
THE DEATH AND LIFE OF DITH PRAN

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FOREWORD

The story of Cambodia is a universal one—it is not a new thing that small countries and vulnerable peoples get abused by the large and powerful. But the awfulness of what happened in Cambodia should not be allowed to blur into a historical generality. This is why I am glad that this account, originally published as a long magazine article in *The New York Times*, is now a book. Books fade more slowly than newspaper pages.

It appears here as it was written, in 1980. Events since then have altered the details of Cambodia's existence, but the basic fact of life for these people has remained unchanged. The Cambodians are still everyone's pawns and are still suffering terribly.

It is my hope that this chronicle of the relationship and experiences of the two of us—an American and a Cambodian brought together by a war—will help provide a glimpse at this history.

Sydney H. Schanberg

I began the search for my friend Dith Pran in April 1975. Unable to protect him when the Khmer Rouge troops ordered Cambodians to evacuate their cities, I had watched him disappear into the interior of Cambodia, which was to become a death camp for millions. Dith Pran had saved my life the day of the occupation, and the shadow of my failure to keep him safe—to do what he had done for me—was to follow me for four and a half years.

Then, on October 3, 1979, Dith Pran crossed the border to Thailand and freedom. This is a story of war and friendship, of the anguish of a ruined country, and of one man's will to live.

In July 1975—a few months after Pran and I had been forced apart on April 20—an American diplomat who had known Pran wrote me a consoling letter. The diplomat, who had served in Phnom Penh, knew the odds of anyone emerging safely from a country that was being transformed into a society of terror and purges and “killing fields.” But he wrote: “Pran, I believe, is a survivor—in the Darwinian sense—and I think it only a matter of time before he seizes an available opportunity to slip across the border.”

Pran is indeed a survivor. When he slipped across the border into Thailand, he was very thin, his teeth were rotting, and his hands shook from malnutrition—but he had not succumbed.

Pran's strength is returning and he wants the story told of what has happened, and is still happening, to his people. He wants to talk about the unthinkable statistic that Cambodia has

become: an estimated two million or more people, out of a population of seven million in 1975, have been massacred or have died of starvation or disease.

I met Pran for the first time in 1972, two years after the war between the Khmer Rouge and the American-supported Lon Nol government had begun. I went to Cambodia that year after several months of helping cover a major offensive by Hanoi in South Vietnam for *The New York Times*. For some time, Pran had worked with Craig Whitney, our Saigon bureau chief, as his assistant on his occasional trips to Phnom Penh. When my plane touched down at Pochentong Airport on that September day, Pran had received my cable and was there to meet me.

His notebook was full of the things that had been happening since *The Times's* last visit. A spacious suite with balcony was waiting for me at the Hotel Le Phnom, my press card and cable-filing permission had already been arranged for, and he had a list of valuable suggestions about what I should see and whom I should talk to. I felt immediately easy with him.

It is difficult to describe how a friendship grows, for it often grows from seemingly contradictory roots—mutual needs, overlapping dependencies, intense shared experiences, and even the inequality of status, with one serving the other.

Our bond grew in all these ways. Other reporters and television crews also vied for Pran's services, but more and more he politely turned them down and worked only for me. By the middle of 1973, his value to the paper now apparent, the foreign desk, at my urging, took Pran on as an official stringer with a monthly retainer. This took him completely out of circulation for other journalists, some of whom expressed their disappointment openly.

Pran and I realized early on that our ideas about the war were much the same. We both cared little about local or international politics or about military strategy. I had been drawn to the story by my perception of Cambodia as a nation pushed into the war by other powers, not in control of its destiny, being used callously as battle fodder, its agonies largely ignored as the world focused its attention on neighboring Vietnam. But what propelled both of us was the human impact—the ten-year-old orphans in uniforms, carrying rifles almost as tall as themselves; the amputees lying traumatized in filthy, overcrowded hospitals; the skeletal infants rasping and spitting as they died while you watched in the all-too-few malnutrition clinics; and the sleepless, unpaid soldiers taking heavy fire at the front lines, depending on the “magic” amulets they wore around their necks while their generals took siestas after long lunches several miles behind the fighting. And then, always, the refugees. While White House policy-makers were recommending only a few million dollars for relief aid, as compared with somewhere around one billion dollars in military aid, on the ground that there was really no major refugee problem in Cambodia, Pran was taking me to the jammed and underfed refugee camps and to the dirt roads not far from Phnom Penh where villagers were streaming away from the fighting, leaving their homes and rice fields behind.

