

An Irishman's diary

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CAMBODIA'S most notorious uncle cuts a distinctly odd, even comical presence at the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia.

Of the four elderly ex-leaders of the Khmer Rouge on trial, it is the 84-year-old Nuon Chea who stands out, having arrived at the court recently sporting a woolly hat and dark shades.

It is difficult to reconcile this eccentric image with that of the photographs of Nuon taken three to four decades ago. In one, circa 1976, the fleshy-faced president of the Standing Committee of the Peoples' Representative Assembly, aka "Uncle", was wearing a buttoned-up suit, standing alongside his notorious boss, Pol Pot.

Brother Number One and Brother Number Two of the Cambodian revolution were, at that point, one of a handful of cadres inhabiting the largely abandoned capital of Phnom Penh. Upon coming to power in April 1975, the Khmer Rouge, an army comprising mostly rural adolescents, forced the urban population into the countryside at gunpoint. Cambodia, renamed Democratic Kampuchea, was without road, rail and telephone links, shunning contact with the outside world, bar China and North Korea.

Refugee accounts told of a nation transformed into a giant rural work camp. By the time the invading Vietnamese forced Pol Pot, Nuon and the rest of the Khmer Rouge to flee Phnom Penh in 1979, up to two million Cambodians would be dead.

Just exactly what kind of man could unleash all this upon his own people was something I tried to discern during a visit to Nuon Chea's homestead in western Cambodia, not long before his 2007 arrest on charges of crimes against humanity.

In the company of the Cambodian journalist and filmmaker Thet Sambath, I left the petrol fumes and bustle of Phnom Penh and drove to the western city of Battambang, then on to Pailin.

Pailin itself, an unremarkable sprawl of concrete and corrugated iron, was home to numerous ex-Khmer Rouge, amnestied after the demise of the movement by prime minister Hun Sen, himself a former cadre member who defected to Vietnam in 1977.

Replace sarongs with ponchos and the local Buddhist wat (temple) with a Catholic Church, and Pailin could have been one of those South American towns where fugitive Nazis found refuge after 1945.

Nuon Chea's home was a typical rural house, wooden and set on stilts. Sambath and I slipped off our shoes and we ascended into a modestly furnished living space. Brother Number Two, wearing a baggy shirt and shades, exchanged the traditional sampeah greeting of raised palms clasped together with his visitors. His wife arrived with coffee and sliced bananas as Nuon, stooped but still exuding an air of authority, pulled himself a seat.

From the onset, it was clear he was going to offer no Nuremburg-type protestations of having acted under duress during the genocide. The Khmer Rouge, he told me, had inherited a country bombed to ruins during the tail end of the Vietnam War, sandwiched between the mutually hostile Viets and Thais. Pol Pot was "a good patriot who tried to do the best for Cambodia". For the three years, eight months and 20 days of "Democratic" Kampuchea, the national flag depicted the gold Angkor Wat on a blood-red cloth. Angkor Wat, beloved of foreign tourists, is a spectacular temple complex in northern Cambodia dating from the 12th century. As a symbol of the regime, it was wholly appropriate.

It was one of the many ghastly anomalies of 20th-century communism that, in each of the countries where it took hold, an ideology that aspired to a utopian, "scientific" future, recreated a despotic past. Even the most cursory examination of Stalin's life and personality turns him into Ivan the Terrible with an atom bomb. Mao might have been a latter-day Ming emperor, ruling a China where the isolationism of the Cultural Revolution had replaced that of the Great Wall.

And the toiling slave society upon which Angkor Wat was built was reincarnated in the late 1970s under the rule of Nuon Chea and Pol Pot.

Journalists and academics, observing the olive caps, Kalashnikovs and rhetoric of the Khmer Rouge, tended to label them "Maoists", vicious understudies to the Red Guards. More fundamentally, they espoused a xenophobic nationalism that put great emphasis on purgation, the more violent the better.

In the minds of men like Nuon Chea there could be no accommodations, no compromises. On one side were the peasants of the countryside and small villages, repositories of collective purity. On the other was the corrupt, "bourgeois" world of the towns and cities, in thrall to foreign "imperialists". Quite simply, that world had to be "smashed". And smash it they did. Last July, the court chamber sentenced the administrator of the hellish S-21, a prison in Phnom Penh where the Khmer Rouge slaughtered 14,000 people, to 30 years of imprisonment on seven counts of crimes against humanity and five of war crimes. The verb "smash" came up repeatedly in his testimony. Nuon Chea, he related, ordered "class enemies" to be "smashed" at S-21.

Yet when I mentioned S-21, Brother Number Two started to laugh. Even today, he said, he had no idea where the prison was.

One of his sons then arrived with a grandchild in tow. The four year-old stomped around the table and "Uncle" chuckled as he prodded the memory button on my camera. So

much has been written about the banality of evil but another, perhaps more disturbing, aspect is its conviviality. Doldery and benign, Nuon Chea could have been the aged patriarch of any household.

It was approaching noon and he informed Sambath that he wished to lie down. Indeed, should the current tribunal send him to jail, he would be too old to serve more than a few years; hardly justice given the horrors he orchestrated. Nor is he bothered by the prospect. Prison, he told another journalist, “is the home of the patriot”. I came away from Nuon’s household with the disturbing sense that terrible things can be perpetrated by seemingly unremarkable people.

They are not people who stand out in crowds. They look like anyone’s uncle.