an excuse for not holding the Khmer Rouge accountable, but we should also hold the American administration from that period (1970-75) accountable for what they did.

**Destroyed buildings in the
Kampong Cham area**



A typical stop on the trip, to film and take photos.



Thoughts from 1978

- We are allowed to stop anywhere and film what we want. This can't be a show only for us.

Thoughts Today

- The things we were shown did disprove some of the rumors about Cambodia. But we were not shown everything, and the things refugees were saying were compatible with what we saw. We should have realized the tour's limitations.

More Thoughts at The Time

Our main guide talked to us about creating the “new man.” Many earlier revolutions held this dream—often with a naïve idea about making quick changes in a culture that has existed for thousands of years. I don't think you can create a “new man” in 3 years! How can our guide have believed that?

Mobile brigade building a smaller dam north of Phnom Penh.



Thoughts from 1978

- We heard stories about city people being persecuted. We wanted to see if this was true. We asked to talk to anyone from a city working at this site. Our hosts said there were city people, but they were too “busy” working for the revolution.
- I did not believe that, not even then.

Thoughts Today

- These brigades seem to part of the larger scheme of commanding, and ordering people around for a larger goal, while forgetting to consider the individual and personal circumstances. The larger scheme seems to be an excuse for violating basic human rights.

Forbidden Thoughts at The Time

What if the stories are true? What if they have in fact killed most of the cities' inhabitants?

Ferry crossing north of Phnom Penh



Thoughts from 1978

- This spot seems much more relaxed and free than any of the rumors about genocide and terror would indicate.

Thoughts Today

- Were these “base people” carefully selected? Or, maybe only certain trusted citizens used the ferry crossing.

Young female brigade waiting for the bus at a ferry crossing north of Phnom Penh

Thoughts from 1978

- Boys and girls are kept separate in these brigades. How many of these workers are voluntary, and how much of this is forced labor?
- But it might be a passing phase for the goal of a prosperous Cambodia.

Thoughts Today

- It seems the Khmer Rouge leaders continued planning for war. Everything was organized without any consideration of the sacrifices that were asked of everyone and with no popular participation. A small group of people with no popular support organized this revolution.





**A young brigade boarding a bus—
North of Phnom Penh**

Thoughts from 1978

- These people did not seem stressed, oppressed, starving or unhappy

Thoughts Today

- Maybe we met only “old people” and Khmer Rouge cadre who were comparatively well off.

Female workers from a cooperative in a rice field.



Thoughts from 1978

- This is the solution to feeding the world—cooperatives with people working together!

Thoughts Today

- Solidarity comes from the grass roots—not from threats, force and overwork.



Women working in the rice fields

Children at the cooperative—protecting the crop



Thoughts from 1978

- Poor farm children worked the fields in Sweden, too—before we were prosperous enough to put everyone in school.

Thoughts Today

- I know now that many children lost their parents and never got the chance to grow up in a safe environment.

Communal eating at the cooperative



Thoughts from 1978

- Everybody seems to have enough food, so maybe this communal effort is a solution to distributing small resources in a fair way.

Thoughts Today

- This was enforced against people's will, creating famine and poverty. The whole picture shows a militarized country whose people are treated like numbers.

Forbidden Thought at The Time

This looks like a military camp. Why are children separated from adults, and why are the sexes separated. Is this forced upon people?

Communal eating



Family from the city



Thoughts from 1978

- Seeing this family from Phnom Penh proves that not all city people have been killed.

Thoughts Today

- This strange meeting is still hard to explain and understand. Suddenly we were invited to meet a former resident of Phnom Penh. One of us had known this man—he really was from Phnom Penh, and they had met before, in 1967. What are the chances of such a meeting?
- We don't know anything about his story since we did not speak Khmer.
- The man claimed in French to be speaking the truth, the translator said. The truth is that nobody had a chance to talk about the truth in Democratic Kampuchea.

Farmers and their buffalo





Children catching frogs

Thoughts from 1978

- These children seem to be okay

Thoughts Today

- Most children were not this well off.

Man and horse along the road



Thoughts from 1978

- This picture seems to refute the assertion that everyone wore the same black clothes.

Thoughts Today

- Who was this man, trusted to travel along the road? Did we meet people by coincidence, or was everything organized and planned?

The former bus station in Kampong Cham



Thoughts from 1978

- Was the evacuation of this city really wise?

Thoughts Today

- The lack of public transportation helped keep everyone chained to their present situation. They couldn't easily travel—or buy food on the way. Abolishing money sounded at first like a bold, revolutionary step. But it created a kind of slavery. It chained people to their assignments, the only place they could get food.

Women workers at the bus station in Kampong Cham



Thoughts from 1978

- These young women seem to be relaxed and happy.

Thoughts Today

- How much control did they have over their lives?



Rice fields on the road from
Kampong Cham

Rubber factory near Kampong Cham



Thoughts from 1978

- The slogans seen here are unusual; around Cambodia you don't often see them.

Thoughts Today

- It seems that political propaganda was mostly verbal, at meetings. Journals and other written documents were kept from the people.

Rubber factory workers



Thoughts from 1978

- Are these working conditions safe? What about the chemicals?
- This factory proves that Democratic Kampuchea is not as backward as some critics say.

Thoughts Today

- What about the quality of the produced rubber? I have no knowledge.

Rubber factory





Rubber factory worker

Women in brick factory



Medicine factory Kampong Cham



Thoughts from 1978

- This is further proof that some of the things said about Democratic Kampuchea are not true. There are hospitals and medicine.

Thoughts Today

- Effective medicine was scarce. Most people never had any access to medical help.
- We don't know what kind of medicine they were making. They talked about revolutionary herbs and claimed that they could cure most diseases with these herbs. This fanatical notion caused lots of suffering and death.

