

Grief and Animosity In an Embassy Haven

The following dispatch by Sydney H. Schanberg accompanied his account of the upheaval in Cambodia.

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BANGKOK, Thailand, May 8 —For the 800 foreigners, including this correspondent, who spent two weeks in the French Embassy in Phnom Penh after the Communists took over, the time seemed like a chaotically compressed generation of life.

A baby was born, another died. A dozen marriages were performed—all marriages of convenience to enable Cambodians to get French passports so that they could escape the country and its peasant revolution.

There were days of deep sorrow. Cambodians without foreign papers had to go on the trek into the countryside. Friends were torn apart. Families broken up as Cambodian husbands were separated from their European wives. On those days sobbing could be heard in every corner of the compound.

And there were days when hopes rose, days when the rumors said that evacuation was imminent.

Heroes and knaves emerged—more of the latter than the former. There was no running water and food was limited, and out of this grew

tensions and rivalries between groups.

Between French officials living well in the embassy and French civilians living in the driveways and gardens outside. Between the outside French and the French staff of Calmette Hospital, who were also living fairly well. And between the non-French foreigners, including the favorite targets—Americans and journalists—and everyone else.

There was more selfishness than sharing. A minor example: Put a pack of cigarettes on a table for 10 seconds and turn around, and it would be gone.

This correspondent emerged into Thailand last Saturday, after 13 days in the embassy and the next three and a half

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days on the road. Hundreds of other refugees remained in the embassy even longer, arriving in Thailand today.

To describe what life was like in the compound is to describe sheer incongruity. A French doctor walked the hospital's pet sheep around the gardens. (The hospital's pet gibbon was taken by the Communists and led around the street outside in a pink dress.) Some of the Frenchmen in the compound fed their dogs better than other people were able to feed their children.

Our group of foreigners lived in the building that used to be the ambassador's residence, one of three buildings on the grounds; the others are a chancellery and a large cultural center. Eighteen of us, using sofa cushions and pillows as mattresses and linen tablecloths for blankets, slept on the floor of a large living room—surrounded by humming air-conditioners, an elegant upright piano, a crystal

chandelier and some of the embassy's best silver, except for the silver teapots, which were used to boil water over wood fires outside.

For a few days it might have been fun—a curious experience to dine on when you got home. But as time wore on nerves frayed more and more and hardly an hour went by without an argument somewhere in the compound, usually over something petty.

The water supply ended a few days after our arrival, after which we had to rely on water tapped from our air-conditioners and that delivered periodically in barrels by the new government. There was never enough for bathing, and the odor of unwashed people was ripe.

Nothing Funny About It

With food limited and with no running water, sanitation deteriorated and there were scores of cases of diarrhea—the evidence of which filled every walkway and garden in the compound.

The compound was difficult at times, but never as difficult as was suggested by the radio news reports we kept listening to, which said our situation was "more and more precarious." Sometimes when we were hearing those bulletins we were swilling Scotch and smoking long cigars.

Though some people man-

aged not to fare too badly, for most of those in the compound the situation was far more than a series of annoyances; there was nothing funny about it.

There was nothing funny for Mrs. Nha, an Air France employee who sat sobbing under a tree on the morning of April 19. Her mother and father were missing, and in two days she would be forced to take her young son and go into the countryside herself.

"I was an optimist," she said as the tears coursed down her cheeks. "Not only me. All Cambodians here thought that when the Khmer Rouge came it would be all welcomes and cheering and bravo and the war would be over and we would become normal again. Now we are stunned, stunned."

There was nothing funny for Mrs. Praet, a Belgian whose Cambodian husband was being forced to leave her and join the march. As

she wept into her handkerchief he embraced her gently. "Courage, ma chérie. Courage, ma chérie," he whispered. She could not control herself and her small body shook with her weeping as their two little girls looked on uncomprehending.

There was nothing funny for a Government officer who cannot be named here who vainly took refuge in the embassy. Soon he and his large family had to leave. Years, wounded several times, he was reduced to hopelessness and was crying like a child.

