



**As Duch Trial Begins, Two US Women ‘Stand Witness’  
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July 2, 2009**

*[Editor’s note: When it opened in March, the trial for Kaing Kek Iev, the infamous Khmer Rouge torture chief better known as Comrade Duch, returned the world’s attention to Cambodia and the horrors of the failed regime. In 1976, two American women helped care for a group of 114 Cambodians in the US who were determined to return to their home, now controlled by the Khmer Rouge. The two recently spoke with VOA Khmer to ensure the stories of those Cambodians, nearly all of whom perished, would not be forgotten. This is the first of a two-part series.]*

When the trial began, from her home in a small, remote town in the US state of Michigan, Cynthia Coleman, a 67-year-old volunteer librarian, tuned in to an Internet video stream of the proceedings, as Duch described his role as prison administrator.

“And then one day I was watching it, and he was talking about Tuol Sleng, and he started saying that he was really just reporting to somebody else and was making himself sound like a pencil pusher, basically... I just looked at that face, and said, ‘I can’t stand one more minute of this weasel, and turned it off,’” Coleman recalled recently.

Such a vitriolic reaction might be expected from a Cambodian survivor of the regime. But Coleman had never even been to Cambodia, except for a brief trip the year before. In March 2008, she had traveled with another American to file as a witness for the UN-backed tribunal, to tell the story of 114 Cambodians who’d found themselves under her care in the United States 32 years earlier.

“Both of us felt strongly that we needed to stand witness,” said Coleman.

Save for that testimony and a small chapter Coleman wrote in book published in 1987, the story of the 114 Cambodians remains little known. They were a small group of expatriates who found themselves in the US when the Khmer Rouge captured Phnom Penh and implemented Year Zero.

They all wanted to return, and ultimately all but two found their way back to their homeland. All of those who did return, 112 people, perished. The two survivors could not be reached for this story.

In 1976, Coleman was not a librarian. She was the director of a refugee project created by an organization called the Nationality Service Center. Her program was funded by the US State Department through the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. Her job was to provide support for the 114 Cambodians and to facilitate their return.

A second American woman, Mary Beach, then a fresh college graduate, worked for Coleman and lived with the Cambodians for weeks, then months, in the winter and spring of 1976, developing a deep bond with the families and finding herself devastated after they left.

Both women were deeply affected by their time with the Cambodians, and the grief they've borne for more than three decades underscores the scope of the Cambodian tragedy, demonstrating that its reach went well beyond Cambodia.

Coleman and Beach, whose testimonies are now filed at the tribunal, both agreed to share their stories with VOA Khmer. Through multiple phone interviews, they described their involvement with the Cambodians, the friendships that grew from it, and the interminable sadness that followed, as hope that their friends had survived eventually dwindled to nothing.

The Cambodians arrived late at night in the cold and the dark of winter, on Dec. 9, 1975. They came with bags, cases and trunks; men, women and children. They were housed at a local civic organization called the YMCA, in a dormitory of cramped rooms and a shared communal area.

It was Beach's first job after college, one she had readily taken after searching for work as a French teacher and falling into a position with the Nationality Service Center. One of the first people she met was Capt. Keo Keam, who had already unpacked, settled in and even adjusted the lighting to give his room a homier feel. He was looking for a partner to play an English-language spelling game called Scrabble.

"And I thought, wow, most of these people are still in the midst of trying to get things to their room, and he's already settled in and wants to play," Beach recalled. "So I did play just a couple of rounds of Scrabble with him, and he beat me."

Keo Keam was among 81 military personnel who had served Lon Nol's US-backed government. They had been training in the US when their republic fell to the communists. Beach said at first she was young and afraid to be housed with military men of any nation, but the Cambodians soon changed her mind.

"They were just so polite, and so considerate, and so proper in everything that they did, that it was just not a problem at all," she said.

Before long, Beach found herself immersed in Cambodian culture. She had but one friend in Philadelphia and one uncle in the suburbs. She spent days and nights at the YMCA, among the Cambodians. She ate with them, took them shopping, and continued to play Scrabble with Keo Keam, who had become a friend.

"I never beat Keo Keam, even once," she said, fondly remembering their time together.

Despite these moments of levity, it was an uncertain time for all Cambodians. While many were undergoing the horrors of the Khmer Rouge, others were settling into new lives, having escaped the war and the guerrillas.