Woman worker in medicine factory





Medicine factory Kampong Cham

Thoughts from 1978

- Factory officials first claimed that peasants did everything here, driven by revolutionary zeal. When asked how the peasants would know about sterilization and other medical issues, we were at last told that a “revolutionary doctor” had assisted.
- Why is it a problem to admit that you use knowledge from educated people?

Thoughts Today

- The disregard for science and education stemmed from something the Khmer Rouge inherited from China’s “Gang of 4”—the disdain of intellectuals. Educated people were considered enemies only because of their backgrounds.
- The Khmer Rouge leaders themselves were intellectuals—something they often tried to hide.

Medicine factory Kampong Cham



Thoughts from 1978

- Are these orphans who work here so they can survive, or are they children taken from their parents?
- The work they are doing, (filling ampoules) is not suitable for children

Thoughts Today

- They dress the children like soldiers. The Khmer Rouge slogans and propaganda give the impression of a country continuously at war
- That propaganda supported this idea. It helped to feed the paranoia that was a crucial part of the leadership's thinking.



Guest house outside
Kampong Thom

On the road north, toward Siem Reap



Thoughts from 1978

- We did not sense a feeling of oppression.

Thoughts Today

- Were these base people? NOT SURE WHAT “BASE PEOPLE” MEANS
- Did they put on an act for us?

Irrigation dam construction on the road north



Thoughts from 1978

- This is an amazing achievement—Cambodia's unique contribution to the problem of feeding the population without dependence on foreign aid!

Thoughts Today

- The revolution was carried out following a blueprint. People were ordered about with no consideration for the individual.
- It didn't work. There was always a shortage of food in spite of all the hard work.
- And why not use excavators and trucks? The regime imported some, and they could have been used to relieve people of exhausting work.
- The Khmer Rouge did accept Chinese aid—why not use it here to save people the hard work?

Dam construction





Dam construction

Workers at dam construction



Thoughts from 1978

- These people are happy and smiling.

Thoughts Today

- Yes, people were happy and smiling. But how is this possible? Perhaps some of them supported the Khmer Rouge, some benefited and some had to put on a show.



Dam construction workers

Part of the constructed dam



Thoughts from 1978

- The irrigation plan seems to be working!

Thoughts Today

- It seems that the irrigation plan was part of a megalomaniacal dream in the minds of a few leaders with delusions of grandeur.



Crocodile Farm near Siem Reap

Bayon

Thoughts from 1978

- Great civilizations rise and disappear again. These buildings in stone represent both a great civilization and the hard work of thousands who remain anonymous in the history books but who left these monuments behind as a memorial—and a memory.





