PHNOM PENH, APRIL 1975: A PERSONAL ACCOUNT

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Wednesday 16 April

The sun is setting behind the flowering flame trees on the Boulevard Monivong in a riot of colour. To the north, a thick black cloud of smoke rises in the sky and shifts to the west. With nightfall, the overall silence is oppressive. There is great agitation in the streets. Mothers order their children to stop playing on the pavement, and come inside. People have hung up white flags at their windows. No electricity; it probably will not come on at all during the night.

The first explosions. It is 10 p.m. They come in salvoes of three. At first far off, then ever closer. The firing seems to come from the east. Some very close explosions shake our walls. The two colleagues with whom I share the flat and I abandon our game of cards. We try to keep away from the windows. The bathroom is the safest place because it has no direct opening to the outside. We lower the flame of the petrol lamp. The area under attack is progressively extended, 'they' seem to cover the north of the city with circular sweeps. In between each round of shellfire, I can distinguish the cannonade taking place in other more distant parts of the city. Impossible to sleep. Every seven or eight minutes, the firing comes closer, you can hear your heart beat, and we stop talking.

11 p.m. Two explosions, very close to, engulf the building. The gap left by the departed air-conditioner, covered with a badly placed piece of plywood, is a source of anxiety.

1 a.m. The explosions come regularly now. How many people have died in the city since night fell? The refugees, who have already lost everything, are the most exposed; what protection do wattle walls, corrugated iron sheets, awnings spread over the pavements offer those who silently end up there? In between the explosions, no sound of a human voice, only the howling of the dogs.

Thursday 17 April

Dawn breaks. Suddenly there are cries of joy, an enormous racket. Sary, the watchman of our building, rushes in to announce: 'It's all over. White flags everywhere! In front of the Embassy, they are shaking hands!' The relief is huge, but interrupted by a fierce volley of machine-gun fire. Everyone with a firearm lets off his weapon, but into the air for once. That all lasts a good hour. A colleague at the Embassy confirms by phone, 'Everything is going well. The meeting took place,

in front of the Embassy. The government troops are giving up their weapons. There was practically no resistance. But do not go out.'

Do not go out? Why not?

I cross the Boulevard Monivong. At Calmette Hospital, people are queuing up to give blood. On the boulevard, many people on the pavements just look on, neither sad nor happy. The refugees are already leaving for the north. They walk, their bundles on their heads, or suspended from yokes balanced on their shoulders. They do not speak, they do not look at the passers-by, they seem to see no one. They walk on, the women with very young children on their hips or in their arms. The children move slowly, serious, like their parents. Men push bicycles loaded with huge sacks. The occasional car passes, overloaded with endless bundles. This huge flow of people moves to the north, slowly, and as powerful as the Mekong. The population is liberated? Well, no one seems to be saying 'At last'. No one is going back to his home, his rice fields, his village. They are leaving, but they do not know what for. They are leaving Phnom Penh because they have already been given orders to leave the city. Cars mounted with loud hailers pass, the microphones belting out 'All the refugees must leave. Immediately. Everyone must leave Phnom Penh within twenty-four hours!' They had to leave the capital by the nearest road. I am now a witness to what, two months earlier, the Cambodian lecturers with whom I was working had warned me; they had often told me of what occurred in the zones conquered by the Khmers Rouges, and I did not believe them.

The crowd only moves in one direction, north. In the other direction come the Khmers Rouges who enter the city. Those not in the first assault lines at dawn now arrive in single file. They are astonishingly young, mere adolescents. Fearless and proud, they walk slowly like peasants returning from a long day's work in the fields. Dowdy, covered in dust, a red and white *krama (*loincloths) round their neck or on their head, festooned with straps and pouches, munitions and grenades, they carry the short Chinese assault rifle AK 47 on their shoulders, or huge bazookas at their sides. Proud kids who have played at war and won. They have overcome the most powerful people on earth! How could they not comport themselves as absolute masters?

The exodus continues before my eyes. They go on foot, pulling overloaded carts, struggle with bicycles sagging under their loads. Here a pregnant woman abandons hope, sinking onto a pile of packets on a cart. Over there, an old man bent double advances, clasping the walls; each step advances him no further than the length of his feet; he clasps a tree, slides down its trunk, and sits on his stick; the five-year old with him waits for him to continue. The conquerors force the soldiers of the Republic still wearing their uniforms to continue their journey in their under-

pants. The victors pass, undisturbed and silent, sure of themselves, their weapons in their hands. Sometimes they mount motorbikes they have commandeered. Here are eight or ten in a car belonging to a civilian, which they have seized. Jeeps, American military lorries, light armoured cars taken from the conquered now transport the new masters while Phnom Penh is emptying itself and dying.

Friday afternoon and later 18 April

Shots can still be heard. Black smoke still rises behind the flame trees. Sary has just knocked on my door. 'Everyone has to leave,' he cried, at his wit's end. 'Before tomorrow morning. Those who stay will be shot!' Sary, a solid, muscular, dependable type, more like a boxer than a watchman, trembles like a leaf, overcome. He implores me to help him let his family (twenty persons or so) take refuge in the Embassy. The Embassy does not reply to my phone calls, nor does the Cultural Centre, some distance away. I have the feeling of solitude. It is as if we were alone in Phnom Penh. Finally I manage to make contact with someone, to whom I explain Sary's request. 'Do as you wish,' I am told, 'but there are already five hundred refugees here!' I tell Sary to assemble his family and a limited quantity of luggage which can go in our two cars. We leave as night falls, going at walking pace. Shots are still being fired and we have to be prepared to be challenged, in order to cover the few hundred metres separating us from the cultural services compound on the Monivong Boulevard. We go there rather than to the overcrowded chancellery.

