



‘Turned Into Animals’ by the Khmer Rouge

Joe Freeman

December 13, 2012

In a country full of fruit trees, there were four years in which Denise Affonco never saw a single orange.

Extreme hunger under the Khmer Rouge pushed her to eat cockroaches, scorpions and frogs, and to cook with tainted goods. Once, she boiled rice with water polluted by excrement.

“We had turned into animals,” she said yesterday to the war crimes tribunal trying three of the regime’s senior leaders.

The comparison is no metaphor.

Affonco said pets owned by Khmer Rouge cadres enjoyed better living conditions than she did.

“We fought over scraps of food with their dogs, and their dogs had more to eat than we did. Is that what you call equal treatment?”

More than three decades later, Affonco, a 68-year-old civil party in Case 002, sketched vivid memories of the lengths she went to live, a fate not granted to her husband, daughter and several relatives.

Because of her age and fragile state of health, she was allowed to testify via a video feed from her home in the South of France, where she is retired. It was the first time that she has ever addressed the court.

Wearing a red sweater, glasses and with her lawyer beside her in a spare room, she described an early idyllic life as an employee of the French Embassy in Phnom Penh.

Her parents were French and Vietnamese, her husband Chinese, and she did not speak Khmer fluently, a fact she tried to downplay when she became a prisoner. Her husband, Seng, did not believe all the ominous news reports about the Khmer Rouge that she had relayed to him through reading wire stories from Agence France Presse.

He remained in denial even when the Khmer Rouge entered the city on April 17, 1975, and took the keys to their house.

Their neighbours also thought the arrival boded well for the country. One man ran out into the street and greeted arriving soldiers with cans of beer, Affonco said. She wasn't convinced.

"Everybody was glad, but the so-called liberation forces, I qualify this today, were dressed in black, they had extremely callous expressions on their faces and red eyes, and I thought, there is danger here."

What followed were years of forced labour and zigzag transfers to the northern reaches of the country. In one of the first stops, at an island camp called Koh Tukveal, members of her group were asked to provide biographies of themselves. Most people lied and spoke of a working class background. Her husband, however, would not use deception. As she explained in a memoir published in 2005, he provided precise information on the entire family.

"In short, he proudly confesses all that should have been concealed," she wrote.

After a while, he was sent to be reeducated, and was never heard from again.

Khmer Rouge soldiers sent her working convoy to Pursat province, herded members of the dwindling group onto a train that stopped in Sisophon town, and traveled on trucks to Phnom Lien.

Her son, who ultimately survived, was taken away from her at one camp. But her daughter, Jeannie, spent with exhaustion, died hours after asking for just one more bowl of rice. She was nine years old.

"An hour after she died, my niece also passed away," she said. "I had to bury the two bodies myself, no one came to help us." Two more nieces and her sister-in-law also perished.

Portions of the profits from Affonco's memoir, *To the End of Hell*, were used to fund a scholarship that the Documentation Center of Cambodia helped set up in Jeannie's name. Affonco's testimony continues today.