



Relatives killed “for nothing,” survivors doomed to living with ghosts
Stephanie Gee
August 20, 2009

Relatives of victims whose lives ended brutally in S-21’s hell evoked with courage, before the Chamber and the accused, a beloved face gone forever, a broken family bliss, an unspeakable distress and the anguish sprung from the ignorance about the fate of those persecuted and imagining the most inhumane torture they must have endured. They stressed the powerlessness in the face of these individual tragedies that unfolded without them. Mrs Antonya Tioulong, sister of opposition party leader Sam Rainsy’s wife, shared on Tuesday August 18th a testimony filled with restraint that struck the right chord. By late afternoon, farmer Neth Phaly paid an impassioned tribute to his brother, “smashed” at S-21, and whose only remains consisted in a portrait he presented to the court, firmly holding it in his hands, to bring the latter’s soul back to his side while he testified in his memory.

Finding the disappeared relatives at any cost

Antonya Tioulong, chief of the documentation service at the French weekly L’Express, came as her family’s spokesperson – first, the two daughters of her older sister Raingsy who was assassinated, but also her mother, “who found the courage to come and stand in the same room as the accused,” and her five other sisters. She also presented herself as a voice for Raingsy, “no longer here to speak,” to defend her and to “say who she really was and how much her family desperately misses her.”

Raingsy was the second of seven daughters and worked as representative for a German laboratory and radio presenter. Her husband, Lim Kimary, was a senior executive at the Cambodian Commercial Bank. In March 1970, Lon Nol’s Republic decreed that the Tioulong family was banished due to the bonds of loyalty between its patriarch and Norodom Sihanouk, Antonya recounted in a trembling voice. Tioulong Raingsy and her husband took no notice and they were the only ones in the family who decided to stay in the country, as they clung to their jobs fearing a “downgrading” in France, where their relatives took refuge. In 1973, as civil war intensified and the Descartes high school attended by their children closed its doors, the couple sent the latter to Paris, in the care of their grandparents. As the situation deteriorated, it was planned for them to reunite with the rest of the family in the summer of 1975. That did not happen.

On April 17th 1975, the Khmer Rouge took Phnom Penh. In Paris, the Tioulong were not alarmed, as the newspaper headlines sported a “pink victory in South-East Asia.” Then started a long silence, a wait, that became increasingly worrying. The mother launched investigations, she was ready for anything: she requested assistance from international organisations based in Thailand, she paid “crooks to go and look for [her daughter] in the country.” She lost fortunes, duped by unscrupulous people who claimed they had seen Raingsy. All in the family sought to protect the couple’s three children entrusted to their care. In 1979, Vietnamese boat-people flocked everywhere in Europe and their fate moved public opinion, unlike that of Cambodian refugees despite their rapidly increasing number.

A hunger strike for Cambodian refugees

“Using my rights as a citizen, together with two other Cambodians, I carried out a hunger strike for some twelve days at the Buddhist pagoda of the Vincennes Forest to draw the attention of French authorities to the necessity to welcome many more Cambodian refugees than the quota initially set by the French government,” Antonya reported. “I don’t have the arrogance to claim that my action influenced then Prime Minister Raymond Barre. But a few weeks later, the quota for Khmer refugees noticeably increased. I believed I had led that action as a citizen calling to my fellow citizens, but I understood later that I had done it for my sister and I wanted her to be among the refugees. It was my way to help her the way I could. I did not know she had already disappeared. I have thought about her constantly for all those years. Her thought has never left me.”

A devastated family

The civil party, in her fifties and living in France for the last 40 years, could not envisage the worst and thus imagined that her brother-in-law, an accomplished athlete, would succeed in organising their escape from the country. “It was very naïve from me.” The Tiouleng responded to the call for help from cousins who survived the Khmer Rouge and managed to get out of the country. These relatives gave them a terrifying account of what they experienced and bluntly told them that Raingsy and her husband had died at S-21. They did not hide that Raingsy was subject to “particularly rough torture.” The announcement was a “devastating shock” and the family was plunged in grief. The father – who, mandated by Norodom Sihanouk to whom he consistently proved “unfailingly loyal,” had signed the Geneva Convention on Indochina in 1965 – ended up sitting at the negotiation table with the Khmer Rouge, including Khieu Samphan. He showed nothing of his grief, overcome forever by a feeling of guilt.