'Could Have Gotten Out'

"I could have gotten out of the country 10 days ago," he said "but I believed the United States would come and help, do something for us. If you get out, please write about this. Tell the world what is happening here."

Some Cambodian women, realizing that their infants could not survive the long trek, earfully gave theirs to French families for foster care or adoption.

"My first baby, my only baby! a mother in shock shrieked. "Save him! Save him! You can do it."

In a corner a young Cambodian who is a Roman Catholic was reading a passage from his Bible: "It is necessary to entirely renounce oneself to obtain freedom of the heart." Looking up to see a foreign newsman watching him, he forced a smile. "Our morale is up," he said. "It must be up. Today is the long march."

It was raining as the Cambodians left. The hospital's

sheep, tethered to a truck, was bleating mournfully; no one paid any attention.

At one time, about 1,300 people were living in the attractively landscaped compound, which is 200 yards by 250 yards or so. Then the Communists ordered out all Cambodians without foreign passports or papers, which forced about 500 people to take to the road.

Family or not, we all lost someone close to us, and when the Cambodians trudged through the gate we foreigners stood in the front yard, weeping unashamedly.

Emphasizing Primary

The forced evacuation was part of an apparent campaign to make it clear to Jean Dyrac, the consul and senior French official at the embas-



The New York Times/Ennio Iacobucci

Journalists and other refugees eating and waiting in compound of the French Embassy in Phnom Penh, where they sought refuge after Cambodian Communists took over city on April 17. At right is Sydney H. Schanberg, correspondent for The New York Times.

bassy, and to everyone else in the compound that the new Government, not foreigners, was in charge—and under its own rules.

The first thing the Communists did was declare that they did not recognize the compound as an embassy, simply as a regroupment center for foreigners under their control. This shattered the possibility of asylum for high officials of the ousted regime who had sought sanctuary. On the afternoon of April 20, in a gloomy drizzle, Lieut. Gen. Sirik Matak, who was among those marked for execution, and a few other leading figures were taken away in the back of a sanitation truck.

Throughout our stay the Communists continued their campaign of proving their primacy—refusing to let a French plane land with food and medical supplies, refusing to allow us to be evacuated in comfort by air instead of by rutted road in the back of military trucks, and, finally, shutting down the embassy radio transmitter, our only contact with the outside world.

At the same time they did not physically harass or

abuse us—the only time our baggage was searched was by Thai customs officials when we crossed the border—and they did eventually provide us with food and water. The food was usually live pigs, which we had to butcher.

Another Point of View

Though the new rulers were obviously trying to inflict a certain amount of discomfort—they kept emphasizing that they had told us in radio broadcasts to get out of the city before the final assault and that by staying we had deliberately gone against their wishes—but there was another way to look at it. From

their point of view we were being fed and housed much better than their foot soldiers were and should not complain.

But complain we did — about the food, about each other, about the fact that embassy officials were dining on chicken and white wine while we were eating plain rice and washing it down with heavily chlorinated water.

Though there were exceptions, constructive figures who worked hard to make the compound run smoothly, our squabbling and our refusals to share and cooperate presented a spectacle that may have reinforced the Communists' notion of us as people too selfish and egotistical to live a less than affluent Asian society.

Outside the gates of the compound soldiers were living in simple fashion—sleeping on the ground and subsisting on rice and salt, with an occasional chicken or piece of pork.

Among the embassy denizens, even in the midst of the tears and heartache, a search for the appearance of normalcy went on.

Blossoms and Bridge

A Frenchwoman picked orange-colored blossoms from a bush and twined them in her laughing child's hair.

Gosta Streijffert, a former Swedish Army officer from a patrician family who is a Red Cross official sat erect in a straight-backed chair he had carried outside and read a British news magazine with his monocle fixed.

At a table nearby a United Nations official and a Scottish Red Cross medical team played bridge and drank whisky; someone carped loudly about the way his partner conducted the bidding.

In the midst of all this an American airplane mechanic who did not leave Cambodia on the day the United States Embassy staff was evacuated because he was too drunk had an epileptic seizure. The Red Cross doctors carried him on the run to the building where the hospital staff was quartered with their equipment.