The compound, with offices and, behind, the official flats, is part of the Embassy but separated from it by the huge complex of Calmette Hospital. In the gutter and spread over the pavement is a corpse. The head of the cultural centre, still carrying out his duties, is furious on seeing all these people arrive. I make a second journey to bring in the rest of Sary's family, the older ones, toothless faces from which all traces of the Khmer smile have disappeared. But no one complains. Sary's uncle, recently wounded in a rocket attack, has an arm in plaster; his wife died the day he was wounded. Everyone assembles in the main hall.

I return to 'our' flat where I rejoin my co-tenants. Night has now completely fallen, the streets seem deserted. The silence is from time to time broken by bursts of gunfire, sometimes very close to. We barricade the doors behind us and try to cook a little rice donated by an American humanitarian organisation. I think of everything that has occurred since the beginning of the week, my last morning in the office, my farewells to two Khmer secretaries, my attempt to visit the Silver Pagoda aborted by a bomb fired at the presidential palace, the telegram I sent to France saying that everything was fine, my breakfast the day before at La Taverne, my midday meal at the Phnom, my last purchases at Cata Stores, and this terrible night. When the rice was cooked, the phone rang. 'They have pillaged the Phnom

Hotel, the Maison de France, the Lycée Descartes. Don't stay where you are, take shelter in the cultural services compound.'

We pack our bags and go by car to the cultural services. We are blocked a while in front of the padlocked iron gate, but the Khmers Rouges who are on guard are not concerned about us. The small room to which we are directed is already occupied by H. and his family. I go to sleep in the offices of the administrative building, very near the entrance to the complex, where I find Sary again, who is happy not to be alone. During the night, the Khmers Rouges come to rattle the iron fencing, calling out, making a noise with their gun breeches. Sary is half-dead with fear. The head, making the rounds, tells us he spends his time dissuading the soldiers from taking away the cars parked in the parking lots.

Saturday 19 April

Daybreak. A few stragglers still pass with their loads, taking the boulevard and going north. Packets sometimes fall from their loads, but they do not even bother to pick them up. Phnom Penh is virtually empty. The last occupants of houses have been flushed out, threatened with grenades, and forbidden to close the doors behind them.

Monivong Boulevard has become a playground for the Khmers Rouges who attack all Western symbols. They make the vehicles they have seized their playthings without knowing how to drive them, they crash the gears and jam the engines. They abandon their toys there, leaving the doors wide open. Bicycles and motorbikes soon fall prey to the remains of soft drink and beer bottles covering the surface of the road. Previously so charming, the roads are now unrecognisable, covered with rubbish, wrecks of vehicles, and abandoned uniforms.

Four youths have opened the gate and entered the compound. They demand a car. We try to dissuade them, explaining that this is part of the French Embassy. They are assuaged with a motor bike whose owner is unknown, and we each receive a cigarette by way of thanks. A friend who has taken refuge in the Embassy proper tells me on the phone (which continues to work, to the pride and joy of the French engineer in charge of the telephone service, who is with us) that there the hygienic and food situation is dire. Two thousand people camp out on the lawns and in the corridors. Here, in comparison, we are 'only' five hundred, and live almost comfortably.

The Cambodians who have taken refuge with us are afraid they too will in turn have to take to the road, and, worse, be punished, that is shot, for not leaving when ordered. Each seeks some comfort from us, the foreigners. What will become of them if we, one day, are put on an airplane? We take our meals communally, share our supplies, and our cigarettes. We even have moments of real gaiety in this surreal existence.

In the afternoon, the Calmette Hospital nearby is evacuated in turn. I can see men pulling on the uneven path a hospital bed occupied by a sick person.

Phone calls to this or that colleague go without reply, Phnom Penh is empty, a dead city. The new administration is apparently not yet in place. We are isolated in an immense urban desert.

Sunday 20 April

To kill the time, we begin a game of petanque on the hard earth of the paths between the buildings in the complex. This similitude of normal life has the effect of reassuring our Cambodian friends. Not for long. At 5 p.m. they are ordered to evacuate the compound. General stupefaction. Sary weeps openly in my arms. The women sob. There is no Khmer smile here. The threats of the Khmers Rouges must have been very specific for the head of mission to have acceded to their demands. Shame weighs down our shoulders.

Carts, bicycles, Vespas without fuel, the miserable cohort moves off. It is a terrible uprooting. In front of me, the heavy cast iron saucepan lid carried by a girl's mother falls on the toes of her little girl, aged three or four. Tears and lamentations. No time to look for a plaster; all I can do is tie my handkerchief tightly round the bloody foot. For this wounded child, the long march has begun very badly. These condemned souls disappear at the top of the Monivong Boulevard behind a host of armoured vehicles abandoned there. At some distance from the group, a very, very old Vietnamese woman, in black pyjamas, slowly advances, bent double, leaning on a stick much bigger than her. A wounded man, hidden among us until then, got into a car. Will he survive with the draining tube attached to his leg? Natural selection is ferociously at work. What destiny awaits the children, the old, the sick, those weakened by hunger and malnutrition?

The streets are deserted for the second time, given over to pigs. A Vietnamese passes, asking for the hospital. 'I need a cure for my wife. A cure for madness. My wife is mad,' he said, 'she is resisting, she refuses to go. She must be mad, don't you think?' Then along comes a handicapped person in a wheelchair, with two wooden legs, and at their ends, the ultimate of chic, shoes. He shakes his head, smiles benignly, picks up the accordion a soldier throws at him, tries a few notes, gives up, and goes off. The masters of the city have taken over a Peugot 403 with a flat battery. Cigarette in their mouth, transistor on their knees, M16 by their side, they ask us to push their vehicle to get it to start.

The city is quite dead. Flames illuminate the boulevard. In the distance, there are fires. A huge explosion occurs; probably some ammunition depot, going up in smoke. We are the last inhabitants of Phnom Penh, the deserted capital of Cambodia.