Angkor Thom: Gateway to Bayon

Angkor Thom: Gateway to Bayon

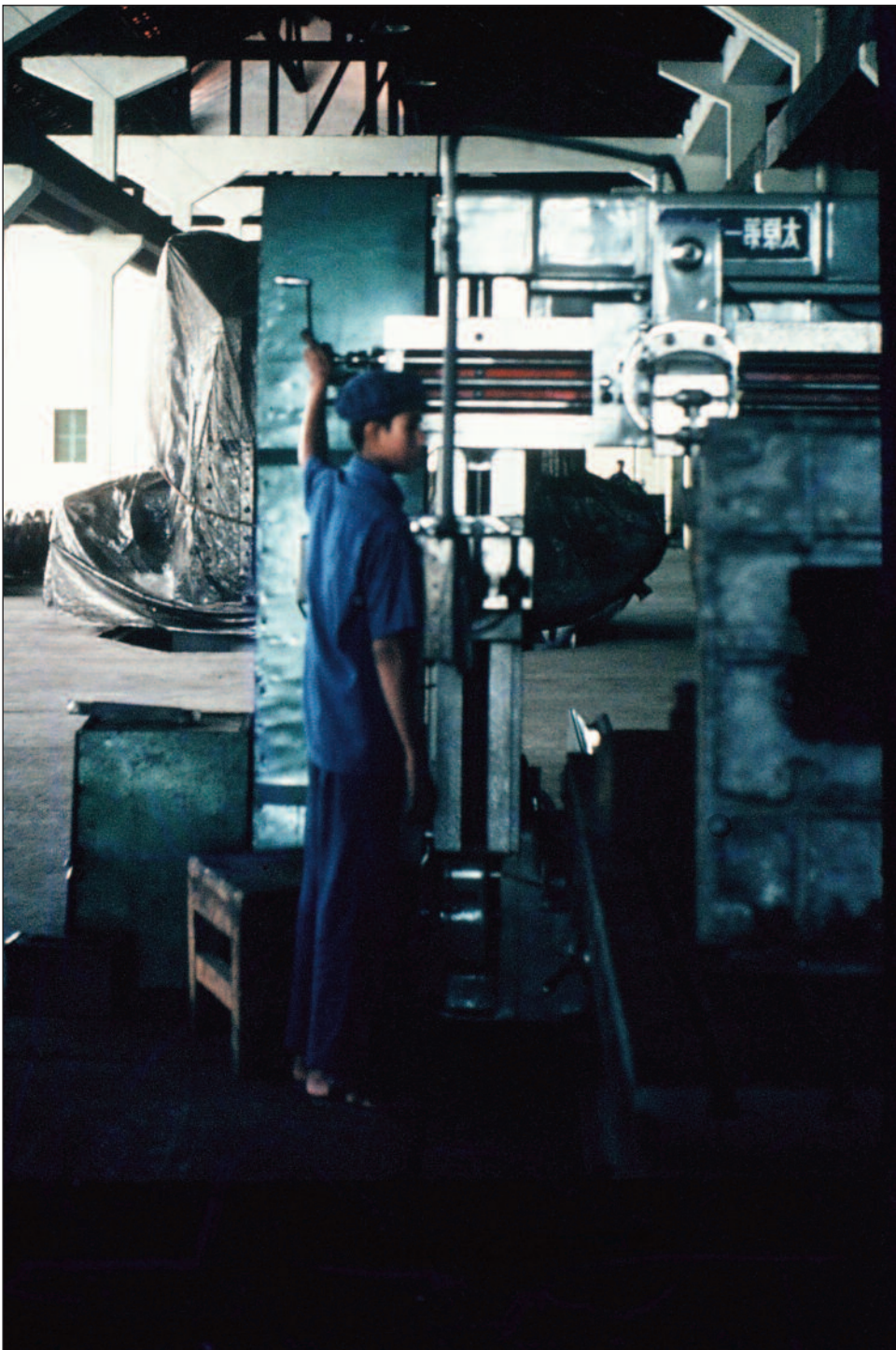




Bayon

Irrigation workers in the fields





Factory worker in Phnom Penh

Making farm tools

Thoughts from 1978

- The planned economy seems to be working. Here they are concentrating on the most important issue —farming! This is the opposite of Stalin's mistakes in the Soviet Union, trying to build heavy industry very rapidly. This is even an advanced step compared to Mao's China!
- Concentrate your efforts on the principal issue!

Thoughts Today

- Concentrating your economic efforts and planning is not all bad—but this was done at the price of turning the country into a labor camp of forced servitude and no freedom.

Factory worker in Phnom Penh





Young boy working in the factory

Thoughts from 1978 & Thoughts Today

- This boy should be in school.

Factory in Phnom Penh



Technical school in Phnom Penh



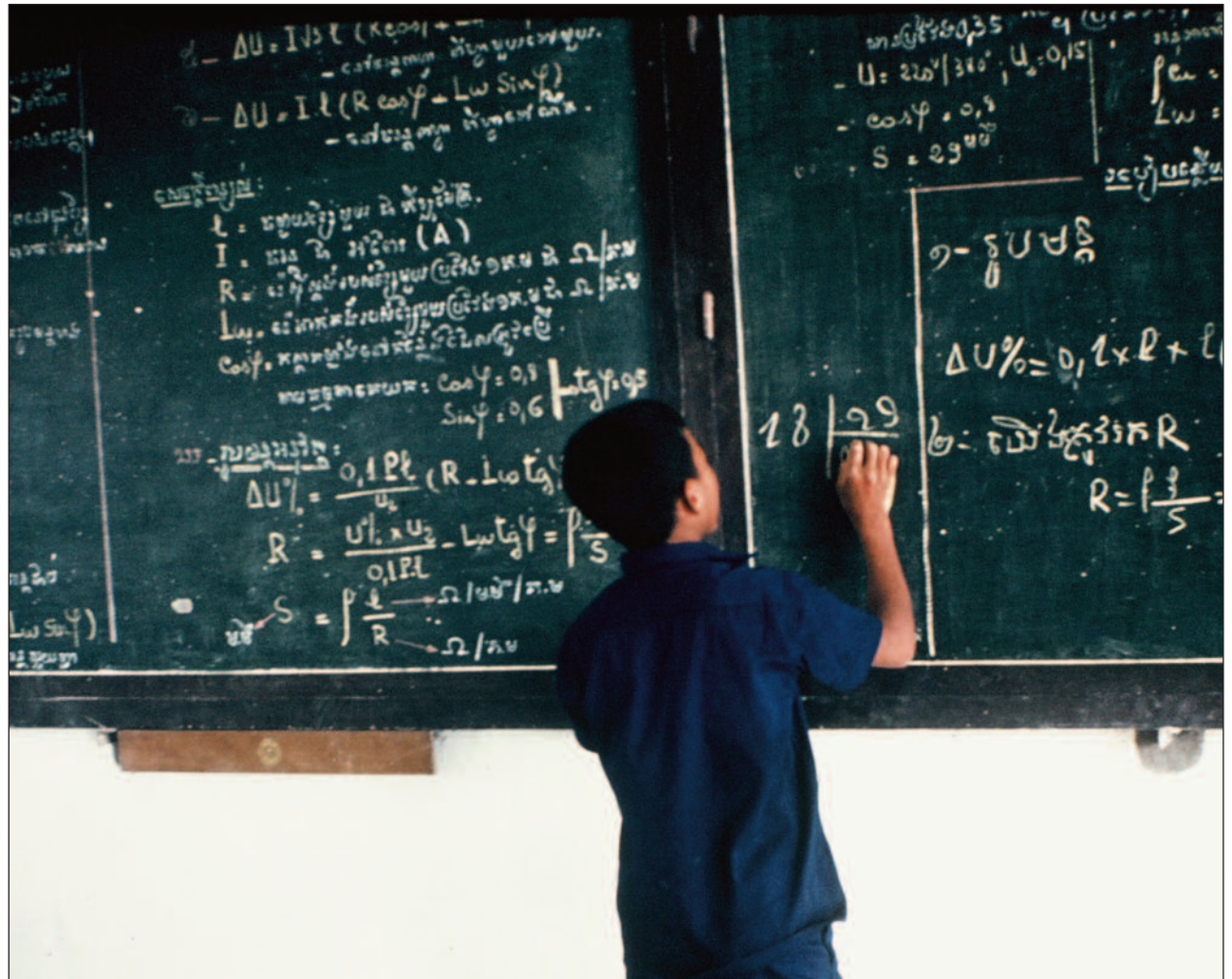
Thoughts from 1978

- Is this for real? They tell us that the teaching here is being done by revolutionary peasants; no professional are being used.
- Once again we see this pseudo-revolutionary idea that all intellectuals are enemies! They will have to grow out of this misconception sooner or later.

Thoughts Today

- Was this school real—or a show for us?

Student at the technical high school



Thoughts from 1978

- Who would believe the story that all of this was done without any prior education?

