

Staying alive with the Khmer Rouge

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Escaping murder by fixing bicycles and watches

With the trial of three ageing Khmer Rouge leaders underway in Phnom Penh, many Cambodians who may not have thought of their onetime oppressors in years are talking again about how the days of their youth were spent under grinding and deadly Khmer Rouge rule.

Some said they had found ways to stay alive, while others, such as family members and friends, had perished from overwork or lack of food.

A watchmaker near the central market in Phnom Penh, who somehow brought my battered old Rolex back to life, told me the other day that a knowledge of watch-repairing could save your life in Democratic Kampuchea.

While everyone without exception had to labor 12 or 14 hours in the fields, he recalled an uncle whose skill in repairing and cleaning the favorite watch of the Khmer Rouge fighters, which, at that time, was an Orient, a self-winding, mechanical watch produced then in Japan, made him less likely to be executed in the arbitrary way of the Khmer Rouge, and earned him a little extra rice, enough to ensure survival for him and immediate family.

Though the Orient watches were not very expensive, how did they own these watches in the first place? With the forced evacuation of Phnom Penh, the Khmer Rouge had the run of thousands of urban homes that had been abandoned on 18th April, 1975, the day after the Khmer Rouge entered Phnom Penh. They also stopped fleeing Phnom Penh residents and, initially politely, asked them to hand over their watches to donate to Angkar, though they likely remained on the soldier's wrist. A refusal to give up the watch could lead to instant death.

Angkar - which meant, in effect, Brother Number One Pol Pot and Brother Number two Nuon Chea - at one stage ordered the young soldiers not to remove jewelry, watches and other trove from the unwillingly abandoned family homes; but who was looking anyway? That was not out of concern for those kicked out of their houses, but for some nefarious reason of Angkar's own.

Later, in the 1980s and 1990s, the Khmer Rouge soldiers moved on to a Swiss watch, the Rado, though this was always second choice, but Orient was not always available. By then, traders came in and out from the Thai border. Khmer Rouge areas like Pailin were

rich in rubies and sapphires, and the Khmer Rouge often had money to burn on such baubles - Pol Pot had given up on his money-free society by then. Alas, the seams of these precious stones are largely worked out now.

"Rolexes were unknown to the Khmer Rouge, and unwanted to them," the watchmaker told me, handing back my own watch, which he said 'would do for another 20 years.'

I doubt if the companies involved, Orient and Rado, would mention in their publicity today, if they knew, that they were the most popular watches of those who brought the Killing Fields to Cambodia, 'Khmer Rouge chic,' you might say.'

The late Ta Mok, one of the most brutal of all Khmer Rouge leaders, had a fixation about fine watches too. He used to drive around his southwest region, where the 'purest' of Khmer Rouge culture was said to exist, in a Lon Nol Jeep driven by a 15 year old boy, survivors told me. When he saw some cadre who had done a good job, whatever that might have been - in exterminating someone no doubt - he would award them the luxury watch off his wrist with great ceremony.

A few weeks later he would come by again and ask for the watch back, which he then bequeathed to someone else. I don't know what happened if the person no longer had the timepiece. (Ta Mok was the nearest the Khmer Rouge had to a ladies' man - he is said to have had a string of revolutionary girl-friends).

Veterans of Khmer Rouge rule said that the Khmer Rouge rank-and-field also craved Ray-Ban sunglasses as a revolutionary fashion statement, and in the nineties I saw them wearing them at Thmar Puok, near the Thai border. I once was asked in Bangkok to deliver a pair of Ray-Bans to Aung San Suu Kyi in Rangoon, during one of her brief spells of liberty from house arrest. I decided not to tell her what I knew about Ray-Bans, and the world's worst violators of human rights. It, er, wouldn't have been in good taste.

Another item the Khmer Rouge had an intense longing for were Cacharel shirts, black ones obviously. Cacharel is a French make that used to sell in Phnom Penh. Probably they originally picked them up again from the abandoned houses.

Besides watches and shades, other Cambodians who were skilled at repairing bicycles and motorbikes also had a better chance of surviving the Killing Fields, with a little bit extra rice, and, when not in the fields, were kept busy mending punctures and fixing bicycle chains. They did something useful for the Khmer Rouge at grassroots level, and seldom heard the dread words: "To keep you, no gain, to destroy you, no loss," followed by a fatal thump on the nape of the neck with a hoe or an ox-plough handle.

The leaders of Democratic Kampuchea had more expensive tastes. When a few journalists and foreign tourists were able to fly in to Angkor Wat from Bangkok on a small plane, when the Khmer Rouge toyed with foreign tourism for about a week, under the back seat they found a crate of vintage brandy, doubtless destined for the Khmer Rouge bigwigs in the Siem Reap area. No one, of course, dared touch it.

As foreign minister, Ieng Sary always liked to fly first class, with a retinue of male and female cadres in tow, informants said. He would usually buy fragrant French perfumes, for whom one does not know.

Nuon Chea and Khieu Samphan, the one-time Democratic Kampuchea nominal heads of state, lived in frugal wooden houses at Pailin, where I interviewed them once or twice. Nuon Chea's wife always welcomed guests with a plate of jackfruit and bottled water. Khieu Samphan was somewhat less hospitable.

Ieng Sary's wife, Ieng Thirith, had expensive tastes of her own. She told acquaintances she would only fly Swissair because she felt 'the red cross on its bodywork, from the Swiss flag, would protect it from being shot down, or taken over by terrorists.' In fact, the Swiss flag is a white cross on red, and that was what was displayed on Swissair planes.

Ieng Thirith was the fourth accused at the current tribunal, but she was ruled mentally ill and unfit for trial.