Away to the north, a fire destroys what seems to be the Vietnamese quarter. A fire engine passes, going north. Is this the sign of a beginning of re-establishing order, of reorganizing? Do they want to limit the damage, do they think they have gone too far? The armed men guarding the gate cook their food on the pavement. They have dug funk holes three metres away from our entrance. Are they preparing for a fight? But against who? Or is it the force of habit? They bring to us medicines they have found in the nearby hospital, and ask about their effectiveness, the illnesses they are supposed to cure. In exchange for the information we supply, they offer cigarettes. One of them shows a wound on his arm, healing over a shell splinter.

Water is beginning to run out. Washing, shaving become difficult. Uncertainty about our future increases. The foreign radio stations we can pick up ask questions, and are astonished at the silence from Phnom Penh. As well they might be, for the city is dead, all contact with the outside world cut off. In the evening there is a heavy thunderstorm. This was excellent for us, and, I hope, for those on the roads – they will at last be able to drink.

Monday 21 April

The patients in the Chinese maternity hospital are in their turn 'invited' to evacuate. Women about to give birth, women who gave birth the day before, everyone is tipped into the street. No possibility of taking refuge in the Calmette Hospital. It is in the hands of the Khmers Rouges and only accepts its wounded soldiers. The sad group of women disappears in turn at the top of Monivong Boulevard.

Three of us decide to make modest sorties into the city nearby. The other members of our trio are M., the engineer from the telephone service and A., chemistry professor in the Faculty of Science. As food supplies are low, we have to increase the stock for those locked up in the Cultural Services compound. Planted in front of the iron railings, our guardians are tolerant (they are students taken on at the last minute or leftist activitists from the university; some speak French) and let us move inside a limited area. Beyond this perimeter – a few streets to the east, in the direction of the Bassac River, and to the south, as well as the vast stretch of land to which goes to the edge of the *baeng*, the large pond to the west of the city – we encounter other armed guards who force us to return.

We go to a nearby military mission. The offices have been pillaged, the library books thrown into the courtyard. The teacher training centre is also ransacked but here the books, mostly teaching manuals, remain on the bookshelves. Only the tapes seem to have interested the visitors; many are lying on the floor, some of their protective covers are empty. We meet a soldier who hands me an accordion he has picked up on the pavement and asks me to show him how to play it. His companion has a guitar with only three sagging strings remaining.

In the houses we visit, it is not unusual to meet Khmers Rouges who are also looking for provisions. They ask us about the contents of this or that tin, happily leaving to us those things that do not appeal to them. They know little enough about the huge range of foodstuffs put in tins. The sharing is done pleasantly. Cupboards full of alcohol interest no one, neither them nor us. We make several trips to the Cultural Services with an icebox full of tins.

A sow is enclosed on a pen on the pavement with several piglets. We would like to take the entire family, but the mother, as she should, shows herself fierce. We make do with a small piglet, not without feeling sad for its former owners, refugees who raised pigs on the street pavement.

A few houses which we enter have already been visited and pillaged. The contents of cupboards and drawers have been systematically thrown to the floor, sometimes in the garden. Everywhere, I am struck by the number of photographs lying on the ground. Family photos, happy moments with the children, photos taken on holiday.

From the terrace of the Calmette building, we discover that one quarter is burning in the southwest, not far from the Olympic Stadium where General de Gaulle gave his famous speech in 1966 on the right of people to arrange their own future. Towards Pochentong Airport, I can see the Faculty of Science, my last residence before withdrawing into the centre of the city.

Tuesday 22 April

We are told that tomorrow and the two days following will be holidays. To celebrate the victory. What will the holiday be in this deserted city? Foreign radio stations continue to be worried by the silence from Phnom Penh. At 1 p.m. a huge explosion: we are told (a hypothesis or accurate information?) that the arms dump behind the stadium beyond the Embassy had been blown up. Although the head of the Cultural Services has forbidden us from leaving (he continues to play his administrative role), we go out in search of commons in the quarter where the Khmers Rouges allow us some freedom of movement.

A little later, two Khmers Rouges come to hand over to us a certain L., a handsome bearded Indian from Pondichéry. He has been wandering in recent days through the streets among those who were fleeing. He has comforting words, saying that the Khmers Rouges are not aggressive except in relation to the monks and the Chinese, people seem to accept their fate, and walk or rest at whim.

In the rooms in which we live, heaped up on top of each other, arguments arise, destroying the atmosphere of communal life. Unpleasant words are exchanged; one person is reproached for never doing the washing up, another for putting a whole lump of sugar in his coffee, some are suspected of hiding foodstuff. We become petty.

Thursday 24, Friday 25 April

The days pass. One's whole life could flow like this. We have established a new way of living, the temporary nature of which we no longer notice. We hear airplanes passing which seem to land at the airport at Pochentong. Is this a sign that we shall soon leave? Some shots can still be heard, though rarely. Are the Khmers Rouges going to revitalise Phnom Penh? There are some encouraging signs: the electricity works, which means that the power station is being serviced; the Khmers Rouges are looking for water supply specialists; our guards are tolerant of the three of us when we go out in search of food… these seem to be signs of a resumption of activity. But are we not guilty of false interpretation? Deprived of concrete information, we construct our hypotheses on the slightest of indicators.

Throughout this period, the radio filled the airwaves with patriotic songs interspersed with ideological slogans.

Saturday 26 April

Without the notes I jot down each day, I would have much trouble in knowing what day of the week we are. There is no difference between a weekday and a weekend.