We were not always depressed by the war, however, because the opposite side of depression is exhilaration—the highs of staying alive and of getting big stories. And he and I covered many big stories. Like the time in 1973 when an American B-52 bomber, through an error by the crew in activating its computerized homing system, dropped twenty or more tons of bombs on the heavily populated Mekong town of Neak Luong, thirty-eight miles southeast of Phnom Penh. About 150 people were killed and more than 250 wounded. The mortified

At 11:13, the last helicopter takes off. The dust on the landing zone, a soccer field, settles. The skies are silent.

Very suddenly the city takes on a strange, new atmosphere—a feeling of emptiness, if that's possible in a refugee-crowded capital of two and a half million. The Americans were the last power base. Now, it's like having the city to ourselves; we're on our own for everything. We don't admit it to each other, but it's more than a little eerie. We begin to feel a heightened kinship with the Westerners who have stayed—more than seven hundred French colonials, a score of mostly French and Swedish journalists, and another score of international relief officials. There are also five other Americans, ranging from a freelance photographer to an alcoholic airline mechanic who has drunkenly slept through the evacuation calls.

Much of what happened over the next five days—until the Khmer Rouge came—was reported at that time in *The New York Times*. Pran and I sped around the city and its perimeter every day in our two rented Mercedes-Benzes, trying to visit every front line, every hospital, every possible government official—to put together as clear a picture as possible of the increasingly chaotic situation. One thing was certain: the enemy circle around Phnom Penh was tightening.

These were long, frenetic, sweaty days. Our lives—and our options—had been reduced to necessities. We carried basic needs with us—typewriters and typing paper in the cars, survival kits (passport, money, change of shirt and underwear, camera, film, extra notebooks, soap, toothbrush) over our shoulders, Pran's in a knapsack, mine in a blue Pan Am bag.

Although I kept my room at the hotel, we rarely stopped there. We spent most of our nights at the cable office, filing

stories—or trying to. The main transmission tower, in a suburb called Kambol, was eventually overrun, and the last remaining transmitter was an ancient Chinese-made contraption that kept overheating and going dead. We caught only a couple of hours of sleep each night, on straw mats on the cable office floor. There was little time to bathe or change clothes, but since we all smelled alike, no one took offense.

There was also little time to reflect on what might happen when the Khmer Rouge took the city. Our decision to stay was founded on our belief—perhaps, looking back, it was more a devout wish or hope—that when they won their victory, they would have what they wanted and would end the terrorism and brutal behavior we had written so often about. We all wanted to believe that, since both sides were Khmers, they would find a route to reconciliation. Most of the high officials in the government put their lives on this belief and stayed behind too. Those who were caught were executed.

On April 14, the Khmer Rouge begin their final push, driving on the airport, one of the city's last lines of defense.

Inside the capital, there remains a strange disconnection from the reality that is such a short distance away. Some of the Frenchmen who have stayed behind, believing that as old residents and relics of the colonial past their lives will not be disrupted, are playing chess by the hotel pool. In a nearby street, a driver leans on the fender of his Land Rover, a mirror in one hand and tweezers in the other, pulling stray hairs from his chin. Government employees laugh and joke as they go through their regular morning marching exercises on the grass outside their buildings—part of a national preparedness program. For two days, the government news agency carries

nothing on the evacuation of the Americans, but it has a long story on the death of the entertainer Josephine Baker. The government radio announces the appointment of a new Minister of State for Industry, Mines and Tourism. A delicious *petit poussin* is served in the hotel restaurant, but an American patron complains because the hotel has run out of ice and he objects to drinking his Pepsi warm.

This surrealism is to come to an end on the morning of April 17, a Thursday, when the new rulers march into the anxious city. On the night of April 16 it is clear that the collapse of Phnom Penh is only hours away. Enormous fires from the battles that ring the very edge of the city turn the night sky orange. The last government planes—single-engine propeller craft diving low over the treetops—futilely try to halt the Communist advance with their final bombs. Refugees by the thousands swarm into the heart of the capital, bringing their oxcarts, their meager belongings, and their frightened bedlam. Deserting government soldiers are among them.

Pran turns to me and says: "It's finished, it's finished." And as we look at each other, we see on each other's faces for the first time the nagging anxiety about what is going to happen to us.

