

## 1 - Youth: The Good Life

I'm a pure product of colonialism – a Eurasian, born in Phnom Penh in November 1944, to a French father and a Vietnamese mother.

My father, Maurice Lucien Affonço, first saw the light of day in Pondicherry, then a French colony, which explains his nationality. But his origins were very mixed, and if a Portuguese ancestor gave him his name, it was without doubt a Hindu forebear who gave him his chocolate brown skin. From his first marriage to a girl from Alsace, who died of amoebic dysentery in 1931, he had three children; two boys, Henri and Bernard, whom he sent to France for their higher education, and a girl, Lydie, who studied at the French Lycée in Dalat, in Vietnam.

My father was recruited by the Ministry of Culture and arrived in Cambodia in 1921, to take up his post as head of the Ecole de Marbre in Pursat. In March 1945, during the Japanese occupation, he was rounded up along with all the other French and sent to a concentration camp. At the end of the war, he settled down in the country and was hired by the French Ministry of Education to teach French, English and Latin at the main Cambodian lycée, Sisowath, in Phnom Penh where he had earlier met my mother, who came from the large Vietnamese community.

My father was also the private tutor of Prince Norodom

Sihanouk, who showed him both respect and friendship.<sup>1</sup> On important occasions, I remember that the King used to send one of his daughters to deliver to us baskets of rare fruit from abroad: apples, pears, peaches, cherries and apricots. When I arrived in France I was happy to rediscover the flavour of the fruit of *Samdech Euv*.<sup>2</sup>

My father was very strict with his daughters. I got the biggest slap of my life when I came home from school without having been enrolled on the honours board in my monthly school report! My sister Lydie told me that when she was at school and he had been her Latin teacher he had made her recite her lessons in front of the whole class, urged on by the swish of his cane. There's no denying it, he didn't leave us with only happy memories.

Despite his mixed blood, his behaviour was sometimes quite racist. Take the time my sister got engaged to her gym teacher, who was from the West Indies... what hadn't she done wrong? The day this cultured and extremely nice young man came to Phnom Penh to get to know 'Mr. Affonço', he made it quite clear that he would have preferred to see his daughter marry a white man. My sister retorted indignantly: "Listen, Papa, how long has it been since you last looked in the mirror?" As far as he was concerned that was an insult. From that day onwards, my brother-in-law never called his father-in-law anything other than 'Mr Affonço.'

When my father retired, he decided to leave Cambodia and to join his eldest sons in France and, above all, he was very proud of his first blonde and blue-eyed grandson and wanted to get to know him. My mother couldn't go with him as she had too many members of her own family holding her back and, as I was still very young my father did not want to separate me from her. So he left Cambodia alone.

In those days, there was no direct flight between Phnom Penh

---

1. The prince became king in 1941 at the age of nineteen.

2. In Cambodian *Samdech* means 'lord', 'prince' or 'excellency'; the Khmer people called Sihanouk "*Samdech Euv*" which means, literally; "Prince Dad".

and Paris; you had to go to Vietnam and take a ship to Marseilles. As a parting favour King Sihanouk, smoothed my father's journey by lending him a Cessna, a small private plane and a French military pilot, who took my father directly to Saigon.

I never saw my father again. Barely two years after his arrival in Paris he fell ill and died, leaving me an orphan at the age of twelve.

So I was brought up by a single mother. She had no profession but was plucky and hard-working. Papa had left her with a small amount of savings but they melted like snow in the sun. She had five mouths to feed in the house; her aged mother who had no means of her own, an elder daughter (by a Vietnamese father,) her two nephews aged four and two, who had been entrusted to her by her sister on her deathbed, and me, her second daughter. All too often she was forced to pull a rabbit from a hat to keep a roof over our heads, feed us all and to provide the four of us with a decent education.

My mother spoke French but couldn't read it. When my father died, she asked a neighbour's husband, Mr. Gauthier, to become my tutor and look after my education. He and his family were refugees from Vietnam and had fled the war in Indochina. They only stayed in Phnom Penh for a few years before returning to France forever.

Maman was a practising Buddhist; I was a Catholic, baptised at birth but she never objected to me being brought up as a Christian and our two faiths lived side by side quite happily.<sup>1</sup> For my first communion she wanted to buy me a brand new communion dress; but this turned out to be far too expensive, so my tutor's wife offered to make me one out of her wedding dress. All the same Maman ended up in debt, as she treated me to a small

---

1. The nuns who often came to our house were offended by the fact that I ate the offerings that Maman had put on the altar. For the sisters, it was a mortal sin, although my mother saw no harm in it and it seemed perfectly natural to me not to waste food!

celebration feast of roast chicken, salad and cake.