Today, one of the Khmers Rouges on guard in front of our railings invites us to visit his headquarters. Although he speaks French, he speaks but little, avoids some questions, and takes refuge in silence. From what he says and what he gives to understand, he seems to be a former student who joined, against his will, the Republican forces, in which he quickly rose through the ranks, and he attached himself at the last moment to the Khmers Rouges movement, calculating the benefits therefrom rather than from conviction. The headquarters he takes us to is a splendid villa in the colonial style, not far from the Royal Hotel, and bearing the date 1919. On the pavement there is a huge radio antenna, held in position by steel cables. In the garden, equipment is piled up in the greatest disorder, in the middle of which I notice a number of rockets. In the main room of the villa, a dozen Khmer soldiers, all very young, unenthusiastically go about their different chores. One of them is trying to repair a metal watch bracelet; a group is listening to revolutionary songs from a radio; another group is listening to cassettes on a hi-fi. The person in charge, to whom we are first presented, is stretched out on his stomach on a divan; a very young boy is massaging his buttock. Armchairs stuffed with cushions are placed under our backsides while our hosts sit on the floor. We are first of all offered a bottle of soda water. Then several cartons of strong Bastos cigarettes are brought in. From a huge bolt of new cloth *kramas* are being cut for us, with red and white square patterns. We would like to ask many questions, but the goodwill which seems

to prevail here and still more the feeling that we would learn nothing silences us. Moreover our interpreter seems to wish to limit his task to that of a polite host. Do the Khmers Rouges, by receiving us in such a sensitive place, by acting in a very free and easy manner (might they be play-acting?) wish to show themselves as humane and reassuring? When we propose to leave, the chief gives us a crate of whisky and another of cognac. We politely refuse this offer, saying that it is too heavy a load to carry. We make do with two bottles, one of each. To conclude, the chief asks us to photograph him. We say we have no camera, which is a lie on our part. We would try, we promise, to find a Polaroid. All that is done with hand-shakes and a broad smile. Our guide-interpreter-guardian escorts us back.

In the afternoon of the same day, François Bizot[1] comes to pay us a visit from the Embassy. He brings precise orders: we are to surrender all the arms in our possession, group all the radios, and hand over our passports. We will be evacuated, beginning 30 April. Not by airplane, but overland; lorries will take us to Poipet on the Thai frontier, where the authorities of our respective countries will handle us; a dozen lorries will shuttle between Phnom Penh and the frontier; nationalities other than the French will leave first. Why by lorry? The Khmer authorities refuse to answer any questions. Simply put, no foreigner is to remain in Cambodia. We are troublesome. The Khmers Rouges are not going to let us control the means of our departure; it is they who will take care of our evacuation. They refuse to allow an airplane ready to leave Laos with ten tons of food and medicines to land.

In the evening, a French friend whose wife is Cambodian, feeling that the departure was to occur soon, wants to go with me outside the compound to pay a kind of farewell visit. He speaks fluent Khmer. One of our guards at the fence, with whom we have often spoken, with a jolly face and almond eyes – no doubt a last-minute recruit – makes a sign to us. He suggests we go 'to his house'. We follow him down a path which comes out, on the west, onto a flat plain beside the *baeng*. At 'his place' in front of a rough plank and bamboo shelter, we are given chairs to sit on in the middle of a group of seven or eight Khmers Rouges, including a girl with sparkling and intelligent eyes. Among them is a strange legless cripple in a wheelchair, whom we have seen several times in those parts, who wants to know if we speak English.

We are offered cigarettes. A rifle shot rings out; we can hear the bullet tearing through the undergrowth. R. chats in Khmer: we are teachers, and will soon be leaving… He only receives evasive answers to the questions he asks about the present situation. The girl gives us to understand she speaks French, but refuses to

[1]A member of the Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient and specialist in Khmer epigraphy. Thanks to his command of Khmer, he could liaise efficiently with the Khmers Rouges while foreigners were kept inside the Embassy after the fall of Phnom Penh. He was subsequently to write a book, *Le Portail*, about his experiences as a Khmers Rouges prisoner.

speak it in front of the others. She admits having a university degree; she is clearly not someone from the rice fields. In charge of the kitchen, she moves away, a bucket of water in her hand. Will the Socialist revolution continue such gender discrimination? When we return, night has already fallen more than half an hour ago.

Monday 28 April

Yesterday, there was an argument among us during the meal. I clumsily evoked, in front of B., the maths teacher, the sad fate of those who were chased out of Phnom Penh and were walking on the highways. 'All that is finished, over and done with!' he replied, impatiently. 'Now we have to look after our own fate, the journey we are going to make in a lorry to the frontier.' I cannot stop myself from comparing our relative positions: we shall make the journey by lorry, and the trip will not take that long; what is that in comparison to what those walking on the highways and byways have to endure? Furious, he jumped up, seized me by the collar, and raised his left hand ready to strike. Those watching did not move. I suggested that he restrain himself, but he turns to the attack again, foretelling the trials we shall endure: our lives are in danger, we have to mobilise our forces to confront the adversary… Mme X. took up his defence, and used the occasion to express her griefs, complaining that we are eating her 400,000 riels of provisions. The harmony of the group is completely broken; the split follows an entirely foreseeable path: on one side, those who lived in the cocoon of official French establishments (the Embassy, the Lycée Descartes), and on the other hand those who worked with Cambodians. Vaguely suspected of being disloyal, this second lot, among whom I count, from that time on keep themselves separate from the others. We stick to our tins of food which can still be found in the abandoned villas, and eat the fruit we find growing on the trees.

Tuesday 29 April

This evening, R and I return to the edge of the *baeng* near where the radio antenna that dominates that part of the city. The surroundings are like a village in the country. Small paths meander beneath the trees between tiny but well maintained plank houses. I imagine the simple and frugal life of the people living there. Today, these places are abandoned, and the impression of solitude is striking. In one enclosure, pigs have been left untended. Here is an anti-rocket shelter, a mere hole in the ground, covered with corrugated iron, itself covered with 30 cm of soil. You enter it by three rough steps cut into the clay. Simple palisades of woven vegetation mark the boundaries of the plots. The walls of the houses are made in part from the planks of ammunition boxes. But the balustrades of the balconies are

decorated with carvings. Further on, we meet a group of Khmers Rouges cooking a fish over an open fire. They offer us boiling hot tea which they have just made. The glass is disgustingly dirty, but so what, the tea is delicious. We return, pass through the abandoned village to be back as night falls. The scene of these deserted houses weighs heavily on us.