We spend that final night filing stories from the cable office, as artillery shells crash down periodically a few hundred yards away. The line goes dead just before 6 a.m. on April 17; two of my pages still have not been sent. I am annoyed and complain edgily to the morning crew chief, badgering him to do something to get the line restored. Within a moment, I feel as foolish and contrite as it is possible for a man to feel. The telephone rings. It is a message for the crew chief. One of his children has been killed and his wife critically wounded by an artillery shell that has fallen on his home in the southern section

of Phnom Penh. As his colleagues offer words of solace, he holds his face under control, his lips pressed tightly together. He puts on his tie and his jacket and he leaves, without ever saying a word, for the hospital where his wife is dying.

We leave the cable office and take a short swing by car to the northern edge of the city. The sun is rising but it offers no comfort. Soldiers and refugees are trudging in from the northern defense line, which has collapsed. Fires are burning along the line of retreat.

By the time we reach the hotel, the retreat can be clearly seen from my third-floor balcony, and small-arms fire can be heard. Soldiers are stripping off their uniforms and changing into civilian clothes. At 6:30 a.m., I write in my notebook: "The city is falling."

Pran is listening to the government radio, which is playing martial music and gives no hint of the collapse. The day before, the prime minister, Long Boret, had sent a virtual surrender offer, via Red Cross radio, to the Khmer Rouge side; it asked only for assurances of no reprisals against people and organizations who had worked on the government side. Prince Norodom Sihanouk, as titular head of the Khmer Rouge, immediately rejected the offer from his exile in Peking. The government radio went off the air last night without mentioning the truce offer; it said only that the military situation "is boiling hotter and hotter" and quoted government leaders as "determined to fight to the last drop of our blood."

Now, as Pran glues his ear to the radio, I decide that, not having bathed in two days, I shall shower and change clothes. "If we're going to meet the new rulers of Phnom Penh today," I tell him jokingly, "I'd better look my best." He laughs, amused at another irrational act by the man whose first thought on the day the Americans left was that he didn't have time to

pack. I emerge from my shave and shower feeling halfway recycled. At 7:20 a.m., the Khmer Rouge break in on the radio to announce: "We are ready to welcome you."

It is the apprehensive population of Phnom Penh that does the welcoming—hanging white flags, fashioned from bed sheets, from windows and rooftops and on government gunboats on the Tonle Sap River and the Mekong. The crews of the armored personnel carriers in the streets outside the hotel stick bouquets of yellow allamanda flowers in their headlights.

The first units of Communist troops seem friendly and celebratory. They are wearing clean black pajama uniforms and look remarkably uncalloused and unscarred. It soon becomes clear that they are not the real Khmer Rouge—we never did learn who they were, maybe misguided students trying to share in the "revolution," maybe part of a desperate plot by the government to confuse and subvert the Khmer Rouge—but within hours they and their leader are disarmed and under arrest and the genuine Khmer Rouge take over and begin ruthlessly driving the people of the city into the countryside. Most of the soldiers are teenagers, which is startling. They are universally grim, robotlike, brutal. Weapons drip from them like fruit from trees—grenades, pistols, rifles, rockets.

During the first confused hours of the Communist victory, when it looks as if our belief in reconciliation is a possibility, Pran and I and Jon Swain of *The Sunday Times* of London, who has been traveling with us, decide to chance a walk to the cable office. The transmitter is still out of order, so we can send no copy, but a beaming Teletype operator chortles at us, "*C'est la paix! C'est la paix!*"

Outside, at 10:40 a.m., we have our first conversation with an insurgent soldier. He says he is twenty-five years old, has been five years in the "movement" and has had ten years of schooling. He is traveling on a bicycle and is wearing green

government fatigues over his black pajamas. The government-unit patches have been torn off. He has a Mao cap and shower sandals, and around his neck he wears a cheap, small pair of field glasses. Like all the others we meet later, he refuses to give his name or rank. We guess he is an officer or sergeant.

Will the Khmer take revenge and kill a lot of people? I ask Pran to ask him in Khmer. "Those who have done corrupt things will definitely have to be punished," he says.

Pran tries to get him to relax and at one point does evoke a small smile from this man from another planet. It is one of the few smiles I will see on a Khmer Rouge face for the two weeks I am to be under their control. I offer him cigarettes and oranges. He refuses, saying that he is not allowed to accept gifts. I ask him if he can give gifts: what about his Mao cap, would he give it to me as a souvenir? He refuses coldly. The smile is gone. He pedals off.

