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*Beyond misfortune, there is life. Simply that.
Just to be able to drink, eat, sleep and be by the side of those we love.*

Emptying Phnom Penh of Its Population

On that 13 November 2015, I received several telephone calls from my daughter Susanna who desperately tried to reach me. Usually she would not insist that much. Actually, I myself was at a friend's place, in Colombes, a suburb in the north of Paris. I had not yet switched on the television, but when I did I found out about the terrorist attacks on Paris. I then understood the reason of the unceasing calls from my daughter.

The day after, when I managed to reach her, I heard that yesterday evening, she was with her husband in a restaurant, near the place where the attacks took place and where she experienced hours of anguish.

On the television screen, I saw President Hollande sitting in the stands of the France Stadium. He suddenly disappeared with his bodyguard after a second explosion was heard...

Never would I think that a developed country such as France, the country of liberties, could one day be living through such a horrible event.

At that moment, everything I had experienced in Cambodia re-emerged in me!

It was 17 April 1975. The Khmer Rouge took over my country by violently chasing away, in a brutal way all the population of Phnom Penh, the capital.

That morning, I could not leave home in spite of the command uttered by the Khmer Rouge¹ downstairs. I had to wait for my husband Sully to return, because with all the disorder in the street, it would be impossible for me to find him later.

When he arrived, he was still in his airforce outfit with his badge of the pilot corps. His name was written on his flight suit. He still carried his Samsonite case which he never left behind, wherever he went. Being an officer, he also carried his pistol, because he was just back from patrolling the capital. He was very sad. I had never seen him in such a state. He told me:

— Our country has fallen into the Khmer Rouges' hands. Pol Pot is their leader. That is not good! Mr Ea Chhong (chief of the Khmer Air Force) left Phnom Penh for America with his family, last night. This morning, after patrolling, I dropped by my office where I retrieved my Samsonite case, and went to the Olympic Stadium where I met my colleague, Ket Mary. We saw that there remained four helicopters ready to take off. They were already full! He said to me: 'If you climb in, I follow you!' After a brief moment of reflection, I put down my Samsonite case and answered him: 'I cannot leave without my family!' So, we went back home.

After telling me about the situation, Sully hid his service pistol, his ammunitions and his flight suit beside the water tank, at the highest top of the house.

1 A nickname given to the political and military communist movement of Maoist inspiration.

It must be mentioned that the ordeal of the Khmer people started as soon as in 1970 with the deposition of the Head of State, Norodom Sihanouk, by the Cambodian parliament.

Why?

Sihanouk authorised the Vietcong (communist Vietnamese of South Vietnam) and the North-Vietnamese troops (Bô Doys) to have their rear bases in the eastern regions of Cambodia, particularly in the north-northeastern area, to support their war against the Americans in South Vietnam. But the Vietcong attacked by surprise all the territorial units of the Khmer Royal Army and took over four provinces. The commander-in-chief Lon Nol then mobilised all the live forces of the country to save our endangered nation. The population showed up en masse to drive out the Vietcong invader.

The latter moved toward the south of Cambodia and took over Saang, a town located at about thirty kilometres from the capital which was then threatened.

Lieutenant General Sosthène Fernandez, appointed by Lon Nol, was assigned the mission to recover Saang and protect Phnom Penh.

After four days and four nights of combat, the invader was repelled and Saang liberated. That was the first victory of the NKAF.¹

The war went on from 1970 through 1975, particularly in the south-southeastern part of the country. The enemy destroyed bridges, land and river communication routes to isolate Phnom Penh and prevent the NKAF from getting fresh supplies and refuelling.

It was at that moment that the first Khmer Rouge units showed up. They were the Vietcong's auxiliaries specialised in intelligence and subversive propaganda.

1 National Khmer Armed Forces.

At the same time, the NKAF got reorganised with American aid: training of larger units, both officers and troops.

The NKAF went into offensive and liberated the invaded provinces inflicting heavy losses both in men and materials to the enemy. A plan to protect Phnom Penh and prevent possible attacks was also elaborated.

But on 23 March 1975, Marshal Lon Nol summoned the commander-in-chief Sosthène Fernandez to announce that the Americans were going to interrupt their aid. So, it was necessary to stop the war and negotiate for the best possible with the Khmer Rouge, 'the enemy brothers'.

The Chairman of the National Assembly, the Chairman of the Senate and the head of the Republican Party agreed. They accepted to end the war and to negotiate with the Khmer Rouge. Having refused to abide by this decision, General Sosthène Fernandez was immediately removed from his position of commander-in-chief of the NKAF.

On 17 April 1975, the Khmer Rouge entered Phnom Penh as its triumphant victors.

The war was over! Peace was back!

But alas, Pol Pot, their head, protected by China, had no experience in State management.

Under the pretext that the Americans were about to bomb Phnom Penh, the Khmer Rouge emptied it of all its population. They gave orders through loudspeakers and radio, to leave the place as quickly as possible, using threats to oblige the stragglers to obey. There were to be many victims among the elderly, the sick people, the children and the fragile people during that cruel 17 April 1975.

From that tragic day on, the new master of the Democratic Kampuchea¹, the Angkar Loeu², was going to impose its law: to eliminate all traces of western culture, to create a new Khmer

1 Official name of Cambodia from 1975 through 1979.

2 The Supreme Organisation.

nation without any link to its colonial past and all religions were banned.