The same evening

I have just closed my suitcase. The arrangements for tomorrow have been proclaimed. I shall leave on Lorry no 15. It is the last night in Phnom Penh, the last few hours. When shall I see this place again? Shall I see it again?

Wednesday 30 April

Got up at three in the morning. This suitcase, which for the past month I have so often packed and unpacked following my different locations, is there, closed, ready to be taken. Two convoys at intervals of two days are planned. A list from the Embassy last night allocated the passengers to the different lorries. It was hoped to arrange as equal a distribution as possible of women, children, the aged, and adult men so that the last group could help the others. I have been put in the first convoy, in fact consisting of twenty-seven lorries. R., his wife and his daughter will also be in this convoy if a twenty-eighth lorry can be procured. Only a few months old, their daughter was vaccinated against smallpox a few days before the fall of Phnom Penh. By constantly scratching herself, she has spread the vaccine, and her body is covered in blisters.

Animation and nervous irritation at the last moments. So many things have to be left behind: books, photos, Cambodian sarongs known as *sampot*. There are minor, short-lived disputes. F. and V. have spent the short night drinking, and are totally drunk. Agitated transport down the stairs of the suitcases. That of R. opens like a flower. A length of string comes to the aid of the deficient clasps. When the head announces at the bottom of the staircase that, in the end, R. will not leave on this convoy, he is profoundly disappointed.

We reach the Embassy by going round the enclosure of Calmette Hospital.

The American army lorries and the Chinese-built Molotova are lined up, some inside, some outside the Embassy garden. The lawn is submerged beneath cars parked anyhow, and covered with empty tins, greasy paper, and turds. The living conditions for the crowds piled in there were certainly difficult. But I have difficulty in not severely castigating the behaviour of my fellows, who seem to have made little effort in keeping the place in a tolerable condition.

In lorry number 15, where I am, we number twenty, including six children and a revolting old man who has not washed for weeks. M. and A., who with me constituted the trio charged with finding food supplies for the refugees of the cultural services, are there. Also there is V., his Vietnamese wife and their children, as well as Mme T., a Frenchwoman married to a Cambodian and her three daughters, but not her husband, whom she had to abandon; she took to the road to find him, but had been brought back to the Embassy (I can imagine her anguish at this moment). Also in their places are a friend of Mme T. and B., the maths teacher from the Lycée Descartes (with whom I am now reconciled), and his daughter. We all take our places on the wooden seats in the lorry. The suitcases are placed side by side in the middle part. The lorry has no roof. Over our heads is the starry night sky. The wait is long, the mood sombre. In a nearby lorry, a man is hoisted onto a stretcher, with a leg in plaster. Things perk up when the first lorries move off. No, it is not yet the moment of leaving. We have to get down and pass on foot under the entrance to the Embassy, each person behind his lorry, so that our masters can count those leaving and verify the groups with the lists that have been drawn up. A young Cambodian woman who tries to join a group is sent back.

There follows a curious hesitation waltz as the lorries, to line up in front of the Embassy, overtake each other, go back, block the way, park diagonally. After many moments of confusion, the convoy finally takes shape. But there is a fresh concern. It is moving to the south, whereas it would be logical to go to the north. Where are they taking us? What are they going to do with us? In the convoy are to be found, apart from the French majority, the Khmer wives of foreigners, a few Americans (a journalist, a helicopter pilot), Russian diplomats who thought they would benefit from special treatment but who have been brought here by force, handcuffed: all the foreigners who delayed departing, who had not foreseen the end of an historic period, or who thought they were at home here. No explanations are provided. This silence about the intentions of our captors is for many a source of anguish.

Day begins to break. The casuarina trees take shape in the gloom, the flame trees of the residence light up, the streets become clear, the city emerges before our eyes, looking like a cemetery. The scene is profoundly depressing. Before it was so lively, so familiar, and now… so different. We are going to leave it, turn our backs on the huge trees full of birds, abandon its balconies full of flowers, its colourful bougainvillea protruding over its walls.

A column of soldiers wearing different uniforms looking like ragamuffins moves down Monivong Boulevard, rifles on their shoulders. They walk in a wavy line; we look at them in astonishment. It all looks as though this was set up for our edification. On the pavement in front, more soldiers in black are busy sweeping the street, using palm fronds for brooms.

The convoy finally sets off. Each of the twenty-seven lorries is escorted by an armed soldier who sits beside the driver.

We stop for the first time when level with the station, where we witness another spectacle apparently organised for our edification. More than a hundred soldiers are lined up in regular order, their heads lowered before a reliquary said to contain relics of the Buddha. After a moment, they all sit down, keeping their same positions, with their weapons at their side. Then the convoy sets off again. The solders look at us as we pass. No hatred is apparent, no sympathy either, something closer to indifference. Here we are foreigners, people from somewhere else, and they do not want to know us.

The convoy turns right, goes down the USSR Boulevard leading to Pochentong airport. The splendour of the boulevard is overwhelming: the flame tree flowers for want of traffic in recent days form a vast red carpet.

Everywhere there are soldiers, rifles on their shoulders who observe us with the same indifference. Barbed wire protecting the Planning Ministry has not been removed; the flower beds, which the Highways Department officials tended with such care before the arrival of the Chaul Chnam, the traditional New Year holiday, still look rather fine. Further on, by a dyke, is a proud pagoda. Then the Faculty of Science with its languorous casuarinas. Nothing has changed. I still have the key to the flat I lived in there, in my pocket.

Next comes the Pochentong market, which suffered in a fire. Houses nearby have been abandoned, emptied of their furniture, of all they contained. The airport is deserted, a red flag flies from the top of the tower, a few airplanes are on the tarmac. Then comes the Cambodian countryside, dotted with sugar palms, raising their bunched leaves into the sky above the rice fields which stretch to the horizon. Beside the road, here and there, are abandoned cars, doors open, windscreens broken, some overturned, others tipped into the watercourses. Cars of privileged citizens, receiving their first lesson in socialist equality, forced to leave them there and continue on foot like everyone else.

