



Excerpt from “To the End of Hell” - Denise Affonco (You can order a copy of ‘To The End of Hell’ directly from Reportage Press via: <http://www.reportagepress.com/books-name.php?book=19> or 0208 749 2867)

The First Camp: Koh Tukveal

After the first day’s work, I am so tired and stiff that I can barely swallow my precious bowl of rice. It’s precious because it’s the last bowl of good white rice we’ll be allowed. From tomorrow it’ll be consistently mixed with corn. Angkar has supply problems, so we must tighten our belts and feed the children first.

Within a few weeks both the young and old lose several kilos. The children no longer have any vitality, no inclination to play or to laugh. My husband, by nature quite robust, used to his daily whisky and his cigarettes, sees his spare tyre melt away in the space of a few days and most submit to a diet of rainwater and bartered tobacco, rolled in dried banana leaves. His face wrinkles quite noticeably.

One morning, some days after our arrival on the island of Tukveal, we are summoned to the pagoda on the mainland. Everybody must celebrate the victory and liberation of the country by the courageous *yautheas*! So off we go with our packed lunch in a mess tin made of palm leaves, called a *smok*. We get back into the canoes to cross back over the river.

Thinking we’re returning home, the children seem quite happy...as for myself, I am hoping in secret; after all, there have been rumours going around that Angkar will send the population back home. The pagoda fills up rapidly, as refugee’s stream in from all sides. The ‘audience’ obediently sits right down on the floor and waits patiently for Angkar’s arrival. At last they appear...and in the form of a group of three or four men, dressed in black pyjamas, with those unmistakable red and white sandals. One of them, who appears to be the leader, begins a long speech in praise of the *yautheas pakdevat*, the soldiers of the revolution, and recalls the history of Cambodia from the reign of King Sihanouk up to the victory of the Khmer Rouge:

“Comrades, before our victory we asked those of you who were foreigners to leave the capital and our compatriots to join the Liberation Front. Why didn’t you do it? You know from now on you are prisoners, Angkar’s prisoners; in principle we should shoot you,

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but there are so many of you and the ammunition is too expensive...So Angkar is going to make a selection to eliminate the bad elements by work and hardship. Angkar needs a new people, pure and hard-working. Everybody will become *kamakors* (peasants) and *kaksekors* (workers). There'll be no more schools, no more books; your university will be the forest and the paddy fields; you'll earn your diplomas with your tears and the sweat of your brow. Your money, that of the imperialist Lon Nol, isn't worth anything any more, it'll be replaced by Angkar's new money. In any case you won't have any; you'll live by the fruit of your labours, by barter and by what Angkar gives to you.

Listen, Comrades! Abandon any hope of going back to your homes in Phnom Penh! Your city has become a vast storehouse. There are no more embassies, no more Americans, no more French...the country no longer needs foreign aid! From now on western medicine will be replaced by herbs...We've no further need for fuel oils, as the machines will run on charcoal. The French, when they left our country, left their cars, and we thank them! But we'll use our legs and we'll salvage the motors for agricultural machinery or for canoes, while the tyres will be good for making sandals...

I think of our beautiful car that Seng has entrusted to Mr Thien, believing that it would be looked after safely, all the while proving of invaluable service to Angkar...The speech continues. I ask myself if I'm not in the middle of a terrible nightmare – in the cause of progress, Cambodia is going backwards! I begin to despair, but my husband, inveterate optimist as ever, always so confident in the regime, begins to reassure me: "Angkar's right. This way we can create a strong and pure nation," and he murmurs in my ear: "We must to sou."

At the end of the first harangue, another man starts speaking: "Angkar will need a workforce, especially factory workers in Phnom Penh, as it is going to reopen the weaving factories, the factories for batteries, fishing nets and also for condensed milk, like Sokilait..." I wake up when I hear the name because I was the executive secretary at Sokilait.

The Khmer Rouge soldier continues: "Right now you must tell us exactly who you are, and the exact truth about your past, and your skills. Don't hide anything from Angkar, who has to make a choice."