After a breakfast of Pepsi-Cola at a restaurant whose French proprietor is glad for company but who has no other food, we walk back to the hotel and decide it is still safe to move around. So we drive to the biggest civilian hospital—Preah Keth Mealea—to get some idea of casualties. Al Rockoff, an American freelance photographer, has joined us. Only a handful of doctors have reported for duty. People are bleeding to death on the corridor floors. A Khmer Rouge soldier, caked with blood, is getting plasma from one of the few nurses who have showed up, but he is nevertheless dying of severe head and stomach wounds. All he can manage to whisper, over and over, is, "Water, water." A few yards away, hospital aides are trying to mop some of the blood off the floor. They mop carefully around three stiffening corpses.

We can stand to look at these scenes no longer, so we depart. But as we get into our car and start to leave the compound, some heavily armed Khmer Rouge soldiers charge in through

the main gate. Shouting and angry, they wave us out of the car, put guns to our heads and stomachs, and order us to put our hands over our heads. I instinctively look at Pran for guidance. We have been in difficult situations before, but this is the first time I have ever seen raw fear on his face. He tells me, stammering, to do everything they say. I am shaking. I think we're going to be killed right there. But Pran, having somehow composed himself, starts pleading with them. His hands still over his head, he tries to convince them we are not their enemy, merely foreign newsmen covering their victory.

They take everything—our car, cameras, typewriters, radio, knapsacks—and push us into an armored personnel carrier, a kind of light tank that carries troops in its belly, which they have captured from the government army.

We all get in—three journalists and our driver, Sarun—except for Pran. We hear him continuing his entreaties in Khmer outside. We naturally think he is trying to get away, arguing against getting into this vehicle. Most of my thoughts are jumbled and incoherent, but I remember thinking, For God's sake, Pran, get inside. Maybe there's some chance this way, but if you go on arguing, they'll shoot you down in the street.

Finally, he climbs in, the rear door and top hatch are slammed shut, and the armored car starts to rumble forward. After a few minutes of chilled silence, Sarun turns to me and in French asks me if I know what Pran was doing outside the vehicle. I say no, since the talk was in Khmer. Sarun tells me that Pran, far from trying to get away, was doing the opposite—trying to talk his way into the armored car. The Khmer Rouge had told him to leave, they didn't want him, only the Americans and "the big people." He knew we had no chance without him, so he argued not to be separated from us, offering, in effect, to forfeit his own life on the chance that he might save ours.

As the armored car moves through the city, it becomes an oven. Sweat starts pouring off us as we stare at one another's frightened countenances. The vehicle suddenly stops. Two Cambodian men are pushed inside. They are dressed in civilian clothes, but Pran recognizes them as military men who have taken off their uniforms to try to escape detection. One of them, a burly man with a narrow mustache, wearing a T-shirt and jeans, reaches over and tries to shove his wallet into my back pocket. He explains in whispered French that he is an officer and must hide his identity. I tell him it is useless to hide anything on me because we are all in the same predicament. Pran takes the wallet and stuffs it under some burlap sacks we are sitting on. The officer's companion, a shorter, leaner man with a crew cut, dressed in a flowered shirt and brown trousers, has a small ivory Buddha on a gold chain around his neck. He puts the Buddha in his mouth and begins to pray—a Cambodian Buddhist ritual to summon good fortune against imminent danger. His behavior is contagious. I take from my pocket a yellow silk rose that my daughter Jessica had given me two weeks earlier when I had taken a five-day breather in Bangkok with my family, knowing the fall of Phnom Penh was near. I had cut off the wire stem and carried it in my pocket ever since, as my personal amulet. Sweat has turned it into a sodden and scruffy lump. I clutch it hard in my right fist for luck.

Looking across at Jon Swain, I see in his eyes what must also be in mine—a certainty that we are to be executed. Trying to preserve my dignity and to get that terrible look off his face, I hold out the rose and say: "Look, Jon, I've got Jessica's good-luck rose with me. Nothing can really happen to us." He forces a wan grimace; I know he thinks I am crazy.

Meanwhile, Pran is keeping up his pleading with the driver

of the armored car, telling him that we are not soldiers or politicians or anyone hostile to the Khmer Rouge. No one here is American, he insists, they are all French, they are only newsmen. Whatever meager words we exchange among ourselves are in French. Rockoff speaks no French, so we run our hands across our lips in a sealing motion to let him know he should keep his mouth shut.

