



FAMILIES STILL SEARCHING FOR ANSWERS

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The trial of Kaing Guek Eav (alias Duch) resumed this morning with the testimonies of Im Sunthy and her daughter, Phung Guth Sunthary. Im Sunthy took the stand first, accompanied by her medical assistant. Appearing in the courtroom to speak about her husband's death was extremely difficult. In fact, she had collapsed earlier this week when she saw the photo of an unnamed prisoner at Tuol Sleng prison (S-21) lying in a pool of his own blood. The picture conjured up memories of her husband, Phung Ton, and the painful thought that he may have also been one of those victims similarly struggling for his life. Accordingly, her lawyer informed the court that she would only be making a brief statement regarding her pain and suffering, and her daughter would represent the family by delivering a comprehensive account surrounding the fate of Phung Ton and the suffering that the family consequently endured.

Im Sunthy's husband, Phung Ton, was a highly respected professor and former university dean. In fact, his former students include Duch's co-counsel as well as the accused himself. On March 16, 1975, Phung Ton left his family to attend several conferences in Europe. His family never saw him again. One month after his departure, the Khmer Rouge took full control of Phnom Penh and forcibly relocated all families, Im Sunthy's included, to the countryside where they were put to work in the fields. During this evacuation, she was forced to destroy all of the photographs of her husband that she had brought with her. Im Sunthy described this period as one of extreme hardship; a period during which they were mistreated and suffered from a lack of food. When the Khmer Rouge regime fell in 1979, she returned to Phnom Penh with her family in hopes of being reunited with her husband with whom she had lost contact. She learned later that shortly after his return to Cambodia he had been sent to S-21, the prison where, she said, no one survived.

The news completely shocked her. She fell into a state of utter distress and tremendous grief. She even attempted to commit suicide to escape the extreme sorrow. Now she can only live by consuming medication. She explained that not a minute or a day goes by when she does not think of him, and the grief only intensifies as time passes.

She explained that she had joined as a civil party not to seek vengeance and revenge but rather to find justice for her husband and to pay homage to his lost soul. She wanted to preserve the memory of her husband and sought to uncover the truth relating to his death, many details of which still remain hidden.

Phung Ton's daughter, Phung Guth Sunthary, then took the stand and provided an in-depth account relating to the disappearance and death of her father. She described her father as a

gentle and humble man who always made time for his children despite his busy schedule. He was the kind of father who always sent his kids gifts when he traveled abroad. He earned the respect of all the people he met. He was open-minded, loved humankind, and carried himself with a great deal of dignity.

Upon her family's return to Phnom Penh after the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime, she began searching for her father. She always believed that her father would remain untouched because he had never hurt nor mistreated anyone. Her family received conflicting reports about Phung Ton, none of which indicated that he had been sent to S-21. They all held out hope, until one fateful day she discovered the picture of her father in a local newspaper. She and her mother were exchanging rice for palm sugar which was given to them wrapped in a newspaper. She recalled that she had not been able to read anything during the previous four years because of the policies of the Khmer Rouge, so she removed the newspaper to see what was written. What she discovered left her and her mother pale and speechless. Jumping right off the page was a picture of her father with a placard hanging from his neck – a photograph that was taken at S-21.

Phung Guth Sunthary and her mother then visited S-21 in search of the truth. There, they found only a depressing place where the stench of blood and of dying people lingered, many months after it had been abandoned. They were shocked beyond belief. Her mother could not even move. They left with despair and wept quietly all night.

She later found out more information from letters her father had sent to friends, and documentation made available to her by the Documentation Center of Cambodia (“DC-Cam”). Her father did not trust the Khmer Rouge regime but felt compelled to return to his country to be with his family. According to him, to do otherwise would be a crime. He returned to Cambodia on Christmas day, 1975 where he was immediately detained and sent to several different detention camps before his final transfer to S-21 in December 1976. Documentation suggests that he was detained for at least seven months during which, she testified, he was surely tortured, terrorized, and ultimately “smashed.”

Phung Guth Sunthary explained that the loss of her father was a severe psychological shock. She explained that her father was the person she always turned to when she had a problem. She described nightmares where she would see only her father's body floating in the sky. The loss of her father filled her heart with suffering – a wound which cannot be cured – and one which only intensifies as she gets older.

She then put several questions to Duch in an attempt to fill in the details surrounding her father's death. She noted that she was there seeking the truth, not revenge, and despite the fact that she consistently attended trial proceedings, she has not received answers to her questions. (She is one of the very few of the nearly 100 civil parties that has attended the trial virtually every day.) She prefaced her questions by noting that her father's fate was in the hands of Duch, a meticulous and thorough man. Therefore, he necessarily had the answers to her questions and if he did provide them he should never be allowed to claim that he is remorseful. Specifically she sought to ascertain who ordered the arrest and eventual execution of her father. She also asked what kind of torture was administered to a liberal, open-minded, and progressive man like her father – a man who was the antithesis of everything the Khmer Rouge represented.

Duch responded by noting that he had a deep respect for Phung Ton, who had been his professor and had defended him when he was a student. Duch maintained that he was never aware of Phung Ton's presence at S-21. He insisted that if he had known of Phung Ton's presence he would have ensured that Phung Ton received adequate food and accommodations, as Duch had done with another former professor. (Despite this deep respect Duch noted that he could never have spared Phung Ton's life because official policy required that every prisoner at S-21 be executed.) Duch recognized the fact that he did not provide sufficient and satisfactory answers to the questions posed to him by Phung Guth Sunthary and asserted that he would continue to try to ascertain this information as best he could.

The day's proceedings concluded with the testimony of the civil party Seang Vandy. Before the revolution, he and his brothers worked as farmers. He chose to join the army in 1972. The following year, his father, brothers, and other men from his village were forced to join the army, at which point they lost continuous contact with their families. After the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime, the men began to return to the village. Seang Vandy expected to see his two brothers return home. They never did.

He and his family worried because they had heard rumors about mass arrests and executions but they held out hope. That hope began to fade when a friend who served in the same military unit told Seang Vandy that his brother had been detained, sent away, and never returned. He lost the little hope that remained when he discovered a photograph of his brother taken at Tuol Sleng prison in the DC-Cam magazine *Searching for the Truth*. His other brother's fate remains unknown as he never came home and no evidence of his whereabouts has ever surfaced.

Seang Vandy was extremely shocked to learn that his brother had been detained and executed at S-21. His parents also felt a sense of despair and hopelessness. He described his difficult visit to S-21 where he saw the remnants of the barbarity and cruelty of the Khmer Rouge regime. He could not hold back his tears after reading his brother's confession. He experienced recurring nightmares where his brother would call out to him for help. Despite his tragic loss, he attested that this trial was easing his pain because it was helping achieve justice for the crimes perpetrated against his brother.