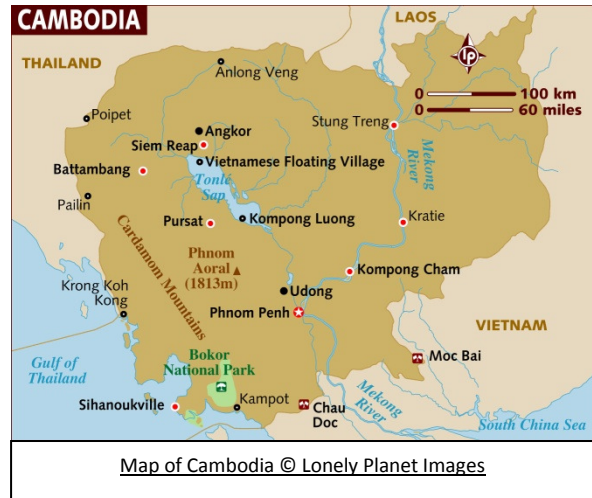


## Denise Affonco; To the end of Hell.

On April 17<sup>th</sup> 1975, Khmer Rouge forces entered Phnom Penh, Cambodia and defeated the ruling Lon Nol Army.

The taking of Phnom Penh marked the beginning of the Cambodian genocide. Between 1975 and 1979 a brutal revolution took place in Cambodia.



Led by Pol Pot, a radical communist group - the Khmer Rouge - seized power following a period of instability. They declared the date year zero and ruthlessly imposed an extremist programme to reconstruct Cambodia (Khmer name: Kampuchea). Working from a warped understanding of Maoist communism, they claimed to be returning society to a golden age when the land was cultivated by peasants. They despised city dwellers.

Denise Affonco was born to a French father and Vietnamese mother. She lived in Phnom Penh with Phou Teang Seng, the father of her children, who was Chinese. Although she had never been to France, Denise was, through her father, a French citizen. She spoke fluent French and regarded herself as French rather than Cambodian. As the French Embassy would not employ French women who were married to Cambodians or Chinese men Denise and Seng never married but she always referred to him as her “husband.” When the Khmer Rouge took control of Cambodia Denise could have fled to France with her children but she decided to stay in Cambodia with Seng, who could not have a French passport. That decision was to change her life forever.

Seng believed that his family would be safe in Cambodia and welcomed the arrival of the Khmer Rouge. He told Denise and her children not to be afraid. He thought that the arrival of a communist group would be good for Cambodia. However Seng knew little about the motives of the Khmer Rouge. Denise describes him as an “armchair communist” someone who spoke

much about hating capitalism but who also enjoyed the finer things of life. When Khmer Rouge forces entered the city on 17<sup>th</sup> April, Seng rushed out to cheer them.

In less than twenty four hours Khmer Rouge forces went from house to house ordering the inhabitants to evacuate the city. They told everyone that “Angkar” (the “Organisation” or the “Party”) wanted to protect people from American air raids. They persuaded residents to hand over the keys to their houses and cars and told them that they could have them back in a few days. Most people, including Seng, believed them and obeyed. Denise later found out that anyone who objected or asked questions was murdered.

Three million people were made homeless and thrown onto the streets over night. They were told to leave the city but had no idea where they were to go. Denise and Seng still had their car but it was soon “borrowed” by Angkar and along with millions of city dwelling Cambodians Denise and her family were deported, first by canoe and then on foot, to the countryside. All inhabitants of towns and cities were treated in similar ways and forced to leave their old lives behind. The ill, Disabled, old and very young were driven out to the countryside regardless of their physical condition. No-one was spared the exodus. People who refused to leave were killed, so were those who did not leave fast enough and those who would not obey orders.

Also targeted were minority groups, victims of the Khmer Rouge’s racism. These included ethnic Chinese, Vietnamese and Thai, and also Cambodians with Chinese, Vietnamese or Thai ancestry. Half the Cham Muslim population was murdered, as were 8,000 Christians. Buddhism was eliminated from the country and by 1977 there were no functioning monasteries left in Cambodia.