Thoughts Today

- This looks like a fake all together.

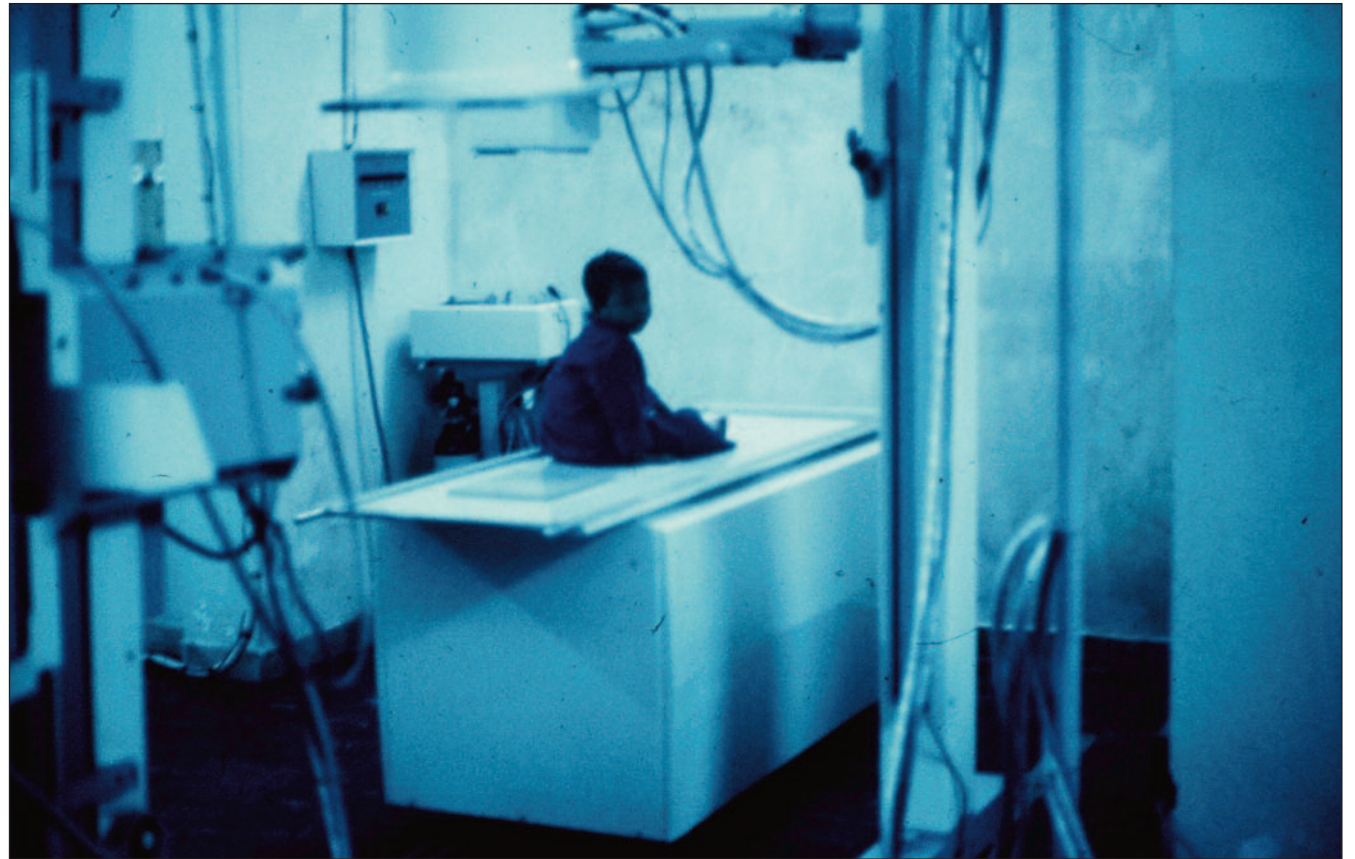
Teacher at the technical high school



Thoughts from 1978 & Thoughts Today

- There were very few students there—was it another show?

Hospital in Phnom Penh



Thoughts from 1978

- The hospital is almost empty—but it seems to be operational.

Thoughts Today

- This could have been one of the staged scenes we were shown. Impossible to know.

Hospital in Phnom Penh



Thoughts from 1978 & Thoughts Today

- Where are all the patients? If this is a real hospital—who is it for?

Hospital Phnom Penh



Revolutionary show in Phnom Penh theatre



Thoughts from 1978

- This show was also for a Romanian song and dance troupe visiting Cambodia.

Thoughts Today

- A traditional performance praising the revolution.
- I wonder if it's correct that Laurence Pique, a French woman and the only foreigner remaining in Cambodia during this period, was present, behind the scenes. If this is true – how did she feel about seeing us there and knowing that she's not allowed to make contact?

Revolutionary show in
Phnom Penh theatre





Revolutionary show in Phnom Penh theatre

This man played an instrumental version of traditional folk music—so sometimes the Khmer Rouge accepted culture from the old society.

Textile cooperative near Phnom Penh



Thoughts from 1978

- I asked how these workers get food since they earn no money. The answer was that the surplus from other cooperatives was brought here and traded for clothes.
- It means that there must be someone who decides the exchange rates.
- This will become complicated when the economy grows. They will probably need to introduce money again.

Thoughts Today

- The Cambodian Communist party tried to move fast and become the exemplary revolution, accomplishing things nobody else had dared try. They talked about being ahead of China, Korea, Albania and all the other communist revolutions.
- Along the way, though, they forgot about caring for their people. They drafted a revolution on the drawing board with no humanitarian considerations.



