



Khmer Rouge survivor's paintings saved his life

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A survivor of the Khmer Rouge's main prison said Wednesday that his ability to paint larger-than-life images of the regime's late leader, Pol Pot, and portraits of other communist icons helped save his life.

Bou Meng was put to work painting portraits that glorified Mao Zedong of China and North Korea's Kim Il Sung and another that mocked Ho Chi Minh, the father of Vietnam's communist revolution.

"I was ordered to paint a picture of Ho Chi Minh's head on the body of a dog," 68-year-old Bou Meng told a U.N.-backed tribunal. Cambodia's archenemy was neighboring Vietnam, which eventually invaded to oust the Khmer Rouge in 1979.

Bou Meng was the third and final survivor of the S-21 prison to testify at the U.N.-backed trial of Kaing Guek Eav — better known as Duch — who headed the Khmer Rouge's notorious facility in Phnom Penh between 1975-1979. An estimated 1.7 million Cambodians died from forced labor, starvation, medical neglect and executions under the regime.

Duch is accused of overseeing the torture of some 16,000 prisoners before they were executed. Seven people are believed to have walked out of S-21 alive, only three of whom are alive today.

Bou Meng, like the other two survivors, said torturers beat him relentlessly to force a confession that he was a CIA spy.

"I didn't even know what the CIA was," he said. "I kept repeating my answer and they kept beating me."

The beatings stopped when his jailers found out he had a skill that could serve them.

"I survived because I could paint exact portraits of Pol Pot," he said. His first job was to copy Pol Pot's image from a photograph and make a towering painting that was 10 feet high and 5 feet wide (3 meters high and 1.5 meters wide). It took three months to complete.

Duch then ordered him to make three more paintings of Pol Pot and the other communist leaders.

Duch would sometimes oversee his work and smile at him when he did a good job or give him cigarettes, Bou Meng said.

Survivor Chum Mey, 79, testified Tuesday that he endured beatings, electric shocks and had his toenails pulled out but was spared execution because he knew how to fix cars, tractors, sewing machines and typewriters.

The only other living survivor, 63-year-old Vann Nath, testified Monday that he too escaped execution because he was an artist and painted portraits of Pol Pot.

Duch, (pronounced Doik), is charged with crimes against humanity, war crimes and murder. He has previously testified that being sent to S-21 was tantamount to a death sentence and that he was only following orders to save his own life.

Duch is the first senior Khmer Rouge figure to face trial and the only one to acknowledge responsibility for his actions. Senior leaders Khieu Samphan, Nuon Chea, Ieng Sary and Ieng Sary's wife, Ieng Thirith, are all detained and likely to face trial in the next year or two.