After a few kilometres, our convoy turns right, northwards, and takes a track. We pass refugees walking. Probably the last to have left the city, who remained as long as possible in their houses. Bicycles, carts, prams overloaded with possessions, pushed by men, women, and children sweating beneath the morning sun. These people stand aside to let our lorries pass. They are empty of expression, beyond sadness, disconsolate. A woman holds her hand over her baby to protect it from the sun begs for a hat. A. throws her his, a conical Vietnamese hat. The woman runs, seizes the precious gift before the lorry squashes it. A little to one side, families are seated under the trees, improvising a joyless picnic with the few provisions they have succeeded in bringing along.

People still move along, ever walking. They do not greet us, just watch us pass. We are in lorries, not on foot, we are not hungry, we are going to rejoin our families, our houses. They distance themselves from theirs with each step. They look like poor sods, but come from the town where the women wore white lace blouses.

We breathe in the dust which the lorry in front churns up from dirt road, even though we never exceed 15 or 20 km an hour. The sun beats down hard. All the bridges over the almost dry rivers have been blown up. The lorries have to leave the track and ford the river. Each time this causes the procession to stop.

The war has left very visible marks. Here there are huge craters thrown up by cluster bombs from the American B52s until 1973, great gaps in the ground where the grass has not grown again. Over there are dead trees, burnt by bomb blast, and the stumps of decapitated palm trees. We pass burnt-out villages, where all the remains of the once wooden houses are black patches of earth and stumps of posts.

There are ruined temples, sad remains with broken walls; the least damaged have shed their roof tiles thanks to the shelling.

The hills of Oudong with its majestic *phnoms* (stupa) come into view on the horizon. We take an asphalted branch road, but soon it again becomes the dirt tracks of the town. The town? Nothing remains of it. Everything has been burnt, trees, houses, walls. It is difficult to imagine life in this small town, to conceive of a market, a school, children, dogs wandering around. We are astonished. No one in the lorry dares utter a word about this. Total silence greets this utter desolation. We draw in our breath, hold back our tears; we are bitter, too.

Then we go through Kompong Cham, an important town, which has also suffered terribly.

The track goes on, through a landscape of rice fields. There is the gentle colour of rice straw left over from the last harvest. The earth bunds marking out the rectangular and seemingly perfectly horizontal fields are so many human signatures, but people are absent. Sometimes this fine chessboard is cut; lorries, armoured vehicles have passed, leaving their red earth gouged-out tracks, destroying the dykes.

We make a long stop in a village. One that is alive, for a change, well maintained. Traditional wooden Khmer houses on piles. What a pleasure it is to refresh

oneself with water from the storage jars under the shade of the trees! We wait for the meal which is announced, smoking the few cigarettes that remain. Our guards stay to one side. They show some indifference now, no longer guarding us systematically with their firearms in their hands. The villagers treat us sympathetically. The man who lives in the house where the passengers of my lorry take shelter from the sun, invites us to use the water in his jars, tries to act the genial host, and be of use. We look at the coconuts on top of one of his trees, but he says that if he gives us one he would have to give everyone one. A few moments later, with a long pole, one of my compatriots seizes the coconuts of our kind host. The rush to the rice prepared by the villagers for us on the orders of our captors is disgraceful. People nearly come to blows to seize the plates of our modest hosts, squabble over a spoon of rice or a morsel of pork. I am ashamed to be there. It seems now perfectly correct to have expelled us from the country. Yes, the Khmers Rouges expelled us, but with the modest means at their disposition, without brutality. Even though our situation is Spartan, we surely do not deserve so much attention.

After a siesta beneath the house of our host, we set off again about 4 p.m. The lorries remain in tight formation, to avoid the dissemination of the morning, where we sometimes just turned in circles. We go through a thin forest, lit by the late afternoon sun. Then it is the rice fields again, not so dry as those passed earlier. The stops are frequent, apparently in order to let the lorries decide which direction to take.

The sky clouds over, black banks appear with astonishing rapidity, and the storm breaks. The convoy stops.We take shelter under the lorries at first, but water quickly covers the track. We discover, behind a hedge, a house, to which we move as a group, and warm ourselves around a fire lit by the inhabitants. But the lorry horns recall us and everyone returns, without thinking of thanking our hosts, who must think they were invaded by a flock of magpies.

On the floor of the lorries, our suitcases soaked up the rainwater. Some, of tough cardboard, split open and vomit their contents in despair. Night falls. The cool wind causes our shirts to stick to our skins. Thrown around all day by the stony track, cooked under the sun, then watered by the storm, we are exhausted at the end of a difficult day. We are cold now, and have no dry clothes to wear.

The convoy turns right, takes a narrow path beneath trees, and we reach the enclosure of a poor half-destroyed pagoda. We shall spend the night here. I witness uncomely disputes about finding somewhere to lie down on the worm-eaten floorboards. I prefer to go and sleep outside on the bench of our lorry. The evening meal will only be ready at one in the morning, when everyone will be asleep. To someone who complained that he could not sleep comfortably, a Khmers Rouges replied, ‘As for us, we have not slept for five years.’

Thursday 1 May

The night was cool, my clothes have not had the time to dry on my back. I am cold. At three in the morning, N. wakes me up; he has discovered a water jar with some water in it. Like him, I use it to shave and have a cat's lick of a wash before the mob arrives. Soon after, cries, pushing and shoving, an inglorious spectacle before our guards. Then what remains of the suitcases has to be placed on the floor of the lorries; some suitcases are simply abandoned, completely ruined by the rain. We wonder how long our exodus will last, and its destination. After more than twenty-four hours, we are hardly more than fifty kilometres from Phnom Penh! At this rate, we shall need more than a week to reach the Thai frontier. We have only enough water for one or two more days, if care is taken. The lorry transporting the Americans having to be abandoned, they have to squeeze into that carrying the Soviets (is this malice on the part of our guards?). The convey sets off before dawn. We are totally bemused when we notice that we are passing the same place as yesterday, in front of the same pagoda. Are we really going towards the frontier?