Textile workers

The harbor in Sihanoukville (Kampong Som)



Thoughts from 1978

- This, too, shows that Cambodia is not isolated. They export and import, but on a small, clever scale.
- We were told this boat was taking rice to Madagascar

Thoughts Today

- Cambodia imported more goods than the leaders admitted—mainly fuel, from China and Korea. Their slogan, rely on your own resources, wasn't always followed.
- The terrible truth is that people suffered and died to makes these exports possible. For example, they exported rice while Cambodians were starving.



Kapok for export

Boat construction,
Sihanoukville
(Kampong Som)





Boat construction

Military vessel, Sihanoukville



Thoughts from 1978 & Thoughts Today

- These boats and all the trucks need fuel. They must be importing more than they admit.

Fishing boats



Thoughts Today

- Were these boats used?

Young boys on boat

Thoughts from 1978

- Once again, these young boys should be in school. But if they are orphans, then this is probably better than being homeless.

Thoughts Today

- It doesn't matter if they were orphans. They still should have been in school.





Farm transport southeast

Kampot



Thoughts from 1978

- Why did they empty all of the towns?

Thoughts Today

- The picture tells it all.

A Cooperative in the southeast



Thoughts from 1978

- They said this cooperative was moved here from the Vietnamese border.
- I think they are showing us this because it's a working, functional cooperative.

Leaders of the cooperative



Children at the cooperative



Thoughts from 1978

- These kids seem to do okay.

Kitchen



Thoughts from 1978

- There seems to be enough food.

Thoughts Today

- This was a showplace for foreigners.



A cooperative forge

Blowing gas





Children at the cooperative

Children and their
caretaker at a cooperative





Child care

Children in Southeast



Thoughts from 1978

- These kids seem to be okay.

Thoughts Today

- Are these also children of the "old people"?

Building a house



Thoughts from 1978

- We stopped here, passing by. The claim was that all families should have a new home. Impressive.

Thoughts Today

- Was this pre-arranged? A man here spoke French, which I thought normally would risk his life.

Finished house



Thoughts from 1978

- When everybody gets a home like this, the standards are okay for a poor country.

Thoughts Today

- Was this the home of a privileged person – who had a bicycle?

School



Thoughts from 1978

- This is more proof that the things said about Cambodia are not true. They do have schools.

Thoughts Today

- This must be for children of the leaders or other trusted people.
- Many children did not go to any school.

Classroom





School

Vietnamese tank



Thoughts from 1978

- The Khmer Rouge claimed big victories.

Forbidden thought at the time

Parts of the Khmer Rouge propaganda are racist; some of it is obviously paranoid and false. (*i.e. the Black Book published in December 1978*)

Thoughts Today

- This is part of the Pol Pot policy that is hard to understand. The Khmer Rouge obviously provoked and attacked Vietnam and killed people in Vietnam—eventually bringing on the invasion and their downfall.
- The question is why. It might have been intended, in part, to unite the people against a common enemy. But there were also delusions of grandeur, dreams of recapturing parts of Kampuchea Krom. Khmer Rouge propaganda also offered racist views of Vietnamese.



A man presented as a refugee from Vietnam (Khmer Krom)

Thoughts from 1978

- They are saying these people are refugees from Vietnam. They are Khmer Krom, and Vietnam has persecuted them.

Thoughts Today

- This was impossible to verify since everything was said in Khmer. Were we being fooled once again? I think so.

Travelling in Cambodia Under the Time of the Khmer Rouge



A typical stop on the trip to film and take photos.

On August 12, 1978, our flight from Beijing landed at Pochentong Airport. I was a member of a delegation of 4 Swedes who had been invited to visit Democratic Kampuchea. Very few westerners had been allowed to visit Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge regime. The few let in were diplomats, friendship groups or Maoist communist delegations. By 1978, I think the Khmer Rouge realized they needed to counter all the allegations of murder, terror and genocide they had faced ever since taking power in April 1975. But they still were control freaks and wanted to be sure that the visitors were “friendly.” All through their time in power, they invited few independent journalists to visit.

We talked about the trip a lot before we left. We wanted to avoid being used as propaganda for murder and genocide. Therefore, we wanted to believe that the allegations were largely untrue. We agreed that there might have been excesses and violations of human rights. But we reasoned that in every revolution violations occur, and the important thing was that they cease after a while. We assumed we were visiting a revolution in progress, and as a result the revolution was not perfect. We were not prepared for what we would say, do or how we would react if some of the things said about Cambodia seemed to be true—that is, allegations of terror and mass murder.

We saw only what the Khmer Rouge wanted us to see. We realized that and tried to peer “around the corner” at things we were not shown. We stayed in the cities and were not allowed to stay at a

cooperative. In the cities, we could walk freely, but a guard always followed us—and, I guess, reported what we were doing. The only time anyone was stopped was the first night in Pnom Penh, when the two women in our group went out for a walk and were stopped after a few minutes. We complained, and that did not happen again.

We sometimes asked our drivers to stop so we could film and see things that were not planned. We were allowed to do that. Walking around the cities was all we were allowed to do independently. While on a 14-day organized tour, we were dependent on our hosts. This is one reason I think the trip should not have been made. We did become part of the Khmer Rouge propaganda.

Did we believe what the Khmer Rouge told us? I can answer only for myself. Some things I never believed. I did not think they were honest in their answers to allegations of murders after they took power. When we asked about the judicial system (courts, law, lawyers etc) their answers were not satisfactory. They said all this legal stuff was unnecessary, and that all problems were being taken care of by village committees—by the “people”. Even then I realized that this allowed continuing human rights violations. I put that down to the revolution’s immaturity and the lack of democratic traditions in Cambodia.

We asked questions about the things we saw. There were things shown to us that I thought were hard to verify. Was the Phnom Penh hospital a stage show or for real? Was the story told us about the Khmer

Khrom refugees fleeing from Vietnam true? We had no way of knowing. We kept on asking and sometimes got satisfactory responses. We regarded other answers as propaganda.