The city dwellers were being turned into obnoxious people and were the first ones to be deadly stricken, then all the intellectuals, the teaching corps, the managerial staff and military officers, the physicians, the judges, the lawyers... suffered the same fate.

This dreadful genocide resulted in the extermination of over two million Khmer.

Gradually, without running water nor electricity, the country lost its political, social and economic life. It receded by a hundred years.

Over 500,000 Cambodians fled their country for foreign countries, and millions of widows/widowers, orphans and wounded people wandered in a totally devastated country.

So it was easy for the communist Vietnamese to seize Cambodia, to plunder its wealth (fish, forests, precious gem mines...) because they did not meet with any obstacles.

Now, we must absolutely leave. The Khmer Rouge were there vociferating downstairs. We took our old car and put into it everything we could. The Khmer Rouge said and repeated that we did not need to bring many things, that it was for only three days. We brought some clothes, though, and most of all everything required for our son who was ill all the time.

During that time, there were many bombings and a lot of noxious matters spread in the air. So, small children and infants suffered from diarrhoeas and haemorrhage. Many of them died. The elderly also had serious health problems.

My son, Chinroth, nicknamed Tintin, constantly suffered from fevers and bowel problems. I feared for his life because several friends of mine lost one or several of their children. I often took

him to the clinic for treatments with drips. We used up all our salaries. And we, his parents, were desperate.

YOU, my son, YOU MUST LIVE! We are going to try EVERYTHING to save you.

We had heard about a bonze, a shaman, who might be able to help our son to recover his health. On 14 April, three days before Cambodia fell, we contacted him. He was in the suburbs of Phnom Penh, which was rare, because he usually lived in the mountains and only came to the capital every three years. We agreed on a ceremony which could bring health back to our son.

The ceremony started the next day. Everybody began to pray with both hands joined. Although he thought that we should not believe in things like this, Sully, my husband, also prayed. All of us followed quietly the development of the rite. I let my son soundly sleep by my side.

Suddenly, I saw on Tintin's small body, who was lightly dressed because of the heat, a colony of black ants crawling and passing. I immediately had the reflex of crushing them with my hand, but the bonze prevented me from doing it, saying that these ants were there to drive away the bad things that made my son continuously ill. I obeyed him and went on praying with him. About twenty minutes later, another colony of ants — red ones this time — passed across Tintin's body. Caught between suspicion and anxiety, I did not know how I was to react. I looked at the bonze who said to me:

— Do not worry. These ants come and bring their protection to your son.

From that day on, Tintin was named Chamroeun — meaning prosperity — on the bonze's advice. Once the ceremony ended, we went back home.

I had the feeling that my son was getting better and better.

Two days later, the Khmer Rouge entered Phnom Penh. It was the exodus.

On 17 April 1975, in the morning, when I opened the window of my bedroom, I saw people on motorbikes and bicycles, waving white flags and shouting words welcoming the Khmer Rouge. The street was already crowded with people, some panicking, some expressing their joy, all sorts of persons: sick people with their dripping equipment, the elderly, the infants, the young children, because everyone had to forsake his home or to leave the hospital right away, order from Angkar, the military party of the Khmer Rouge. The whole population was obliged to leave the city for three days, in order, so they said, to enable them to clean up the place of its enemies.

— It is not useful to take anything along, the military Khmer Rouge yelled in their microphones.

Those military Khmer Rouge were youngsters aged fifteen-sixteen years old, or sometimes younger. They wore black trousers and shirts, and had a krama¹ around their neck, a symbol of their membership of the party. On their feet, shoes made out of car tyres. Their hair was cut very short and they had the same hairstyle. They were men and women who received very little education. They contented themselves with obeying orders. They were brutes! To make people move forward quicker, they shot these populations with their machineguns! Horror broke loose! Dead persons littered the road, bodies exploded! I saw feet, hands and heads flying past our heads. I had to step over bodies or what was left of them. And all this in a deep terrifying silence. I was so petrified that I could not hear anything anymore. I felt fever creeping over me. My temperature was at least 40 °C. I knew that I held my son tightly in my arms, that my husband was beside me, and I moved forward, forward... because if I did not do so, they would shoot us!

At about 7.00 p.m., we were at Khbal Thnol heading toward the bridge that led to Kien Svay. There were so many people at that place it was very difficult or even impossible to cross it.

1 Piece of long woven chequered cotton material.

The bridge was not wide enough to enable everybody to pass across. But we had to go forward because the machineguns were there. The young Khmer Rouge who shot people were cold, impassive, but they were determined to face the situation and the orders they received. All these atrocities being part of their daily life, shooting people to make them move forward quicker seemed normal to them.

After succeeding in crossing the bridge, I was relieved. I felt better. I still did not know where I was going, but the military Khmer Rouge were not there anymore. They abandoned us to our sad fate. On the way, chance had it that I found my parents, my five brothers and my sister again. One of my brothers, Touch, was missing. He left on his own on his motorbike, from the other side of Phnom Penh, with his clothes he was wearing. He wanted to go and join my father at the Dara Sastr private high school that our father had founded, but it would prove impossible for him because of the crowd. He had to follow the movement which went to my parents' opposite way. It took them four years to find each other again.

When I was reunited with my family again, my grandmother was not among them.

— Given her old age and her bad health condition, she did not want to leave home, my mother told me.

Actually, she would be obliged to do so, when pushed by the Khmer Rouge soldiers' machineguns. She would leave with her walking stick, her bag of betel, her clothes she was wearing that day. She would walk as long as she could... and we never saw her again.