I did all my schooling at the French Lycée in Phnom Penh, the Lycée Descartes. I never learnt Khmer. I might have looked Vietnamese with my classic '*nhac*' features inherited from my mother, but I was French and in my heart, I felt French.<sup>1</sup> The majority of my classmates were Eurasians like me, although there were a few Vietnamese and French. There were also some Cambodians, the sons or daughters of senior civil servants who could afford to send their children to such an establishment (for us, the half caste French, school was free.) But I didn't spend a lot of time with them. I was very shy and I was never very at ease with other people. I spoke very little Khmer and had no urge to learn it, as I had never thought of Cambodia as my homeland.

I never took a holiday; in July and August I baby-sat for the neighbour in order to pay for my books, pens and paper for the next term. Free time was given over to reading, to preparing for dictations and exercises; I would work with my cousin on the edge of the bed, on a wooden stool which made up for a desk. When my mother couldn't pay the rent, the landlord cut off the electricity and in the evening we'd finish our homework by moonlight or by the glow of a candle.

We were poor but honest and hardworking. I still admire my mother's heroism. She knew how, come hell or high water, to drum into us the rules of good behaviour and she made enormous sacrifices to put four of us through school. Maybe it was her example that, twenty years later, gave me the moral strength to fight and survive in the hell of the Cambodian forests.

In 1964, I finished my secondary education. When I was 20, just as I started work, I met the future father of my children, Phou Teang Seng. He was Chinese from the island of Hainan, whose family had settled in the province of Kampot. I left my mother's house to move in with him in a flat that was partitioned

---

1. *Nhac*, diminutive of *nhà quê* (countryside), was the term used by French colonists for Vietnamese and meant 'peasant'.

off from the one in which his family lived in – his sister, her husband and their four children, along with their brother, who was a simple-minded boy. We didn't marry; at that time living together was the norm and I didn't want to legalise the situation in case it caused me problems at work - the French Embassy, for example, wouldn't hire French women married to Cambodians or Chinese. At first, I found work as a bilingual French-English typist at the South Korean Consulate. But when diplomatic relations were broken off between South Korea and Cambodia, I left to teach in a private French primary school, a job I lost when I became pregnant, because the headmistress, a Frenchwoman, had no health insurance for her staff and didn't want to keep me on in case of an accident. It has to be said, in Cambodia, we were at the mercy of employers in the private sector. There was no social security, no health insurance, no pension rights, no ante or post-natal leave. If you didn't want to lose your job, you had to work right up to the day before, or even the day of the birth, and go back two weeks later. We worked more than forty-five hours a week with only fifteen days of paid holiday a year. After my daughter Jeannie was born, I found a new job with a company called, Comin Khmer, which was run by a Dane. Eventually they made me the executive secretary in a factory, Sokilait that made condensed milk. I worked there from the moment the factory was built right through to the production and launch of the product. Finally, in 1973, I left Sokilait to be the Cultural Attaché's secretary in the French Embassy in Phnom Penh, a job I held until the Khmer Rouge came to power.

My husband, Seng, was very entrepreneurial, perhaps a little bit too much so. After running the American Officers' Mess in Phnom Penh, he started all sorts of different businesses and restaurants. None of them ever worked and we were often in debt. Then, when the war and bombing began, he found another line of work, construction. He could have made a go of it as an architect and decorator, as he was talented and had extremely good

taste. In particular, he designed villas for the nouveau riche of Phnom Penh, who were mostly Cambodian army officers - generals, colonels and such like, and he took care of all the interior decoration. This business did well.

When he was with his military clients, Seng hid his communist sympathies. At home, on the other hand, everyday he'd spout at me, an anti-communist, one of the thoughts of Chairman Mao. If we started a discussion, we'd inevitably end up fighting. He was anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist but loved the good life, driving beautiful American cars, eating out in restaurants and drinking good whisky. Quite often I'd be sharp with him and tell him he should go back to China. Of course, this was impossible and he knew it. He was just an armchair communist and anyway, suspicious China didn't want its citizens from overseas back. He was also quite dogmatically anti-Western and he was particularly anti-French. And yet, he chose me...

That said we got on well if we avoided politics. He was a good-looking man and I started a family with him. We had three children, Jean-Jacques - born on the 25 August 1964, who lived through the Khmer Rouge period from the age of ten to fourteen; Jeannie, born on the 30 May 1967, who died of starvation, aged nine, under the Khmer Rouge regime and Françoise, born the 19 December 1970, whose premature death a few days later had nothing to do with the Khmer Rouge. My children were recognised by their father, who gave them his surname, but they had French citizenship.

After Jeannie was born, I fell ill. I was so exhausted that I was incapable of looking after the baby. So my husband's aunt, Mme Champion, who had been married to a Frenchman, looked after her and carried on doing so when I went back to work.<sup>1</sup> Little by

---

1. During the 1950s this aunt lived in Vesoul in France with her husband Lucien Champion, who worked in a mine in Albertville. In 1954, he died in an explosion in the mine. So, three months pregnant and knowing nobody in France, she decided to return to Cambodia.

little she became her second mother. In the end, Jeannie chose to live with her and only came home for the weekend. If my little Jeannie had stayed at her aunt's that fateful weekend, when Phnom Penh was taken by the Khmer Rouge, two days before Khmer New Year, her fate would have been very different...