Yuth Hean, a former lieutenant in Lon Nol's navy, came to study in the US in 1974. He said, like other Cambodians, he considered going home, but was told by a senior Khmer Rouge official, Chan Youran, to stay on till he finished his studies.

"In late 1975, Ieng Sary and his delegation came to New York. I met with Chan Youran and asked him if it was the right time for me to go back and help the country," Yuth Hean told VOA Khmer by phone. He asked me what I was doing. I told him that I was a student at Virginia Tech, in Virginia, and he then told me to finish my study."

This advice saved his life.

In the US, Khmer Rouge sympathizers recruited overseas Cambodians to return and rebuild the country.

Prom Saunora had come to the US study electrical engineering. He heard of the recruitment but decided not to return until he finished his studies. He also feared the motives of the communists.

"I asked those whom I knew not to go back yet and wait and see how the situation developed," he told VOA Khmer. "I knew the communists very well, so there was no need to rush back. But most of those I knew who went back never returned."

There were no such doubts among the 114 in Philadelphia. They were determined to go home and help their families.

"I think that everyone and everything they loved most in the world was in Cambodia, and that's where they wanted to be, and it was worth it to them to take the risk... They didn't quite believe something like this would be happening in Cambodia," Beach recalled.

Eventually, the group decided to undertake its own communist purification, holding secret meetings, watching communist propaganda films, she said. They wanted to make themselves presentable to the Khmer Rouge cadre awaiting them, and they worried, much as their Khmer Rouge contemporaries would, that informers lurked among the group.

"In the general foyer there, they had a television, and sometimes I would watch television with them, but when they started having these meetings of course, they were closed meetings," she said.

Meanwhile, Coleman set about taking care of her new wards. In her position, she too got to know the Cambodians, including the leader of the group, a man named Maj. Kim Pok Tung.

“He was a very funny guy, and he was making jokes about wearing his three new Philadelphia custom-made suits while working in the rice fields in Cambodia,” Coleman said. “He also had a wife and I believe three or four children, including a five-year-old son who had had polio and was disabled from the polio. And he told me... that he was going to go back home to see if he could find his son and protect him.”

The soldiers and the other Cambodians at first had no idea how they might return.

“The UN looked worldwide to see what government agency there might be outside of Cambodia that could advise these people; and the only place in the world that had any kind of a Cambodian Khmer Rouge mission outside of Cambodia was in Paris, in France,” Coleman said.

The UN contacted the Paris-based Khmer Rouge, which worked through the Royal Government of National Union of Kampuchea, or GRUNK, to facilitate the repatriation of the 114 as UN-protected refugees.

“At that point the United Nations was told that the government of Cambodia did not want any involvement by the United Nations or by the US government, that they the Khmer Rouge would deal directly with the repatriates,” Coleman said.

By February 1976, the first group was ready to go.

“They were told that when they did go back home, they would go for a couple of weeks to a re-education center, but then they would be reunited with their families out in the countryside where they could be with their family growing rice,” she said.

Keo Keang was among the first to leave, as well as his friend, Hu Chheng Kuoy. Beach was too anxious to speak to Keo Keang about leaving, but the night before the group left, she found herself in the room of Hu Chheng Kuoy. It was not a joyful moment.

“I wish you didn’t have to go,” she told him, and as she recounted the story she paused to compose herself. He didn’t say farewell. “He just hugged me.”

Bit by bit, the other groups left for Paris, to be processed by the Khmer Rouge mission for their return to Democratic Kampuchea.

The last group to leave was in April 1976. Maj. Kim Pok Tung was among the last to leave.

“Like a captain of a ship, I think he was in the last group to go, and it was primarily the leadership of the group who left last,” Coleman said.

Coleman took the major to the bus station, where he would travel to New York, Paris and his fate.

“And they went from being extremely happy and jovial about finally moving and getting to Paris and eventually be able to get back home, to being kind of shy and nervous,” Coleman said.

“We hugged each other, and sniffed. I don’t if Cambodian men and women kiss, but they would sniff me, and I would do that back,” she said. “And we were hugging each other, and then he pulled his head and the top of his body back and looked at me with just a great big smile and said, ‘We’ll see what happens,’ and then he got on a bus.”