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From the Killing Fields, on a Mission of Truth
Stephen Holden
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“Some say that almost two million people died in the killing fields,” declares Thet Sambath, a polite, soft-spoken Cambodian journalist for The Phnom Penh Post, in the opening moments of the documentary “Enemies of the People.” He adds, “Nobody understands why so many people were killed at that time.”

Thus begins this intensely personal film, undertaken at some risk, in which Mr. Thet Sambath seeks the truth about the mass killings from 1975 to 1979 at the hands of Cambodia’s Communist Khmer Rouge government, which was responsible for the deaths of nearly a quarter of the country’s population.

The heart of the film, a collaboration by Mr. Thet Sambath and the British documentarian Rob Lemkin, consists of meticulously cataloged interviews conducted during nearly a decade with perpetrators of the mass execution, many of them rural farmers living in northwest Cambodia. As they open up and matter-of-factly describe horrific acts, the camera scours their weather-beaten faces.

“Enemies of the People” is extraordinary on several fronts. Mr. Thet Sambath’s father and brother were slain by Khmer Rouge militants, and his mother died in childbirth after her forced marriage to a militiaman. Yet as Mr. Thet Sambath

gently coaxes peasants to confess to atrocities, there is not a shred of bitterness in his questioning. At times, Mr. Thet Sambath suggests a one-man Cambodian Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Instead of affixing blame, he seeks the healing power of confession.

“Enemies of the People” is another disquieting testament to the fact that ordinary individuals under extreme pressure will carry out the most monstrous crimes. If they hadn’t followed the orders of superiors, they say, they themselves would have been killed. One farmer, a Buddhist who believes in reincarnation, expresses his tormented certainty that it will be many lifetimes before he returns in human form.

He is persuaded to demonstrate with a plastic knife on a nervous young villager how he pulled back the heads of prisoners and slit their throats. “I slit so many throats that my hand ached, so I switched to stabbing in the neck,” he recalls.

These peasant executioners were often given wine to loosen their inhibitions. Soldiers stood by to cover the mouths of children when they screamed as they witnessed their parents’ murders. One farmer recalls acquiring a taste for drinking human gall, even though it was bitter. The stench of blood was worse than buffalo flesh, another remembers. As bodies decomposed, the waterlogged fields bubbled as if they were boiling, one woman remembers. Another refuses to drink the water in this now placid tropical landscape because of bodies buried there.

The film's journalistic coup is Mr. Thet Sambath's persuasion of Nuon Chea, the chief ideologue of Pol Pot, the Cambodian Communist leader who died in 1998, to explain what happened. Mr. Nuon Chea, also known as Brother No. 2, is a proud, gaunt man in his 80s with missing teeth, who lives with his family in a cabin in the woods. Mr. Thet Sambath visited him regularly for three years before he agreed to tell the truth.

By his account, the Khmer Rouge government, which he describes as "clean, clear-sighted and peaceful," was determined to be more Communist than Communist China by abolishing all private property. Its enemies — "spies who attacked and sabotaged us from the start" — belonged to the party's more moderate, Vietnamese-sympathizing faction.

"If we'd let them live," he says, "the party line would have been hijacked." He and Pol Pot, he says, were in perfect accord, but the revolution failed because they had no experience in governing. For every question that is answered, 10 more are left hanging.

"Enemies of the People" reserves its biggest emotional punch for the end of the film, when Mr. Thet Sambath, who has lied to Mr. Nuon Chea about the fate of his own family, finally tells him about their loss. Mr. Nuon Chea, after a pause, thanks Mr. Thet Sambath for his "graciousness" over the years of their relationship, and then expresses his deep apologies.

As the final interviews with Mr. Nuon Chea were conducted, he and other high-level Khmer Rouge officials were waiting to be arrested for war crimes and genocide by the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia, a United Nations-backed tribunal.

On Monday Kaing Guek Eav, commonly known as Duch, the head of the Khmer Rouge's Tuol Sleng prison, was sentenced to 35 years in prison for charges that included crimes against humanity. In 2011 Mr. Nuon Chea will be the tribunal's second case.

ENEMIES OF THE PEOPLE

Opens on Friday in Manhattan.

Produced and directed by Rob Lemkin and Thet Sambath; written by Mr. Lemkin; directors of photography, Mr. Lemkin and Mr. Sambath; edited by Stefan Ronowicz; music by Daniel Pemberton; released by International Film Circuit. At the Quad Cinema, 34 West 13th Street, Greenwich Village. In English and Khmer, with English subtitles. Running time: 1 hour 34 minutes. This film is not rated.