But for all its ups and downs, our life was a long tranquil river. It could have and should have flowed on like this in the most unremarkable way in the world, in a land where the sun always shone, peacefully and without any worries. How could one imagine for a moment that, from one day to the next, the 17 April 1975, it would be plunged into horror?

## 2 - Tragedy Unfolds: Cambodia 1970-1975

Hell became a reality as early as 1970.

On the 18 March 1970, King Norodom Sihanouk, accused of having permitted North Vietnamese troops to set up sanctuaries along the Cambodian-Vietnamese border, is stripped of his role as head of state by General Lon Nol who, with American support, proclaims the Khmer Republic which he leads until the 17 April 1975. After the coup d'état, war spreads across the whole of the Indochinese peninsula. Fear and crime reign in Cambodia; the peaceful Khmer people, a large majority of whom are Buddhist, gentle, smiling believers will thus become either the victims or perpetrators of appalling barbarous crimes.

The moment he comes to power, Lon Nol declares war against the communist Vietnamese forces and denounces the infiltration of Vietcong elements into the country's Vietnamese community;<sup>1</sup> the Ho Chi Minh trail effectively crosses the north-east of Cambodia.<sup>2</sup> The Vietnamese and those Cambodians of Vietnamese origin are soon subjected to genuine pogroms on Lon Nol's orders. It's a radical cleanup operation, a wave of barbaric and bloody terror that washes through Cambodian history

---

1. The armed resistance to the Saigon regime, born out of the National Liberation Front.

between 1970 and 1975; it's followed by a tidal wave of Khmer Rouge savagery.

Overnight, all the Vietnamese are arrested and collected together in the north of the city, in hastily created camps in schools and Chinese pagodas, for so-called repatriation to Vietnam; of which there will be none...

The arrests usually take place at night, by surprise. In Phnom Penh, a curfew is ordered; as soon as the lights are out, military trucks trundle heavily through the streets. The residents in my block are of all sorts of origins; Cambodians, Chinese, Vietnamese... but only the Vietnamese are targeted. Every evening, from nightfall onwards, I hear soldiers shouting orders, banging on the front doors of flats with rifle butts, then the cries of distress, the tears of women or children pulled from their sleep and taken away *manu militari*. A sort of Vietnamese witch-hunt is organised, women no longer dare wear their hair in a traditional Vietnamese bun and cut it very short to look more like Cambodians. Overnight all my Vietnamese friends are forced to flee the country. It's the prelude to a nightmare.<sup>3</sup>

The Vietnamese who leave in a rush can only take a few personal belongings; they have to abandon everything; houses, furniture and anything else left behind is confiscated by the state or pillaged by dishonest neighbours. Some manage to sell their things in haste, but for a pittance; they are easy prey for profiteers of all sorts... Panic sets in even among those Vietnamese who are naturalised Khmer citizens or are married to Cambodians. With

---

2. The Ho Chi Minh trail linked the north of Vietnam with the south, passing through Laos and Cambodia. It was made up of a number of paths, channels and pipelines hidden by the forest, the fighters of the Liberation Front (the Vietcong) transported men and materials from the communist north of Vietnam to the zones occupied by their troops in the south. Because of its strategic importance during the Vietnam War, the Ho Chi Minh trail was subjected to incessant American bombing.

3. My Vietnamese mother was not worried by Lon Nol's troops, because she fell under my responsibility; as a French citizen I could vouch for her. On top of that, many of the senior figures of the Cambodian regime knew my father well, the majority of them having been his pupils at the Lycée Sisowath.

checks on every street corner, they no longer feel safe and they don't go outside anymore.

The makeshift camps are soon full. With the heat and the poor hygiene, children and the elderly are the first victims of epidemics, particularly cholera or dysentery. Next come the systematic massacres; all those trying to reach Vietnam by boat are slaughtered, their bodies thrown unceremoniously into the water. Women are raped; Buddhist monks and nuns, accused of collaborating with the Vietcong are exterminated; their pagodas ransacked and burned. An elderly friend of my mother, a nun in a pagoda in Kompong Speu province, has her throat savagely slit.

The Lon Nol years also see Cambodia sucked inexorably into the war in Indochina. North Vietnamese troops intervene in the country, which is pounded by American air power... It's during this period that the Khmer Rouge start peddling their nationalist movement in the countryside, rallying to their cause the young and mostly illiterate peasantry and create an army.

In Phnom Penh, since the proclamation of the Khmer Republic, skirmishes between pro-American government soldiers and the Khmer Rouge rebels take place every day; war devours the country...