Suddenly, after a forty-minute ride, the vehicle stops and the rear door clangs open. We are ordered to get out. As we move, crouching through the door, we see two Khmer Rouge soldiers, their rifles on their hips pointing directly at us. Behind them is a sandy riverbank that slopes down to the Tonle Sap River. Rockoff and I exchange the briefest of fear-struck glances. We are thinking the same thing—they're going to do it here and roll us down the bank into the river.

But we climb out, like zombies, and no shots are yet fired. Pran resumes his pleas, searching out a soldier who looks like an officer. For a solid hour he keeps this up—appealing, cajoling, begging for our lives. The officer sends a courier on a motorbike to some headquarters in the center of the city. We wait, still frozen but trying to hope, as Pran continues talking. Finally, the courier returns, more talk—and then, miraculously, the rifles are lowered. We are permitted to have a drink of water. I look at Pran and he allows himself a cautious smile. He's done it, I think, he's pulled it off.

Strangely, in the surge of relief, my first thought is of my notebooks, which were in my airline bag, confiscated when we were seized. I feel more than a little silly to be thinking now of pieces of paper. But my sense of loss is overwhelming—the notebooks hold all my thoughts, everything I had observed, for the last several months.

We are still under guard, but everything has relaxed. They

now let us move into the shade of a concrete approach to a bridge blown up by sappers early in the war. We watch jubilant Communist soldiers rolling by in trucks loaded with looted cloth, wine, liquor, cigarettes, and soft drinks. They scatter some of the booty to the soldiers at the bridge. We also watch civilian refugees leaving Phnom Penh in a steady stream—our first solid evidence that they are driving the city's entire population of more than two million into the countryside to join their "peasant revolution." As the refugees plod along, the soldiers take watches and radios from them.

Our captors offer us soft drinks. One of them toys with me. He holds out a bottle of orange soda, and when I reach for it, he pulls it back. Finally I say, "Thank you very much," in Khmer. Having made his point, that I am his subject, in his control, he hands me the bottle, grinning.

At 3:30 p.m. we are released. Suddenly a jeep drives up, and many of our belongings are in it—including the airline bag. Sheepishly, I ask Pran if he thinks he can get it back. He sees nothing unusual in the request and immediately begins bargaining. A few minutes later, a Khmer Rouge soldier, after haphazardly groping through its insides, hands me the bag. In it, with the notebooks, is a money belt holding nine thousand dollars and my American passport, which, if they had bothered to look at it, could have given me away. Our hired 1967 Mercedes-Benz and my camera, among other valuables, were kept as booty.

As we move off, I look back. The two men who shared the armored car with us are still under guard. The smaller man still has the Buddha in his mouth, having never stopped praying. There is no doubt in our minds that they are marked for execution.

Much later, I ask Pran about the extraordinary thing he had

done, about why he had argued his way into that armored car when he could have run away. He explains in a quiet voice: "You don't speak Khmer, and I cannot let you go off and get killed without someone talking to them and trying to get them to understand. Even if I get killed, I have to first try to say something to them. Because you and I are together. I was very scared, yes, because in the beginning I thought they were going to kill us, but my heart said I had to try this. I understand you and know your heart well. You would do the same thing for me."

The rest of that day is an adrenaline blur, a lifetime crammed into a few hours. We see friends going off to certain death, families pleading with us to save them as we professed our helplessness, roads awash with people being swept out of the city like human flotsam. Some are the severely wounded from the hospitals, who are being pushed in their beds, serum bottles still attached to their bodies.

After our release, we head for the Information Ministry because earlier Khmer Rouge radio broadcasts have called on all high officials of the defeated government to report there. We find about fifty prisoners standing outside the building, guarded by wary Khmer Rouge troops. They also begin to guard us as we approach the men who appear to be their leaders and seek to interview them. Among the prisoners are cabinet ministers and generals, including Brigadier General Lon Non, younger brother of Marshal Lon Nol, who went into exile some weeks before. Lon Non, considered one of the most corrupt men in Cambodia, is smoking a pipe and trying to look untroubled. He says calmly to us, "I don't know what will happen to me."

A Khmer Rouge official, probably a general, though like all the others his uniform bears no markings of rank, addresses

the group with a bullhorn, telling them that they will be dealt with fairly. He asks for their cooperation, saying, "There will be no reprisals." The prisoners' strained faces suggest they do not believe him. (Whether this entire group was killed is not known, but Lon Non's execution is confirmed a short time later.)

