

New Cambodian Envoy

Sonn Voeunsai

By ERIC PACE

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PARIS, June 2 — In happier times the cream of Cambodian society used to pack its sons off to the Lycée Chasseloup Laubat, an élite French secondary school in Saigon.

Prince Norodom Sihanouk and Gen. Lon Nol went there. So did Sonn Voeunsai, a

sturdy youth with a pair of legs that is swift and sure for engineering a passion he was chosen

captain of the soccer team, on which the slower-footed Lon Nol played a defensive position.

Now, 40 years later, the Cambodian Government of Premier Lon Nol, who ousted Prince Sihanouk, has given Mr. Sonn the task of engineering smoother relations between the beleaguered capital of Pnompenh and Washington.

Mr. Sonn, who is 58 years old and has been Ambassador to France, plans to fly to Washington Friday to take over the Cambodian Embassy, now being run by a chargé d'affaires.

'Concrete Things as Well'

He apparently got the job because of his reputation as the ablest senior member of his country's languorous diplomatic corps. He approaches his profession with the bluntness and precision of a trained civil engineer, which he is.

"I like to see many people," he said in French during an interview this week. "I do not like only to speak but to do concrete things as well."

No grand figure in the Paris salons, he impresses Westerners with his workaday approach. He answers questions directly. He writes memorandums. His handwriting is legible. He gets to appointments on time.

Those qualities evidently helped endear Mr. Sonn to American aid officials in Pnompenh before Cambodia



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shut the aid mission down in the early nineteen-sixties. They sent him on a trip to the United States in 1958, when he was a high planning official concerned with the management of water resources.

The Ambassador, the son of one of the few French-educated Cambodian physicians of his generation, was born on April 25, 1912, into the tiny upper class of Pnompen, then the sleepy center of France's Cambodian protectorate.

Many men in his family were civil servants. "We are all functionaries," he recalls.

'Went Up to Paris'

After the lycée Mr. Sonn followed the path of many of Indochina's future leaders. In the French phrase, he "went up to Paris" at the age of 18, studying civil engineering and taking a degree at the Central School of Arts and Manufactures.

Asked how he enjoyed the

Paris of his youth, Mr. Sonn allowed himself a small smile. "It was before the war," he said. "It was tranquil."

He returned to Cambodia and, doing well, became Director of Public Works by the time he was 30 and busied himself building up the irrigation system that is essential to the production of rice.

Later in his career he was concerned with the modest railroad system and with regional planning for the Mekong River area.

After Cambodia became independent in 1953 Mr. Sonn held the portfolios of defense, the interior, public works, the economy and foreign affairs.

From 1962 to 1965, under Prince Sihanouk, he was the Cambodian representative at the United Nations, living part of the time in Forest Hills. But he still speaks only a little English (and no Vietnamese).

A Princely Town House

In 1965 Mr. Sonn became Ambassador in Paris, where his home has been a princely town house near the Eiffel Tower. It is decorated with bas-reliefs and great silver vases in the ornate Cambodian style, but the Ambassador has an austere personal style, favoring plain suits and conservative ties.

He presents a fairly youthful figure, enjoys tennis and drinks little although he has a taste for whisky. In his spare time, he said, he reads history books "about the great countries—the United States, the Soviet Union, China."

For 25 years the Ambassador has been married to the former Kim Eng, who, like many urban Cambodians, is partly of Chinese ancestry. (her husband says he is of Cambodian stock). They have three children, two daughters, one married, and a son.

The younger children will go to school in the United States for the Cambodian élite does not send its sons to school in Saigon nowadays.