Faced with a situation that is deteriorating daily, conscription is introduced in June 1970. The new regime needs cannon fodder. Rich and well to do Cambodians hurry to send their children overseas (to France or the United States,) so that they can continue their studies... but in reality it's to escape military service and death, because at home, large numbers of young conscripts are killed each day on the battlefields.

Added to the fear of conscription is that of rockets raining down on the town night and day sowing terror. These murderous shells target not just schools, cinemas and markets, but also the hospitals, already full of the sick and wounded. Twice, the playgrounds of nursery schools are hit and many children are killed. The city falls prey to mass panic.

The Khmer Rouge have no difficulty in sapping the morale of the inhabitants who soon realise that those in charge are simply incapable, ineffective puppets in the pay of the Americans. Added to this incompetence are greed and corruption. The latter is of such magnitude that Lon Nol's government rapidly becomes unpopular. The United States finances the war effort without counting the cost, but top civil servants and military men cash in majorly by exaggerating the numbers of soldiers in order to pocket their pay or by establishing lists of phantom dead soldiers to get their hands on their 'widows' pensions or even to resell arms to the enemy. With this easy money, they live like kings; fun and restaurants, sumptuous villas equipped with air-conditioning and the most up to date hi-fi systems; these are the new rich Phnompenhois.

Of course, this depravity doesn't lead to victory. Contrary to the deliberately reassuring tone of the constant radio broadcasts and despite the massive American military and economic aid, Lon Nol's troops suffer defeat after defeat and lose ground day by day.

Between 1971 and 1975, the massive influx of refugees from neighbouring provinces conquered and occupied by the Khmer Rouge, means the population of Phnom Penh almost triples, to between two and three million inhabitants.

Little by little the capital begins to suffocate. The supply of staple goods becomes more and more difficult as the main roads are cut. The Tonlé Sap, the only river that crosses the country and by which fuel and other vital raw materials are transported, is harassed daily by the enemy. A large number of merchant ships and tankers are sunk, meaning stocks all sorts of things run out and there's a mind-boggling leap in the price of essentials such as rice, sugar, salt, raw materials for the manufacture of condensed milk, petrol, etc. Speculation is in its element. The local currency, the *riel*, is hardly worth anything. Bank notes are now nothing but paper; to do one's daily shopping, you have to set off with a basketful of notes.

The rich rush to buy gold and hard currency, bought at ex-

orbitant rates, to save them safely abroad. On the eve of the city's fall, a French franc is worth 560 *riels* on the black market, the US dollar 2,500 *riels* and a tael of gold (36g) 450,000 *riels*. Those who want to leave the country can negotiate an exit visa for around 700,000 *riels* and air tickets are subject to last minute surcharges that are beyond reach. The airport, however, is also a target for rocket attacks which often stop the planes from taking off altogether.

In April 1975, Lon Nol's pro-American government falls; it's hung on for five years. The last days of the regime are grim. You can feel it dying; the town is deserted from seven in the evening, as soon as the curfew starts. The inhabitants seal themselves in their houses frightened of the rockets, and have no more than two or three hours of electricity and running water a day because of fuel shortages. Little by little foreigners leave the country.

What should we do? Which saint should we turn to? The Cambodians curse Lon Nol and his band of puppets. They desire only one thing, peace, and wish for the victory of the Khmer Rouge whom they think will liberate them from the yoke of the American stooges and finally put an end to their troubles.

Unfortunately, they don't know... not yet, that the word 'liberation' will be forever engraved in their history as a synonym for a stream of macabre evil; imprisonment, mental and physical torture, summary executions, massacres, forced labour, families separated, famine, death... They cannot imagine that these so-called liberators, the Khmer Rouge, who are mostly uneducated, will systematically eliminate other Khmers, their own brothers, whom they consider to be rotten citizens, corrupted by imperialists; that they will get rid of all foreigners, regardless of race (French, Chinese or Vietnamese), with no regard for age or religion (Muslims, known locally as 'Chams', Catholics and Buddhists,) that they will organise the most brutal and radical reconstruction of society that has ever been attempted in order to construct a new, pure nation. They don't know that absolutely everyone will be submitted to an infernal and pitiless lottery designed to sort

*Tragedy Unfolds: Cambodia 1970-1975*

‘the wheat from the chaff’, that those who escape the first wave of executions will be slowly decimated in turn by forced labour, deprivation, sickness, lack of medical care and medicines. They do not know that their country is going to be transformed into a gigantic agricultural co-operative dominated by the peasantry, under the aegis of a bloodthirsty madman, a Maoist extremist exponent of the agricultural revolution and with the open support of the communist Chinese!

In 1975, the Cambodian people still know nothing of this, they are happy to hope and, irony of ironies, pray to Buddha for the victory of the enemy.