Everyone then receives a questionnaire to fill out, on which you must state your surname, first name, profession under the old regime and the number of people in your family. Most Cambodians understand the tactic, which is to single out soldiers, teachers or doctors – in a word all the intellectuals – who are considered traitors. Everyone declares they are peasants, street vendors, colliers, street sweepers or bicycle – rickshaw drivers...Everyone, or nearly everyone, with the exception of Seng, who above all believes that one mustn't lie to Angkar, and who gives precise information on his whole

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family: I'm French. I work at the French Embassy. He is a self-employed businessman, who has done a lot of work for military officials. In short, he proudly confesses all that should have been concealed.

Once all the papers have been gathered in, Angkar declares the meeting over. Now we're allowed to eat the contents of our mess tins in a suddenly relaxed and celebratory atmosphere. Each of us can already imagine returning to Phnom Penh and we rejoice, even if it means working there as a labourer. For a fleeting moment, I imagine myself back working at Sokilait. I'll tell Angkar that I know the factory and that I once worked there; it's a little daydream that helps me forget our appalling situation for a few minutes.

Back on the island at the end of the afternoon, the village chief calls us together, as he does every evening after work; we must be well educated...He announces to us that, from now on, it is formally forbidden to speak anything other than Khmer. I, who haven't yet mastered the language, will have to keep quiet as I lean on the job. A night falls, Mr Thien also advises us not to reminisce, as Angkar doesn't like the spirit to be led astray by the life of corruption that we used to know. But for the moment, we haven't got into this habit, as we have neither the inclination nor the time to upset ourselves with yesterday's pleasures. The memories will come later, when we are truly hungry; during our work in the fields, my sister-in-law and I will reminisce in lowered tones about our favourite foods, and our surreal whispers will make us drool. But the chief has spoken. We are not allowed to talk about the past. As for the future is concerned, it seems truly dark.

According to Angkar's commandments, each village is ordered to house between fifty and a hundred families. On the island, Mr Thien continues to take in refugees; five to the families arrive every day, always the well off, and the more profitable to shake down.

Days, weeks, months pass. How many? We no longer have a calendar. Since our arrival, I have tried to keep a sense of time by writing the date on the wall of our straw hut with a piece of charcoal.

There's still no news about our return to Phnom Penh. My life as a peasant goes on; a life without electricity, without running water; rising daily at five in the morning, a quick wash in the river, then, on an empty stomach, it's off to the cornfields, to the sugar cane or to the tobacco fields, to water, weed or to plant manioc, sweet potatoes, peanuts and a variety of vegetables – marrow, pumpkins, cucumbers, beans and aubergines. I learn to plant tobacco, and extremely precious and sought after commodity. The island produces precious and sought after commodity. The island produces it to exchange for the palm sugar it lacks. Tobacco production is paramount and requires a lot of work;

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gathering, drying and cutting. There is the cultivation of rice which is of fundamental importance. For this I must learn to turn over the earth, sow, weed, transplant, harvest and thresh the stalks to get the grain and then pound it to obtain the totally white rice. There's no time for idling. When the land on the island runs out, the inhabitants work the mainland, to the west, where there are several hectares of paddy fields to which we are sent – men, women and children.

I learn to work the earth.

Bit by bit, I learn how to deal with my gaolers, how to navigate in their troubled waters and how to play at being submissive to escape death. Because of my French nationality, the converted Khmer peasants and the Khmer Rouge, particularly their women, make fun of me viciously and call me ye barang (old French woman) or ye ponso (old ponso – it's a corruption of my family name, which Cambodians can't pronounce):

"So, ye barang, in your country, would you work like this?"

"Oh no, comrade!"

"Are you happy to be here?"

"Yes, comrade! Thanks to Angkar I've learned lots of new things. In my country, I would never have learned all this. Yes, Yes, I'm very happy to do what I do here because otherwise I'd have never known any of it."

It is what they want to hear and I gibber it at them – in Khmer, of course. I bend in the direction of the wind, like the reeds.

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