Three Cambodian women suddenly walk into this tense scene. They go straight to the leader and tell him they wish to offer their help. They are officials of the Cambodian Red Cross—middle-aged patrician ladies dedicated to good works. They do not seem to understand what is happening. The leader smiles and thanks them for coming. They depart as incongruously as they came.

The Khmer Rouge leader, who seems no older than thirty-five, then turns to talk to us and a few French newsmen who have joined our group. He is polite but says very little. Pran serves as interpreter. When we ask if we will be allowed to cable stories to our publications, he says, "We will resolve all problems in their proper order." He also volunteers "our thanks to the American people, who have helped us from the beginning."

He suggests to Pran that the foreign newsmen stay at the Information Ministry to be registered. Pran, sensing trouble, declines politely and motions discreetly to us to leave. We slip away, smiling as broadly as we can.

Just then, the prime minister of the old government, Long Boret, arrives in a car driven by his wife. He is a courageous man who could have left with the Americans but stayed behind to try to work out a peaceful transition of power. He has failed and he looks wretched. His eyes are puffed. He stares at the ground. He is one of the seven "traitors" specifically marked by the Khmer Rouge for execution, and he knows what faces

him now. I want to get away, but I feel I must say something to him, and Pran understands. I take Long Boret's hands and tell him what a brave thing he has done for his country and that I admire him for it.

Pran takes his hands, too. I feel dehumanized at not being able to do anything but offer a few words. Long Boret tries to respond but cannot. Finally he mumbles, "Thank you." And we must leave him.

As we head back to the hotel on foot, a gray Mercedes approaches us and stops. The driver jumps out and comes toward me, haggard and stuttering, holding some pieces of paper. It is Ang Kheao, a gentle middle-aged man who used to teach at the university and sometimes did translations of documents for me. For the past week, I have had him monitoring government radio broadcasts. His large family is jammed into the car; like everyone else, they are leaving the city under the Khmer Rouge orders of evacuation. It is hard to believe, but in the midst of chaos, with his family in jeopardy, Ang Kheao has kept on working to complete his assignment.

I look at the papers he hands me—it is his translation of the final broadcast of the defeated government, transmitted around noontime. The government announcer had started reading a message saying that talks between the two sides had begun, when a Khmer Rouge official in the booth with him interrupted to say, harshly: "We did not come here to talk. We enter Phnom Penh not for negotiation, but as conquerors."

Ang Kheao and I say goodbye as if in a ritual. I pay him for his services and offer him my meaningless wishes for good luck. He wishes me good health in return and drives off toward the northwest, up Highway 5. Another friend I shall probably never see again.

It is exactly 5:20 p.m. when we reach the Hotel Le Phnom.

It is deserted. Insurgent troops sit in a truck outside the gate, their rocket launchers trained ominously on the building. I run up to the only foreigner in sight, a Swedish Red Cross official standing on the front steps. "What's going on?" I ask. Peering at me through his monocle, he says calmly: "They gave us half an hour to empty the hotel. They gave no reason." "When did they give you that half hour?" I ask nervously. "Twenty-five minutes ago," he replies.

So the overflowing hotel, which the Red Cross had tried to turn into a protected international zone, is no longer a sanctuary, and we must fall back on the contingency plan that has been worked out among the foreigners remaining in Phnom Penh, which is to seek refuge in the French Embassy about a half-mile away.

I have five minutes to collect the loose clothes I left behind as dispensable. Jon Swain, his hotel key confiscated by the Khmer Rouge with his other belongings, will now need them. Also in my room—and more important—is a cupboard full of survival rations, collected judiciously for just such an event: canned meat, tins of fruit and juice, sardines. While I'm in the bedroom throwing the clothes into a suitcase, I yell at Rockoff to empty the cupboard. He packs up a few things—a can of Dinty Moore beef stew, a jar of Lipton's powdered iced tea, and a tin of wafers—but he completely ignores everything else, including a fruitcake and a large jar of chunky peanut butter. In the days ahead, when we are often hungry, we rag him good-naturedly—but continually—about this lapse.

We are the last ones out of the building, running. The Red Cross has abandoned several vehicles in the hotel yard after removing the keys. We have too much to carry, so we throw our gear in the back of one of their Toyota vans, put it in neutral, and start pushing it up Monivong Boulevard toward

the French Embassy. The broad avenue is awash with refugees, bent under sacks of belongings, marching into the unknown, their eyes hurt with the knowledge that, being soft city people, the trek into the interior will certainly kill many of them.