Antonya evoked her nieces and nephew, who grew up “as best they could,” without their parents by their side. Raingsy’s two daughters were “so devastated they did not have the strength to come and testify before the Chamber,” although they also joined as civil parties, while the son died prematurely in 1999. Still today, the memory of the couple was kept alive. “We talk about them in present tense.”

Probably dead for being too honest

Antonya eventually learned at least partly what happened to her sister. After Phnom Penh's fall, Raingsy was very soon assigned to "the hardest work in the fields." As she often spoke French, she drew suspicions. She and relatives of hers were subjected to an interrogation that demanded the truth from them. And she told the truth: her name was Tioulong Raingsy, daughter of Nhiek Tioulong, former commander of the armed forces, whose return as well as that of Norodom Sihanouk she was waiting for. When she said those words, she felt the Khmer Rouge tensing up. But it was too late. It was a sadly ironic twist as Raingsy had never put forward her aristocratic ancestry and never used her maiden name, as she preferred a simple life, her sister said. The only time when she declined her real identity, it cost her life.

When Antonya set foot again in Cambodia in 1994, her steps quickly led her to S-21, where she discovered a photograph of her sister, displayed on the wall. "As soon as I entered that room, it was as if I had immediately caught her eye." She also recovered her biography, which established she died in April 1976 and bore the mention: "beaten to death."

"Why so many inhumane methods?"

In the confession unearthed from the archives, it was written that Raingsy "led a CIA network," that she was "in charge of spying," etc, while she was a French-speaker and never had any links with Americans. Faced with such coarse inventions mixed with reality – "it was machiavellic, [...] it was a refinement to decree until the end that the victims were guilty" – and the idea that her sister endured long months of torture, Antonya exclaimed: "She must have survived her wounds too long. We are revolted and wonder why such cruelty? Why so many inhumane methods? How could what happened under the Nazis have recurred in an even worse way because here, it was Khmer who killed Khmer, with no reason! They caused suffering day after day and they were not content with simply killing their fellow countrymen with a bullet in the head. They delighted in and enjoyed making them suffer. My sister and brother-in-law endured that and that thought is unbearable!"

Guilt and powerlessness

A distressed Antonya explained that what continued to torment this family was that "the whole time they were still alive, they must have wondered why their family did not help them. [...] They must have wondered why the French, who were so present until then, who were our closest friends, did not manage to come and chase the Khmer Rouge away. It was a terrible feeling of guilt and powerlessness. I can only imagine the psychological distress of my sister and the incomprehension of my brother-in-law. It is unbearable for their children and I believe it shows through their disquiet and illness still now. My sister was killed for nothing."

The need for justice

Antonya had been waited for a trial for a long time. She filed a complaint in France, after 1999, for “sequestration followed by torture and war crimes against Duch, Khieu Samphan, Chea Sim, Nuon Chea and Ieng Sary.” Two years later, her complaint was dismissed on the grounds that the victim was not French. She argued that the victim was born under French protectorate, but to no avail. She then turned her hopes – and legal naiveté – to The Hague tribunal. Of course, nothing came out of it. The family was able to hope again only when the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia were created. It was relief. Doubly so, she noted, because the tribunal allowed for the participation of civil parties and Cambodia would show the example.

“My family or myself will never forgive Duch”

“We have to teach future generations and Khmer young people, who are not enough informed, that this type of absolutely intolerable crimes cannot stay unpunished. It is not enough to say “I apologise” to be absolved. There must be a ruling [...] that measures up to the crimes perpetrated by the accused.” After showing one of the last pictures taken from her smiling sister, she talked indirectly to Duch: “I do not believe in his apologies. I do not believe in his remorse. My family or myself will never forgive him. I know he doesn’t care. I know that in February, when he made his apologies officially, he said “I present my apologies to the tribunal. Now, the court can do whatever it likes with them.’ [...] I simply want to say that, in light of the horror he inflicted upon my sister and brother-in-law, I will never forgive him. If he does feel one centimetre of remorse, I wish him that this remorse become as tall as all the physical and mental suffering he inflicted upon his 17,000 victims. That is the punishment he would deserve. I think the accused is quite lucky: he is appearing in a fair international trial. His victims were not as lucky. [...] The accused sleeps every night on a mattress, he has adequate clothes and food, and he lives reasonably well. He will probably spend the rest of his life in decent conditions. These victims went through agonies. So, never, ever, ever, will I forgive him.”

