

Khmer Rouge Court Witnesses Recall Shock of Return Home

Joseph Freeman

August 9, 2012

The title of the book that Case 002 witness Ong Thong Hoeung wrote could speak for thousands of educated people lured from abroad to help rebuild the country after the evacuation of Phnom Penh in April of 1975.

J'ai cru aux Khmer Rouges, or I believed in the Khmer Rouge, describes Hoeung's journey from Parisian intellectual to a worker in re-education camps.

Hoeung, a 67-year-old resident of Brussels, described the inspirational visits of new Minister of Foreign Affairs Ieng Sary yesterday.

"I remember that he was not really received as a hero. But the status was much larger than that," he said.

International prosecutor Vincent de Wilde pressed for details about the impression Ieng Sary made, particularly after the fall of Phnom Penh.

"It had great influence," Hoeung responded. "Because Cambodians at the time, even though some of them had foreign spouses, they had to leave their families behind, sell their properties, in order to rebuild their country."

Hoeung returned in 1976 and was shuffled from camp to camp, including the notorious Boeung Trabek.

"The situation was like the German treatment of the Jews, they picked a team leader to supervise the others," he said.

According to his research, of the 1,700 returnees, roughly 200 survived.

While the Documentation Center of Cambodia doesn't have data to back up Hoeung's numbers, the center has a list of 184 intellectuals who were killed at the main torture facility, S-21 in Phnom Penh.

Intellectuals who returned had to "refashion" themselves", according to Suong Sikooun,

who testified earlier.

Sikoeun, who worked under Ieng Sary at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, said he was told to bring only a rucksack with him when he returned.

As preparation, Sikoeun tried to condition his body for the rigorous life of a revolutionary.

In Beijing, “I and a few other intellectuals tried to engage in physical activities, including exercising so that we prepared ourselves for long distance walks and intensive labour work,” he said. “We already prepared ourselves secretly and mentally, but when it comes to physical labour, we did not have that kind of readiness.”

Civil party lawyers will question Hoeung today.