The convoy stops at a crossroads. A burst tyre. While being repaired, the women of a nearby village come up to us. Their looks, at first indirect, become more engrossed by the curious spectacle we present. A handsome woman, in front, holds her baby on her hips. The children exchange signs with us, become ever bolder. The little girls smile at us. Charming moments to be retained.

The convoy sets off again. We take the track built by the Khmers Rouges army to bring munitions to the outskirts of the capital. It goes through a thin forest which in other circumstances would be delightful, with its gentle light, the ground covered in brown leaves. The bridges have already been repaired, or are about to be, by groups of workers of both sexes dressed in black. We meet many times these teams working at repairing the dykes or the roads.

Then we reach a landscape of rice fields already green from the modest early rains. We enter what seems to us like a 'normal' rural world where the war has left no visible signs. Modest but well-maintained wooden houses lie behind clumps of trees. The women are at work in front of a huge cauldron over a fire, children tease a dog nearby. It is as though we have reached a peaceful and welcoming place.

At midday, after going round a *baeng*, we stop in a village, apparently long under Communist control. The inhabitants show us neither hostility nor fear. They prepare, on the request of our guards, a meal of rice and pork and we expect the luxury of a siesta under the houses. I take advantage of these moments to dry in the sun the contents of my suitcase (my poor books are in a terrible condition). The passengers of each lorry were required, given yesterday's disorder, to select one person to take charge for each lorry. I have to collect our rice and meat. The village women, mostly old, offer us a soup that they have taken the initiative of

providing. 'How much do we owe you?' 'Nothing. Everything is free here, we do not accept money.' A little later, an old woman says to G. 'Give me your glasses. My eyes are old'. 'But without them, I can see nothing,' he replied. 'Ah well, never mind,' she said.

Off we go again, under a hot May sun. As evening approaches, the sky darkens, a storm threatens. Some lightning, some thunder, then the deluge. After being cooked by the sun, we are frozen.

Some distance away, we can see an old railway steam engine, a real museum piece. But it works, and we are astonished.

The bridge in front of us has been blown up. The river has to be forded. The first few lorries pass without too much difficulty, but they gouged out the banks made soft by the rains. So all the passengers have to get down, and each lorry be winched up from the opposite bank. The Chinese Molotovas, constituting about half our convoy, manage without the winches. The rain comes down again, icy but not heavily. Impossible to take shelter or warm up.

Overnight at Kompong Chnang. We stop at a handsome building which turns out to have been the prefecture. A fine monumental staircase, carpets on the floor, armchairs, polished wood, nothing appears to have been damaged. A dispute arises between the French and the Germans as to who will occupy the best places. The most tenacious get a real bed; some will sleep on the carpets, which is not bad. Most though doss down on the tiles in the corridors.

Friday 2 May

Up at four in the morning. I am once more designated to get the food for our lorry: a big bowl of rice, a little pork, a bottle of Chinese wine, a large bag of shredded dried fish, a packet of cigarettes, a jerry can of fifteen litres of water from a well.

We arrive as Pursat at midday. We are placed in a newly built wooden house for the meal. Everything looks new; no doubt the home of a 'bourgeois'. On the floor is a photo of a man about forty, carefully groomed hair, a necktie over his flowered shirt, probably the owner of the house. On a wall is an inscription in Khmer: 'We left on ... taking the road for … Come and join us.'

We have to tranship. Our guards are supposed to return to Phnom Penh the military lorries in order to evacuate those we left behind in the Embassy, another group of two hundred and fifty-five persons. We shall continue our journey on buses and civilian lorries assembled there for us. The Chinese buses and minibuses belonged to tourist agencies or airlines (including Khmer Airlines). The women and children will be in the buses, the men on the remaining lorries with the luggage.

But some of us have already attacked the buses and installed their luggage on the seats. There is a sharp discussion. They do not give up until it is made clear that the convoy will not leave until they have obeyed instructions. The transfer had only just ended when the rain returned. The storm was not as violent as those of the two preceding days, and this time we are sheltered. Our lorry has an awning. What comfort, now! If, that is, one discounts the smell of the exhaust which fills the interior. When the rain stops, A. and I take up position on top of the driver's cabin to avoid breathing the fumes. The people we meet on the way, children and adults, make big signs at the sight of us perched on top. Not everyone wears black here. But very soon, we have to return to the interior of the lorry because it jumps about so much on the rutted road that is it is impossible to remain on our perch without injury. We continue the journey standing, hanging on to the straps of the awning over our heads, legs bent to absorb the shocks of the road. The lack of maintenance, the passage of armoured cars, bombardments and the rain have united to produce huge depressions in the road surface.

A stop of one hour at Battambang to take a rapid meal. Seven oranges are distributed for the ten passengers in our lorry. Like many others, I take advantage of this stop to sleep a few moments. We set off again in the middle of the night. The uneven road is much worse than the two previous days.

Saturday 3 May

At dawn, we are at Sisophon. The countryside here is flat and dreary. Huge empty rice fields. Few trees. In the distance, to the left, a few hills. Sometimes we meet a shaky old tractor. There is no sign of any other road traffic.

Last stop before Poipet. The milestones tell us we are approaching the frontier. Oranges and coconuts are handed out. We wash our faces in a stream. At Poipet, where we arrive at ten the morning, we wait for a long time by our respective lorries. The frontier is a few feet in front of us. The town has not been damaged, but seems deserted. The market stalls are empty, but in position. The shops lining the street are locked up. We are told that we shall not be allowed to go backwards and forwards across the bridge marking the frontier. Each individual must pass with all his luggage. This causes panic among those who have many suitcases and bags; they have to decide what they are going to take. Some acquire yokes to carry as much baggage as possible.

