

## From Khmer Rouge torturer to born-again Christian

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*The leader of Cambodia's most notorious prison, now on trial, has admitted guilt and asked for forgiveness in accordance with his new faith*

Once a devoted Khmer Rouge communist, the regime's former chief executioner traded leftist ideology for Jesus, and now, with his trial four days under way, presents himself as a pious, contrite, and cooperative old man.

"I would like to seek forgiveness from the victims," Kaing Guek Eav, alias "Duch," told judges Monday at the UN-backed Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC).

At the second day of his trial March 31, he said: "I would like to emphasize that I am responsible for the crimes committed at S-21 [prison], especially the torture and execution of the people there."

This is the penitent Christian that Cheam Socheong, the director of Phkoam High School where Duch (pronounced "Doik") taught math in the 1990s, remembers well. "Duch often talked of God and the good way," Mr. Cheam said in a recent interview at his school office in Cambodia's remote northwest. "He asked me why I didn't go to church. He tried to convert me."

First with communism, then Christianity, Duch has always embraced and espoused his beliefs with fervor, friends and family say.

The court's psychological exam noted "obsessive" traits in his personality, "both past and present," though it did not link that trait specifically with his faith.

The intensity that once turned Duch into a feared prison chief has now transformed him into an evangelical Christian eager to cooperate with the court and seek forgiveness. Of five former Khmer Rouge cadres now in detention at the ECCC, he is the sole detainee to have cooperated with the investigating judges.

Duch's embrace of Christianity makes him "less likely than other defendants to justify the regime's abuses as necessary but painful steps toward socialism," says Stanford University's John Ciorciari, a senior legal adviser to the nonprofit Documentation Center of Cambodia.

## **A devoted communist teacher**

Duch joined the Khmer Rouge in 1964 while attending college. The next year, he began teaching math at Skuon High School in Kompong Cham province, about 50 miles north of Phnom Penh. There, he often carried around Mao's Little Red Book and, although he could afford a car, rode to work on a rickety bicycle. He also encouraged students to embrace a peasant life, recalls Kek Channary, a former student.

"Everyone knew he was a communist," she said recently by telephone from San Jose, Calif., where she lives with her husband and two sons.

That same year, Duch said goodbye to his family and friends and joined the underground ultra-Maoist movement. During the next decade, he oversaw several of the regime's security offices, most notably S-21 in Phnom Penh, now known as Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, where it is estimated that more than 12,000 people confessed under torture to counterrevolutionary activity and were executed.

## **From communist to Christian**

When the Vietnamese Army sacked Phnom Penh in 1979, Duch fled with the Khmer Rouge to Cambodia's western border. He remained a cadre until 1992, when he moved his wife and four children to the village of Phkoam in Banteay Meanchey Province and resumed teaching math. He used the alias "Hang Pin" to hide his identity.

Soon after Duch moved to Phkoam, his neighbor, Suon Sito, invited him to attend the local Christian church. Duch embraced the religion and cast aside his communist beliefs, Mr. Suon said in a recent interview.

Duch became vocal about his faith and began inviting others to attend services, says Suon, and eventually became a lay pastor.

Duch's eldest child, Ky Sievkim, said her father baptized her soon after his conversion. "Every night my father led me in prayer. Every Sunday he brought out the Bible and read it to the whole family," she said during a recent interview at her home in Battambang Province. As she spoke, she held in her lap her 1-year-old son Chhin Chonghour, whom Duch has never met.

Duch later started a house church near Svay Chek High School, where he taught from 1996 to 1997. During the work day, he proselytized. "He spoke of Jesus Christ and tried to convince other teachers to believe," said Hun Smien, the school's former director, in an interview at the now-abandoned schoolhouse where Duch lectured French — one of five languages he speaks.

## **Khmer Rouge identity revealed**

In 1998, when local teachers recognized "Hang Pin" from a photo in the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, Duch urgently requested a transfer to Battambang province, where he became the education director of Samlot town, Mr. Hun says.

There, his evangelism continued. "He asked me to be a Christian," says Sok Lian, a local market vender in Samlot who briefly rented property from Duch. "He told me he wanted to start a church. But he was arrested before he could."

In 1999, a news article revealed Duch's identity and authorities soon detained him. The news stunned his former students and colleagues. "When I saw him on television, I said, 'Oh, Hang Pin is Duch!'" recalls the former high school director, Hun.

"I was shocked," says Ms. Kek, Duch's student in the 1960s. Although she remembers Duch as kinder than the other teachers, she is appalled by his deeds. "You cannot erase his genocidal action," Kek says. "You cannot forgive him for that."

Family members see Duch differently, arguing that he is a changed man worthy of forgiveness. "I want to tell the court that my father is a good man, through Jesus," said Mrs. Ky. Duch's sister, Hang Kim Hong, who today lives in Duch's old home in Samlot, said that she prays for his release every day with her children.

## **Seeking forgiveness**

Duch has said he will cooperate with the court during the next three to four months of trial proceedings and attempt to answer all questions asked by the judges.

Alex Hinton of Rutgers University's Center for the Study of Genocide and Human Rights says Duch's trial starts a long-overdue conversation between Khmer Rouge perpetrators and victims. It's also Duch's first chance to seek the forgiveness his new ideology commands.

"His admission is very much a Christian act," Mr. Hinton said during a break in Monday's proceedings. "The question now is whether he's trying to get his sentence down or is genuinely sorry and wants to confess his sins."