

Supplement || Elizabeth Becker, *Pol Pot Remembered*.

Source BBC's Radio 4 'From Our Own Correspondent', April 20, 1998



Pol Pot: "Ranting and raving ... always in the quietest of tones"

Elizabeth Becker of the New York Times, author of 'When the War is Over', is one of the few westerners ever to have met Pol Pot. She sent this personal report to the BBC's 'From Our Own Correspondent':

It has been 18 years since I met him at the height of his power and even though my interview lasted little more than a few hours, it was long enough to give me a touchstone that I have used ever since, to help me figure out what Pol Pot may be up to, how and why he could evade and bully his way out of one trap after another, and whether the belated efforts to capture him might work.

It was 22 December 1978, a cool sunny afternoon in Phnom Penh, the last day of a unique two week trip to Democratic Kampuchea.

The Khmer Rouge had only invited select communist journalists to their country before my trip and - with the exception of the film produced by a gifted Yugoslav television crew - little had been revealed by those communists.

I was accompanied by another American journalist and a British academic, Malcolm Caldwell.

We travelled in a bubble

We had travelled throughout the country, heavily guarded and under near house arrest.

I had lived in Cambodia for several years, covering the war, and although the terrain was achingly familiar - the sugar palms, the tough bright green of the rice paddies, and the vast flat skies - the people themselves had seemed alien on this trip.

The communist cadre wore black pyjamas. The few peasants I saw wore rags. No one was allowed to talk to me freely.

I had travelled in a bubble - looking at Cambodians who answered my questions from official translators with blank faces or occasional expressions of fear.

Now, as I walked up the semi-circular driveway into the former palace of the French colonial governor, I too was shaking.

Elegant, and aloof

We were met by the first of a platoon of officials and guided into the huge official receiving room. At the opposite end was Pol Pot, seated like a king in front of the floor-to-ceiling windows. Here was the man who had committed some of the worst crimes in modern history and he was not what I had expected.

He was actually elegant - with a pleasing smile and delicate, alert eyes. He was much more polished than the mugshot quality photographs I had seen of him.

He was dressed impeccably in a tailored Mao-style grey suit. His hands were especially refined, his gestures nearly dainty.

But there was no question of his aloofness. He never rose to greet me and we were seated at a considerable distance from him. Pacing behind Pol Pot was Ieng Sary, the foreign minister, and it was soon clear that I was part of an audience, not a reporter about to interview him.

Ranting in the quietest of tones

In the softest voice, without a script or piece of paper, Pol Pot went on to lecture us for over an hour.

He ranted and raved about the impending Vietnamese invasion - always in the quietest of tones - saying he was sure that American and European troops of NATO would intervene on his behalf and fight the Vietnamese and their Soviet allies in the rice paddies and highways of Cambodia.

There was no interrupting. There were no questions about the condition of the Cambodian people, about the executions and killing fields. Pol Pot's vision had no room for anything but enemies and justification of his behaviour.

"We want only peace," he said, "to build up our country. World opinion is paying great attention to the threat against Democratic Kampuchea. They are anxious, they fear Kampuchea cannot oppose the Vietnamese. This could hurt the interests of the Southeast Asian countries and all of the world's countries."

Except for the occasional flickering of a wrist, Pol Pot remained motionless as he laid out his worst-case scenario, bragging that he would convince the US, Europe and most of Asia to support him.

I left convinced he was insane. That night, just before midnight, my observation was justified.

While we slept in a government guest house, armed soldiers of the regime burst in on us, threatening me and murdering Professor Caldwell in his bedroom.

Indescribable fear

There are no words to describe the fear and horror of that single night. We left the next morning, bringing Professor Caldwell's coffin back to Beijing just hours before the Vietnamese invasion.

Later I was furious as I watched Pol Pot achieve what had seemed impossible: winning the support of most of the US and Europe against Vietnam.

His government remained at the United Nations as the representative of Cambodia and for nearly 12 years the US government refused to acknowledge that his regime had committed genocide.

Hopes of justice

Peace in Cambodia - forcing the Vietnamese to withdraw and hold new elections - was the only goal and the US felt that bringing Pol Pot to justice would prevent the Vietnamese from withdrawing.

The 1994 Yugoslav tribunal proved that theory wrong. The war crimes tribunal of those monsters got underway before the Dayton peace plan for Bosnia was approved the following year.

So, in this last year I had hopes that Pol Pot might be forced to testify at a Cambodian Tribunal, that he might be forced to read through the documents from his torture chambers, forced to listen to weeks upon weeks of angry survivors testifying to the destruction he had wrecked in their lives and the entire country.

His last testimony though was different. On 2 April he gave his last interview. He was no longer a communist king but a sick old tyrant under house arrest in a bare hut.

Appropriately it was a Cambodian journalist - Samkhom Pin - who took down Pol Pot's last public utterance. "I am in extremely bad health," he said, "the blood does not reach my brain. It hurts every day."