Other things also disturbed me, even at that time. At one excavation site I asked to talk to a former city dweller. I was told that all of them were too busy working for the revolution and did not have the time. I never believed that. I did not want to believe that so many people from the cities had been killed or tortured, but a doubt grew in my mind.

I also had some disagreements with our main host, Sok Rim, who talked about “the new man” and about “party dictatorship.” I thought he had an immature view of revolutionary changes and a misunderstanding of Marxism.

So, in the end, how could we believe and support this regime? I think it boils down to wanting to believe. All of us had worked against the American war in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. When the world’s view clearly split between the Vietnamese Communists and the Khmer Rouge, we took the Cambodian side. Day and night for years, we had worked to support this. Could we have been wrong? I admitted some Cambodian mistakes but told myself that I needed to take a stand and that a perfect revolution does not exist. I deluded myself and accepted the positive side of the Cambodian Revolution, regarding it as stronger than the mistakes they were making. I had Maoist glasses on.

Adding to the delusion, some of the things said about the situation did not appear to be true, as far as we could see. We saw people with glasses in spite of rumors that all of them were killed. We met people

we had been told had been executed, and they were alive. We saw no starvation where we travelled. So if some of the allegations against Democratic Kampuchea were wrong—how could we believe the rest?

We should have considered that most of the allegations against the Khmer Rouge could have been true in spite of what we saw. We grew more positive during the trip. That, I think, was a psychological mechanism at work. What would have happened if we had come back and said many of the allegations against Cambodia were true? We weren’t ready for that. I was asked to say something about our visit for Phnom Penh radio, and I did feel some unease about that. I did not want to offer propaganda, even though I supported the revolution. So I said a few words about the things I thought I could support and left out other things. I don’t know if the interview was ever broadcast, but I can still remember an uneasy feeling, a foreboding. A few months later, I dropped my support for the Khmer Rouge and could admit publically that we had been wrong all the time.

But in the fall of 1978 I still believed that Democratic Kampuchea was worthy of solidarity and support.

There is a lesson to be learned here.

The meeting with Pol Pot and Ieng Sary



Pol Pot and Gunnar

When we arrived in Cambodia, we asked for a few things beyond the “standard” tour. We asked to stay in a cooperative for a few nights, not just to visit for a few hours. We were denied that. We also asked to interview Khieu Ponnary, Pol Pot’s wife and officially the chairperson of the women’s association. I sometimes doubted that some organizations the Khmer Rouge talked about really existed. But at that time, we did not know that Khieu Ponnary’s health was deteriorating. In any case, they would not let us meet her. We also asked to interview Pol Pot. To that, we didn’t get an immediate answer. We were told to submit questions in advance. We were used to this since the Vietnamese and Chinese communists used the same procedure. Of course this is so these leaders aren’t caught off-guard; they wanted to prepare their answers.

A few days later, when the women were out in Phnom Penh on a stroll, a jeep arrived with our hosts. They told us to get dressed and ready because we were meeting Pol Pot in a few hours. We told them the women were out, but they insisted that this was not a problem. And in fact, 20 minutes later the women had been picked up and returned to the house. They didn’t have a clue why they were being picked up because the driver and the guards only spoke Khmer.

They drove us to the presidential palace. During the first part of the meeting, Pol Pot read his answers to our written questions. He was formal and said nothing new. Foreign Minister Ieng Sary was also present but did not comment or interfere with Pol

Pot’s long answers. Pol Pot spoke in Khmer, and everything was translated to French. Of course he was asked about the allegations of genocide and denied everything.

After this formal part, which was filmed for Swedish Television, we were invited to dinner in the adjacent room. As best as I can remember we were served clams, fish and rice. During this part of the dinner we talked more freely, and Ieng Sary participated in the conversation. We talked about the imperialist propaganda against the Khmer Rouge and why the revolution in Cambodia was different from all others. Pol Pot still gave “speeches” more than sharing views. In that respect he was little different from other communist leaders I had met. This felt like standard protocol. In the middle of the dinner, however, he got tired of having our French being translated to him since he understood French perfectly well. So he stopped the tiresome charade of translating things he already understood. He kept answering in Khmer though, even though he spoke French after many years in Paris.

During an intermission, I went to the bathroom together with Ieng Sary. When we were on our own, he spoke French. He told me that Sweden’s TV2 channel had submitted an application to visit and film in Cambodia and asked what I thought about that. I told him I thought that they would have everything to win in opening the country for journalists. I told him they just created the suspicion that they had something to hide by rejecting ordinary media. I don’t know if he listened.

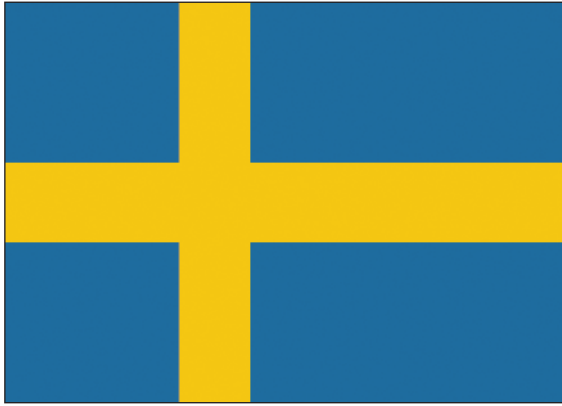
When we were driven back to the guest house, I was asked what I thought about “Brother No 1.” This was the first time I had heard that expression, and I was a little surprised. So far the Cambodian Revolution had been very different than the Chinese, Vietnamese or Korean in that there was no personality cult. During our trip we saw no pictures of Pol Pot anywhere. In fact, the Khmer leaders were rather anonymous and hardly told us their names. Most Cambodians had no idea who Pol Pot was. But maybe they were planning for a personality cult. The fact that they kept the painter Vann Nath alive in Tuol Sleng to paint portraits and create statues of Pol Pot might mean that they were planning to launch a personality cult.