The American recovered slowly. His case interrupted the staff's dinner—steak. We were envious, and they seemed embarrassed and angry when journalists made notes about their full larder.

Why was there not more sharing, more of a community spirit? What made us into such acquisitive, self-protective beings?

Why did all the Asians live outside, in the heat and rain, while many of the Caucasians, like my group, lived

inside, with air-conditioning? We explained it by saying the living arrangements were up to the embassy, but this was clearly not an answer. Was our behavior and our segregation a verdict on our way of life?

Some Exceptional Behavior

Amidst the generally disappointing behavior of the Westerners there were exceptions—people who rose above the squabbling and managed to hold things together.

There was François Bizot, a Frenchman who worked for many years in the countryside restoring ancient temples and ruins. He lost his Cambodian wife and mother-in-law, who were forced on the march. Yet his relationship with the Communists was strong and they trusted him, for he had met some in his work in the interior and he speaks Khmer fluently.

It was Mr. Bizot who, in the early days of our confinement, was allowed to scout for food and water. And it was he who successfully argued the cases of some Asians whose papers were not in perfect order. A number of people who were in the compound probably owe their futures to him.

There were others who performed constructive roles,

among them Douglas A. Sapper 3d, an American with a Special Forces background who was involved in a private airline company.

Sapper, as everyone calls him, organized our group's kitchen and food rationing to make sure supplies would last. His ranger training—and his colorful language, none of which can be reproduced here—kept us eating regularly and kept pilferers out of the larder.

Disappointing Behavior

These special people notwithstanding, the general level of behavior remained disappointing throughout our stay. We held constant group meetings and made endless lists of who was supposed to perform what chores, and we were constantly going through the movements of organizing, but we never really got organized.

Lassitude and depression set in as the days dragged on. People lay dozing on their makeshift beds throughout the day, waiting only for the next meal. One journalist slipped into a torpor in which he had energy only to lift his aerosol insecticide can and spray away flies.

Occasionally, however, there was an occurrence



Associated Press

A Cambodian Communist soldier driving merchants from their shops in Phnom Penh on the day the city fell and its inhabitants were forced to leave.

dramatic enough to break this morphic aura—such as the sighting of a Chinese plane on April 24 coming in for a landing at the airport, possibly carrying high Cambodian and Chinese officials from Peking.

There was also the unexpected arrival the day before of the seven Russians who had been holding out at the Soviet Embassy. They had

been desperately trying to make friendly contact with the new Cambodian leaders to counterbalance Chinese influence.

But it was the Chinese and not the Russians who had been supplying the Khmer Rouge with arms. The Cambodian Communists rebuffed the Soviet overtures, fired a rocket through the second floor of their embassy, looted the building and ordered the Russians to the French compound. The Russians, having failed in their mission, looked gloomy. They did not appreciate any of the jokes about assignment to Siberia or the salt mines.

Veritable Storehouse

The Russians seemed to console themselves by carrying a veritable storehouse of food, including large stocks of tinned meat and vodka. They shared none of it with anyone either in the compound or on the trip to Thailand—which occasioned some arguments and also some further jokes about the bourgeoisie and the revisionist influences that seemed to have crept into Soviet Communism. The Russians did not appreciate those either.

This phase came to an end for us in the early hours on April 30 when—after an evening of sipping champagne “borrowed” from embassy stocks and singing determinedly hardy traveling songs such as “It’s a Long Way to Tipperary,” we were awakened as scheduled, after a few hours’ sleep, and told to board the trucks.

As we stepped into the pleasantly cool air with our sacks and suitcases, we could see in the night sky the lights of many planes coming from the direction of South Vietnam and heading west. Saigon was falling, and South Vietnamese pilots, carrying their families and other refugees, were making their own evacuation journey to Thailand.



United Press International

Ung Bun Hor, left, Cambodia's National Assembly president, being expelled by French Embassy officials after he attempted to seek refuge in the embassy's compound. Many other Cambodian Government officials were refused admission to the compound for fear they would "compromise" the safety of the other refugees.