In the tidal crush, people have lost shoes and sandals, and footwear litters the street. Cars with flat tires stand abandoned in the middle of the road. Clouds of smoke from the final battles wreath the city. Coming from the north along Monivong is a fresh, heavily armed battalion, marching in single file. As we pass, we eye one another like people from different universes.

At the French Embassy, there is pandemonium. The gates are shut and locked to prevent the mob from surging in, but people by the dozens, including Cambodians, are coming in anyway—passing their children over the tall iron-spiked fence, then hurling their belongings over and finally climbing over themselves. We do the same.

Entering the compound, we are immediately segregated racially by the French officials. Westerners are allowed inside the embassy's four buildings. (About eight hundred eventually gather in the compound.) Cambodians and other Asians must camp on the grass outside. A French Embassy official with a guard dog bars me from taking Pran and our two drivers, Hea and Sarun, and their families inside our building, the Salle de Reception; we sneak them in after dark. At about 9 p.m., a report sweeps the compound that the Khmer Rouge are ordering all Cambodians out of the embassy and into the countryside. The five hundred Cambodians outside the embassy buildings sit up all night in anxiety, ready to run and hide, afraid to go to sleep. In a few days, this report will become a reality, and the Cambodians will indeed be pushed out.

Talks are begun between the Khmer Rouge and our side (embassy officials and representatives of the United Nations

and other international agencies), but our basic requests—for delivery of food from the outside world, for an air evacuation of everyone in the compound—are curtly rejected. The Khmer Rouge make it clear that we and our requests are not merely unimportant but irrelevant. At one point they say that the "indispensable" evacuation of Phnom Penh "does not concern you." More disquieting, even though France has recognized their government, they reject the international convention that the embassy is foreign territory and therefore a place of asylum, inviolate and protected. They enter the compound at will, taking away people they consider "high enemies," including Sirik Matak, a Cambodian general and former prime minister. In a funereal drizzle he walks out the gate into Khmer Rouge custody. "I am not afraid," he says, as he is led to the back of a flatbed garbage truck, his back straight and his head high. "I am ready to account for my actions." He is executed soon after.

From our small window on their revolution—the embassy's front gate—we can see glimpses of their "peasant revolution." There is no doubt that the Khmer Rouge are turning Cambodian society upside down, remaking it in the image of some earlier agrarian time, casting aside everything that belongs to the old system, which has been dominated by the consumer society of the cities and towns. Some of the Khmer Rouge soldiers we talk to speak of destroying the colonial heritage and use phrases like "purification of the people" and "returning the country to the peasant."

"They haven't a humanitarian thought in their heads," says Murray Carmichael, a doctor on a Red Cross surgical team, as he describes the emptying of the hospital where he worked. "They threw everyone out—paralytics, critical cases, people on plasma. Most will die. It was just horrible."

On the second day in the embassy—April 18—the French

ask us to be ready to turn in our passports the next day so they can catalog who is in the compound. This means that what we feared is true: the Cambodians with us cannot be protected. I discuss the situation with the drivers, Hea and Sarun. They agree that their chances are better if they leave the embassy now on their own rather than later in a conspicuous group of hundreds of Cambodians. I give each of them a thousand dollars in hundred-dollar bills for potential bribe money. We have a hard time looking at each other as our parting nears. At 2:25 p.m., Hea and Sarun and their families, loaded with sacks of food and other needs, slip out a rear gate that a French guard quietly opens for them, and head north out of the city.

We have one last hope for Pran: Jon Swain happens to have a second British passport. It is in Swain's name, but we think we can doctor it and alter the name skillfully enough to give Pran a foreign identity. Al Rockoff sets to work with a pen, a razor blade and some glue, Swain has a hyphenated middle name, so by erasing "Jon" and "Swain" and the hyphen, Pran has a new name. But it's an upper-class English tongue twister—Ancketill Brewer—and Pran spends hours trying to learn how to pronounce it and make it his own. We substitute Pran's photo for Swain's, and the next day—April 19—we turn the passport in to the French with our own. A day later, the French come to Swain and tell him the ploy won't work; they say that the Khmer Rouge will spot the forgery as quickly as they did and that it could compromise the entire compound. They will kill him on the spot, the French say, and maybe us, too. They insist Pran has to leave.

I do not tell Pran right away. I want time to think about other possible subterfuges. I am also trying to get up the courage. My mind is a blank. I talk to Swain and others and we can think of no way to hide him. Finally I tell him.