At two in the afternoon, after long discussions between the Khmers Rouges and the police on the Thai frontier, the crossing can finally be made. We have to wait another hour and a half for our lorry to move and deposit us at the entrance to the bridge of Aranya Prathet. Many Khmers Rouges, dripping firearms and grenades, are there, looking at us, indifferent, and making no effort to help the men and

women struggling with their personal effects. On the other side, the Thai soldiers at the other end of the bridge willingly lend a hand. One of them even warmly shakes my hand. We are on the other side. Journalists are there, behind barriers. They hand out to us cans of beer, soda water. I recognise the reporters from *Paris-Match*, who, in March, seeing nothing happen, left Phnom Penh for want of news. The cameras click. The Thai Red Cross is there too, kindly providing soft drinks, biscuits, and warm smiles. But before being completely free we have to go through the meticulous inspection of our bags by the Thai customs officials. They even go through my toilet bag.

Apart from the journalists, many people came to meet others they knew. Euphoria to a degree overtakes the refugees who see the end of their travails, and their fear. But I am not happy. I look back at the bridge, to Cambodia which has made perfect strangers of us. I have left friends behind, to face what?

Comfortable buses take us to Bangkok. The Thai countryside seems rich, with its fine tarmac roads, its innumerable service stations, its illuminated sign-boards!

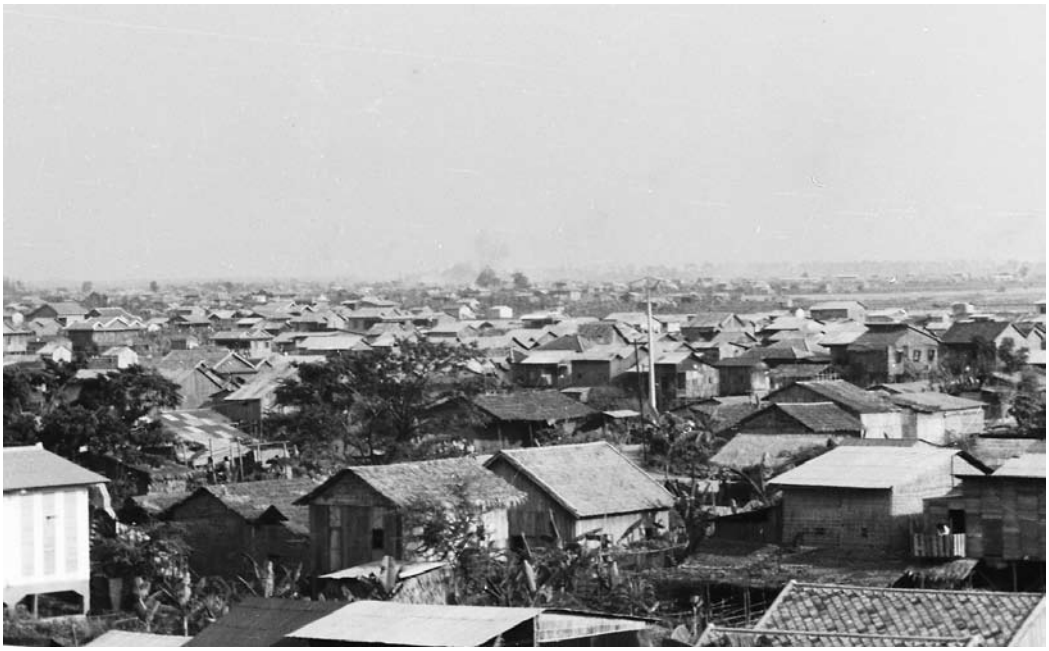
We are received at the French Embassy in Bangkok, which has done us proudly: a cold buffet, drinks, and forms to fill up. We are overwhelmed with questions tinged with compassion – everyone thinks we have suffered terribly. No, I want to say. It is the Cambodians who have suffered, who are suffering, and will do so for a long time.

We are posted to different hotels in Bangkok. I end up at the M…, a very luxurious hostelry for someone like me, covered in sweat and dust. What a joy to have a shower, shampoo. To be finally clean! We spread out in our rooms the still-wet contents of our suitcases. The reviews I brought from Phnom Penh, *Nokor Khmer*, which I value since they come from a world now inaccessible, are in a terrible condition; the colour pages have stuck to each other, thanks to the rainwater which penetrated my only case. After a meal of unwanted opulence, I sleep deeply until the next morning.

A tourist in spite of myself in Bangkok, I am full of sorrow at having lost Cambodia. Two days later, the 747 of Air France takes off at midnight. Not far from me, Mme T., with her daughters, leaves without her Khmer husband. France is about to greet her. All these people, snatched from their country, what awaits them in France? Our adventure ends at the airport in Paris, after having to face once again a crowd of photographers. A happy ending – it could have been much worse – but infinitely sad. Those with whom I spent special moments, to whom I felt bound by fraternity, sometimes friendship, I leave without fuss after having lunch with them. Everyone is on his own now. I am swallowed up by the Metro, the doors of which shut behind my back with the brutality of gun breeches. I am terrified by the absence of grace in these people who are going to their jobs, by the

lack of elegance in their made-up faces, the harshness of the lines of their furrowed brows. Everyone is strangely silent, lives nervously in total anonymity. In the street, the cars pass by in the rain, the pedestrians cross each other's paths without looking. Here, no child plays on the pavements.

(translated by Michael Smithies)



Fighting in the distance, in the western suburbs of Phnom Penh.

Monivong Boulevard with armoured vehicles assembled at one end, on the eve of the fall of Phnom Penh.

Khmers Rouges soldiers walking into the city.

Refugees or inhabitants expelled from the city.

The military at work.

Aranya Prathet crossing, 3 May 1975.