Duch sings the same song

When Antonya interrogated Duch about the fate of her sister and brother-in-law, the accused remained evasive. Tioulong Raingsy arrived at S-21 when he was still only the deputy director, he said. He believed she had died “of illness” and as for her husband, he did not know... Why were they eliminated? “Any person sent to S-21 was eventually eliminated,” Duch repeated on a curt and mechanical note. When he finally spoke to share his observations, he eagerly expressed his respect to Raingsy’s mother. “It is an honour.” As for each of these testimonies, he repeated that he considered the statement to be “a historical document” that would be useful for future researchers studying the impact of the Khmer Rouge on the families.

Growing without a father or any hope for his return

Hao Sophea, a 33-year-old farmer, did not know her father, a Khmer Rouge cadre who returned from Hanoi. The S-21 killing machine got him just before she was born. Her mother raised her in the memory and respect of this adored man, whose return she waited for until 1996, when all her hopes vanished. She learned through the Documentation Centre of Cambodia (DC-Cam) that he died at S-21 and she went into depression. If the daughter was at the stand today, it was because the mother refused to be faced with the accused, Hao Sophea explained. Her father's absence meant a daily struggle, "financially, physically, emotionally," tempered by the mother's certainty that everything would improve upon the father's return. To her despair, the young woman had to end her studies, for lack of money. She had wanted to become a Khmer literature teacher.

After learning that her husband was executed at S-21 – where he was sent after passing through the Boeung Trabek camp –, the mother travelled to Phnom Penh in January 2007, with Tuol Sleng museum as her sole destination. "She was in a state of shock. Her eyes were filled with tears," her daughter recounted. When she arrived near the pile of former prisoners' clothes, she wanted to search it to find the last clothes worn by her late husband. The guards prevented her from doing so. After that visit, the daughter decided to join as a civil party. After that visit, the same dream started haunting her: she saw this father whose living face she never knew escape from S-21.

Duch again recognised his responsibilities and concluded his observations by saying he referred to the Chamber as to whether Hao Sophea was the daughter of the one she called her father, who bore a different name.

A testimony in the memory of a brother-in-law

Mrs So Song, 55 years old, came to testify in the name of her older sister, whose husband allegedly died at S-21 and was like a father to her after the separation of her parents. Her sister, ill for a year, was unable to take such step and it was therefore legitimate for So Song to do it instead, her lawyer justified. A debate then started on her family relationship with the victim, proved by only one certificate by the older sister's commune chief. The defence remained to be convinced. The civil party, guided by her lawyer's questions, evoked the grief caused by the loss and the economic struggles encountered as the family was deprived of support. So Song only had one photograph of her brother-in-law, found at S-21, to affirm he was detained there. Duch would only accept the picture as evidence if it was corroborated by other documents.

"Let my brother know that justice is being given"

Neth Phaly, a 52-year-old farmer, was there for his older brother, Neth Bunthy, imprisoned and killed at S-21. The last time he saw him was in 1978, at the April 17th hospital where he treated his wounds. At the fall of the regime, he started looking for him and searched districts for ten months. He found no trace of him, but was convinced he was still alive. He lost all hope only in June 2004, when DC-Cam provided him with a

copy of his brother's biography found at S-21. He fell into depression. He knew that in that cursed place, detainees died after great suffering. "How could someone as loyal as him, him who had devoted his life to the revolution, have been executed at S-21? My father never got over it and died a few years later. [...] I myself participated to the military activities but in the end, we were betrayed. My brother met with death and there is nothing left except sadness and grief."

Neth Phaly appeared dull when he spoke, and yet, anger was consuming him inside, he said. He finished his testimony with magnificent words, while holding a portrait he showed to the Chamber: "I would like to show a picture of my brother. A little as if he is sitting next to me and I hope he is now with me and he knows that the accused is being judged. I believe my brother would find peace again if he knew that justice is being given here by this court. So, I make the wish for the soul of my brother who died at S-21 to know that justice is being given. [...] He was taken to S-21 where he was blindfolded and he was blindfolded again when he was taken for execution. Today, we are revealing the faces of those who committed these atrocities. I invoke my brother's soul to be present here with me. May homage be paid to him with this picture. We will never find his body. There is only this picture left, which represents the ashes and body of my brother."