I ask him if he understands—we have tried everything we can think of but we are stymied. He says yes, he understands. But it is I who do not understand, who cannot cope with this terrible thing. He saved my life and now I cannot protect him. I hate myself.

It does not ease my conscience or my feeling of responsibility that on the morning Pran and I have this talk, members of the embassy staff are moving through the compound, telling all the Cambodians they must leave. "We'd like to help you," one French official says, "but there's no way. If you stay here, there will be trouble. You're better off out there. It's a good moment to leave now because later the Khmer Rouge will come into the embassy to search."

Pran packs his essential belongings in a small bag. He destroys any piece of identification that might link him to foreigners or make him anything but a simple member of the working class. All the other Cambodian journalists in the embassy—most of them freelance photographers—do the same, although a few do not jettison their cameras. Some have families with them.

We give them all of our "private" food and cigarettes and Cambodian money. I also give Pran twenty-six hundred dollars for bribe money. At 10:15 a.m. on April 20, Pran and his group—twenty-one persons in all—gather at the embassy's front gate, their belongings in the back of a gasless Toyota wagon, which they will push up the road.

I put my arms around Pran and try to say something that will have meaning. But I am wordless and he is too.

I watch him pass through the gate and out of sight, and then I put my head against a building and start banging my fist on it.

Jon Swain comes over to comfort me. "There was nothing

you could do," he says. "Nothing you could do. It will be all right, you'll see. He'll make his way to the border and escape. You know how resourceful he is."

In the months and years to come, that scene—Pran passing through the gate—becomes a recurring nightmare for me. I will awake, thinking of elaborate stratagems I might have used to keep him safe and with me. I am a survivor who often cannot cope with surviving.

The night of Pran's departure, Jean Dyrac, vice-consul and senior official in the embassy, comes to our quarters to brief us on his latest negotiations with the Khmer Rouge. He is a decent man who had suffered cruelties as a prisoner of war during World War II. He is now overwhelmed and drained by the demands on him, by the appeals to save lives, appeals he has been powerless to respond to. He talks small talk at us first—he has made no headway with the Communists—and then his feelings begin to show. He is suffering remorse and heartache over the expulsion of the Cambodians from the compound. "We are not policemen," he says, "but we had to turn them out. They could have been shot on the spot, and those believed responsible would be compromised." His eyes well up now and his voice falters, the words coming out so painfully soft we have to strain to hear. "It is a very sad thing to say. When we do such things, we are no longer men." Unable to continue, he walks swiftly from the room, looking at no one. I feel very close to Jean Dyrac at that moment.

The next day, April 21, the rest of the Cambodians in the embassy—there are several hundred left—are forced to leave. It is a time of mass grief. Cambodian husbands are separated from European wives. Wailing rends the compound.

Louissette Praet, a Belgian woman whose Cambodian husband, an engineer, is being taken from her, is crying softly

into her handkerchief. He embraces her and whispers: "*Courage, ma cherie. Courage.*" But she cannot control herself, and her small body shakes with her sobs as their two little daughters look on, uncomprehending.

Vong Sarin, a Cambodian friend who had held a senior job in the former government's communications system, is turning his seven-month-old boy over to a Frenchwoman to care for. He gives me some money to put in a bank for the boy. "Do you think they will punish people like me?" he asks. I cannot tell him what I really think. "I doubt it," I say. "You were not a soldier or politician." He and I both know the truth is elsewhere, and his face remains fixed in gloom. His wife is hysterical at having to give up her child and about what awaits them. She grabs my arm and pleads: "My first baby, my only baby! We'll never see him again. Save us, save us! Get papers for us, sir. You can do it." It was a time of not being able to look into people's eyes.

Nine days later, April 30, the final evacuation of the embassy begins. The first of two truck convoys sets out at dawn for the border with Thailand, carrying about five hundred of the eight hundred foreigners in the compound. I am on it. We awake to pack at 2 a.m., and as I am leaving our building an hour later to walk to the trucks, I see in the foyer a huge vinyl suitcase that someone has discarded. It is large enough for Pran to have crawled into; I could have cut air holes in it for him. I stand frozen for a minute to breathe, looking at it, and then someone is calling me, telling me if I don't hurry, I'll miss the convoy. I move on woodenly.

Three and a half days later—after a monsoon-soaked journey whose metronome had swung crazily between petty fights