Once in the countryside city dwellers were used as slave labour, working in harsh conditions on collective farms. Denise soon discovered that all political and civil rights were abolished. Angkar made new rules which had to be obeyed. Everyone had to dye their clothes black. Shoes, soap and personal possessions were gradually confiscated. Children were taken from their parents and placed in separate forced labour camps. Denise’s son Jean-Jacques was separated from her and given a Khmer Rouge education. He had to forget his life in the city and the love he once shared with his family. His new duty was to serve the Khmer Rouge. Factories, schools and universities were shut down, so were hospitals. Lawyers, doctors,

teachers, engineers, scientists and professional people in any field were murdered, together with their extended families. Religion was banned, so were music and radio sets. Denise, her family and those exiled with them were told never to talk about their previous life. It was a crime to remember.

Denise's first language was French and it placed her in danger. It was possible for people to be shot simply for knowing a foreign language. People who wore glasses were also in danger, because glasses implied that a person was educated and wanted to read books. Showing emotion or attachment to family was also forbidden, laughing, or crying could cost you your life. One Khmer slogan ran 'To spare you is no profit; to destroy you is no loss.'

For a while Seng continued to believe that Angkar would look after his family. He refused to believe that conditions would not improve. He also did his best to impress the Khmer Rouge and the heads of the collective farms but he talked too much and demonstrated that he was educated. He drew too much attention to himself. On 15<sup>th</sup> July 1975 Seng was taken away to be "re-educated." Denise never saw or heard from him again.

Five months after Seng's disappearance, Denise and her sister-in-law, Li, were told that the Khmer Rouge were taking city dwellers back home but there was no repatriation. Instead they were transported "like animals" to new farms and further slavery. Any remaining personal possessions were confiscated. Denise managed to hold onto a few family photographs but it was dangerous to keep any reminders of city life.

Working long hours in what came to be known as "the killing fields" with very little to eat Denise endured almost four years of slavery whilst watching her family die from starvation or dysentery. Her sister-in-law died first but was closely followed by Denise's nine year old daughter Jeannie, who died of starvation on 9<sup>th</sup> November 1976 and her seventeen year old niece Hoa, who died a mere hour later. In December of the same year Leng, Hoa's sister also starved to death and thirteen year old Phan followed her sisters in January 1977. Ha, the brother of Hoa, Leng and Phan, was executed by the Khmer Rouge when he was caught stealing food. He was eight years old.

Civilian deaths in the Khmer Rouge period, from executions, disease, exhaustion and starvation, have been estimated at well over 2 million.

On January 7, 1979, Vietnamese troops seized the Cambodian capital of Phnom Penh, finally toppling the brutal regime of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge.

Denise remembers the kindness of the Vietnamese soldiers who rescued her from “living Hell” when they ended the ruthlessly imposed extremist programmes of the Khmer Rouge. She remained in Cambodia to become a witness at the trial of Pol Pot (he was tried in his absence) before building a new life for herself and her surviving child Jean-Jacques in France.

As well as being a witness at the trial Denise wrote a brief account of her suffering immediately after her liberation. Over twenty five years later she wrote a fuller version of her story and it was first translated into English in 2005. Denise works to ensure that people know about the Cambodian genocide. Her memories handed on to us are her Legacy of Hope. She dedicated the book to her nine year old daughter Jeannie.

*You can order a copy of 'To The End of Hell' directly from <http://www.reportagepress.com> or 0208 749 2867*

*Part of the profits from the sale of To the End of Hell will be given to the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam), where a scholarship has been set up in the name of Denise Affonco's nine-year old daughter, Jeannie, who starved to death under the Khmer Rouge regime.*



*Denise Affonco, present day © Reportage Press*