So what could I answer? Pol Pot did not make a great impression. His speech was low-key, and he gave very little new information in what he said. We were filming all the time, and the dinner was rather formal. So I can’t honestly say that he gave a very strong impression at all. I gave a formal and polite answer about his revolutionary accomplishments.

People have raised the possibility that Pol Pot was insane. I have even seen discussions of what kind of psychiatric disorder he suffered from. I have also been asked if Pol Pot seemed sane when we met him. To me he seemed completely sane in the normal sense of the word. If he had been put to trial, I think he should have been held accountable for what he did. But I do think that he, as a result of personal traits, suffered from delusions of grandeur at the end. This conclusion does not result from my meeting with him. It is based on other information. This process started early and led to his tendency to consider all opposition as hostile. Opponents were accused of being foreign agents. This paranoia is similar to what

happened in the Soviet Union under Stalin. Both Stalin and Pol Pot saw enemies everywhere and could not tolerate opposition in any form. Power does corrupt, and it seems that Pol Pot did plan a personality cult. He intended to have a gigantic statue of himself raised at the site of Wat Pnom. When the Vietnamese were on their way to Pnom Penh in January 5, 1979, he talked to Sihanouk about defeating Vietnam and went on for hours about these schemes. He had lost contact with reality.

Getting Out of Hell—Coming Home to Sweden



Swedish Flag

When we returned home to Sweden, all of us felt basically positive toward the Cambodian revolution. We agreed not to write a common report in which our different points of view would disappear. So I wrote my own newspaper articles, as did the others. We all went on tour showing slides and giving speeches.

There were differences between us even at that time. I could not defend the evacuation of the cities, so I wrote differently on that than some of the others. Some of us disagreed on some of the child labor we saw. Was it no different than the child labor in other Asian countries and in Sweden 100 years ago? These differences were within the framework of a largely positive picture of Cambodia under Pol Pot.

By the end of 1978 the doubts in my mind began to surface. There were so many refugees and stories of atrocities that they couldn't all be untrue. I also realized that some of them were consistent with what we had seen. Things were said about Cambodia that we could just dismiss because we knew they were not true, but I could no longer use those as an excuse for dismissing everything. People could have been taken away at night, tortured and executed when we were there. The way we travelled and lived did not allow us to witness any of this.

In January 1979 Vietnam invaded Cambodia. The Swedish-Cambodian Friendship Association turned their efforts toward opposing the invasion. By this time I had moved to the north of Sweden and was no longer a member. The invasion came at about the same time as I decided to go public with a statement that I thought we had been wrong all the time, and this needed to be said. The other members in the

group did not contact me about this, and so with one exception I don't know exactly how they reacted. The exception was the author Jan Myrdal, who complained that people should not be discussing the merits of Pol Pot at this crucial time for the Cambodian nation. My answer to this was that I thought the morale of Cambodia's people might collapse if they believed Pol Pot would come back. I don't think people wanted Vietnam to occupy their country, but the Khmer Rouge had so terrorized people that most of them were not willing to take any risk that Pol Pot would return to power. That had to be considered when deciding how to oppose the occupation. It's also interesting to note that throughout communist history, when people want to talk about mistakes made, they are told this is not the moment. There is always a reason to push mistakes under the rug.

A year later I declined to join the board of the association again. I was asked to return for "decorative" purposes—because they thought it would look good to have a broad base of people against the occupation, including me. By then, I was opposed to Pol Pot. I said I thought the association, to become trustworthy again, needed to clean itself from its pro-Pol Pot history. A few years later the association was dissolved. We all went on with our lives and have not met as a group since then. We all have different opinions about what happened, and all of us have come to different conclusions. The words and thoughts in this book are my own only.

—Gunnar Bergström, August 2008

Final Word

You have now seen what we saw during a 14-day visit to Cambodia during the reign of Democratic Kampuchea.

As I said in the introduction, I think the trip was a mistake since we became part of the propaganda of the Khmer Rouge.

The trip cannot be undone. I have personally learned a lot from my lack of judgement at the time. Maybe some of these lessons can be carried on to others so they don't have to be repeated. Maybe there are lessons I still have failed to learn and conclusions I haven't reached that others can see.

My experience has taught me that there are fundamental human rights that are not negotiable:

- The freedom of thought and expression
- The freedom of expressing any religious belief and practising it
- The freedom of movement

I also hope that I have learned to be sceptical of all "total" solutions, of leaders who claim that they have seen "the truth" and of solutions that claim to quickly solve every problem.

I have not lost faith in the possibility of a better world for all and with a world order more fair and just than the one we are living in today.

For those still appalled by my support of the Khmer Rouge at the time, and especially those who suffered personally under that regime, I can only say I am sorry and ask for your forgiveness.

Sweden in April 2008

About the Author



Gunnar Bergström in Kampong Cham province, 1978. Photo by Hedda Ekerwald

1978

In 1978 I was 27 years old and had two children. I was politically active in the movement against the war in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia for many years. The movement was strong in Sweden, the strongest in the Western world. Thousands of young people devoted all their time to protest the US war. I was one of those young persons. My whole youth was dominated by this.

Later I, as many others, became attracted to the Maoist communism. We believed the Soviet Union was corrupt and thought China was different. Some of us got more and more interested in the Cambodian revolution which we thought was new and free from corruption.

I was a member of that Maoist party until 1979 when I left and at the same time publically rejected my old views on the Khmer Rouge, realizing we had been wrong all the time.

Present Day

Today I am 57 years old and work as a counsellor in treatment of drug addicts and people in a criminal lifestyle. I live in Vallentuna north of Stockholm with my wife. All 5 children have moved on their own.

I am no longer politically active in a political party since I found no party I can identify with. I still believe that it should be possible to create a fair world with justice and equality but I don't believe in the solutions that I believed in 1978—the maoist solution.

The Partnership

The Living History, Sweden

The Living History Forum is a government agency which has been commissioned with the task of promoting issues relating to tolerance, democracy and human rights—with the Holocaust as its point of reference. By spreading knowledge about the darkest sides of human history, we want to influence the future. We learn to see patterns. We are forced to reflect on issues such as justice, humanity and personal responsibility.

We ask ourselves how it could ever happen, and why it keeps happening.

Our aim is to encourage people's readiness to work for the equal value of all human beings. To make everyone listen, understand and act. But this requires more than merely distributing information. We need to be as creative as we are relevant.

The Living History Forum will show the exhibition in The Living History Forum's premises in the old city of Stockholm. The exhibition will travel all around Sweden from 2009.

www.levandehistoria.se

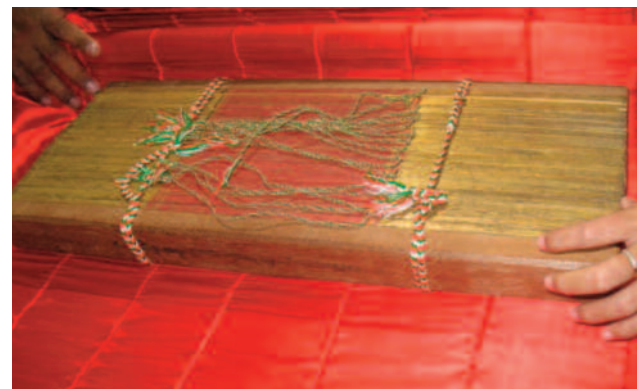
The Documentation Center of Cambodia

The Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam) is an independent Cambodian research institute dedicated to the promotion of *memory* and *justice*. By documenting, researching, and sharing the history of the Khmer Rouge period, we aim to help Cambodians heal the wounds of the past. By assisting in accountability efforts and teaching principles of law and justice, we seek to contribute to

a stronger rule of law and to prevent future human rights abuses, in Cambodia and beyond.

To ensure that we can play a similar role for many years to come, we are now preparing to establish a permanent center called the **Sleuk Rith Institute**. The Institute will serve as a permanent documentation center of Cambodia and include a research and training institute, library, museum, and media center. Above all, the Sleuk Rith Institute will embody and represent a permanent stand against genocide, in Cambodia, Asia, and throughout the world. The name we have chosen for the Institute reflects our core objectives, as well as our Cambodian heritage. *Sleuk rith* are dried leaves that Cambodian religious leaders and scholars have used for centuries to document history, disseminate knowledge, and even preserve culture during periods of harsh rule. They also represent Cambodia's cultural and historical ties to its neighbors, as religious scholars have long used them in modern-day Burma, Thailand, and Indonesia. Throughout Asia, *sleuk rith* represent both the beauty of knowledge and the power of human perseverance during times of peril.

The Royal Government of Cambodia has generously given us a large piece of land for the Institute in Phnom Penh and entrusted us with a broad educational mandate for the future. We are now working with top local and international architects to design the Institute and have embarked on a fundraising campaign to support the construction and operation of the Sleuk Rith Institute. This brochure outlines our vision and our plans for the future.



Our Vision for the Sleuk Rith Institute

Since 1995, we have built a reputation as an international leader in the quest for memory and justice. Our mission has even more to do with the future than with the past. The Sleuk Rith Institute will be dedicated to similar aims.

- As a *museum*, the Institute will cherish the memory of lost loved ones, foster reconciliation and forgiveness, and show the power of Khmer culture to survive and overcome the dark legacy of Khmer Rouge terror.
- As a *research center* with a state-of-the art library, it will continue our work in compiling, organizing, analyzing, and preserving information about Democratic Kampuchea and other periods of grave human suffering. Scholarly research at the Institute will promote accountability and encourage a greater understanding of the history of Cambodia and other places torn by conflict and tragedy.
- As an *educational institute*, it will train Cambodians and international visitors about the lessons of the past and the principles of law and human rights needed to build a more promising future.
- Finally, as a *media hub*, the Institute will disseminate knowledge widely and contribute to a more robust and democratic dialogue among Cambodians and others about the requirements for a just society.

Education is the critical strand that connects all of our initiatives. Even when the ongoing trials of certain Khmer Rouge officials are complete, research and teaching must continue for many years if the tragedy of Democratic Kampuchea is to be fully understood. Cambodians will only achieve closure and reconciliation with a full and impartial history of the period, and they will only be able to prevent similar abuses in the future and build a better rule of law by understanding the causes and consequences of genocide. The Sleuk Rith Institute will play an essential role in these related processes of societal healing and development.

Acknowledgement

This book would not have been possible without help and support from several people and institutions. Chief among them are the victims. Many are unknown to me, but they have testified to the misery imposed on their lives under the Khmer Rouge. They told stories that contributed to my belated understanding of the Khmer Rouge terror that lay behind the polished surface that was shown to us during our trip.

Thanks must also go to Youk Chhang, director of the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam). The original idea for the book and accompanying exhibition were his, and he provided the initial editing. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) and Living History Forum in Sweden provided funding. Sophorn Huy and Sarah Dickenson organized the project proposal and funding. Joel Brinkley edited the manuscript. Yvonne Wong provided the book's graphic design. Sim Sopheak and Kim Sovannpany helped get the book published. Kalyan Sann of DC-Cam and Ly Daravuth at Reyum Arts Gallery arranged and set up the exhibition in Cambodia. Sayana Ser and Kalyanee Mam arranged and set up the exhibition at the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia. Hedda Ekerwald allowed us to use her photos.

