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'The Gate': The Executioner's Soft Side

By RICHARD EDER

"He was a child venturing among wolves: to survive, he had drunk their milk, and learned to howl like them, and let instinct take over. Terror, from that moment, became all-powerful. It seduced him by putting on the face of morality and order."

François Bizot is recalling the commander of the Khmer Rouge prison camp where he was held for three months in 1971, four years before the insurgents completed their hold on Cambodia. Bizot, a French ethnologist studying the religious underpinnings of rural society, was abducted by a rebel band near the monastery where he was working. He was forced to march for three days, expecting at any moment to be hacked to death (the Khmer Rouge method of execution), then blindfolded before reaching the prison camp. There he met Douch, a mathematics teacher turned guerrilla and executioner.

The first, unforgettable part of "The Gate" recalls Bizot's strange daily sessions with his captor. It is a deeply unsettling account of a particular ordeal that suggests larger questions: the moralities of power's ends and means, the character of revolutionary fanaticism and the indecipherable humanity that flickers within it.

Memory may heal by letting you forget -- not everything, of course, or you only get sicker, but the worst bits. François Bizot's retrospective thoughts, contained in that initial quotation, slightly smooth over his shattering encounter with the Khmer Rouge commander who treated him with strange sympathy yet went on to take charge of one of the most terrible of the Cambodian killing fields.

There is nothing smooth, though, in the account that precedes these thoughts. He gives us the magnitude of a historic horror less through its details than through the way his sense of the order of things was broken. His Frenchman's temperament, original to the point of eccentricity, nevertheless required grounding in a (slightly modified) Cartesian "I understand, therefore I am." The discrepancy between the terror of his situation and his captor's solicitousness left him in a quandary: "I don't understand, and therefore who am I?" The question was painfully intensified when Bizot discovered long afterward both the full dimensions of Douch's cruelty and the extremes Douch had risked to persuade his superiors to release Bizot.

The ambivalence also marks Bizot's writing, gracefully translated by Euan Cameron: by turns evocative, wise and crisscrossed by fury. Why, recalling those three months, does he several times call Douch "my torturer" when his experience was of an oddly lenient captor, and a stiff but needy sparring partner in political and philosophical argument? The reader is puzzled, uneasy, even (on a reader's scale, of course) shattered. Yet long before

the answers, which come in an epilogue, we realize that we've been led into the book's fibrillating moral heart.

"The Gate" begins with an episode that took place in 1970, before Bizot's arrest. Working in an area contested between the forces of the American-supported general Lon Nol and the insurgents, he was stopped by a detachment of North Vietnamese -- unacknowledged allies of the Khmer Rouge and, a decade later, their vanquisher. When Bizot reported the encounter in Phnom Penh, he was not believed. The French line was that the insurgency was exclusively Cambodian, so any assertion that North Vietnamese were involved was American propaganda.

Bizot held no brief for North Vietnam. His cause was village folkways, and the Communists, whether Vietnamese or Khmer Rouge, were uprooting them. Accordingly, his feelings about the war in Vietnam were mixed. Today, he still doesn't know what most to deplore about the Americans, "their intervention or their withdrawal." Much like Graham Greene, he knew he despised "their crass ignorance of the milieu in which they had intervened, their clumsy demagoguery, their misplaced clear conscience."

No easy man: fine-spirited, judgmental and fierce barely this side of physical aggression. That's how Douch seems to have found him when he was dragged into camp. Indignation had tensed him up so that his neck tendons hurt for days. In the months that followed, indignation did not exclude fear and sometimes tears.

Douch, by contrast, was conciliatory. When Bizot raged, his captor tactfully lowered his eyes. Bizot was kept outside the fetid sheds used for the other prisoners, allowed to bathe daily in the nearby river, given a fire to keep warm. When he demanded nighttime unshackling, though, Douch refused. With a kind of back-to-front tact -- perhaps even a compliment -- he explained that Bizot might sneak up and strangle him. Clearly he was working for his prisoner's release. Bizot would write a statement of innocence; Douch would bicycle off to consult the regional superiors and return suggesting rewrites. Back one day from a crucial session, he told Bizot that he had been "exposed" and his calculations "totally thwarted." Bizot collapsed. Douch propped him up, apologizing for the joke.

The night before the actual release, there was a party for the guards and prisoners (who later would all be killed). There were speeches, songs and 13 chickens paid for by Bizot. The strange celebration is vividly described. Even stranger are the hours of talk as Bizot and Douch sit side by side until dawn, poking at the dying fire. It could be a Sorbonne cafe session. Bizot assails the harshness and cruelty of the Khmer rebels, and their uprooting of the peasant life they claim to defend. Douch argues that all great advances involve suffering. Look at the French Revolution; look at the building of the great temples at Angkor Wat. Bizot has no answer; neither has he been answered.

Where is "my torturer" in all this? the reader wonders. True, Bizot heard a whisper of the horrors when a fellow prisoner told of Khmer Rouge soldiers using spades to chop down a group of peasants. But only in the epilogue do we get details learned years afterward:

on one hand, how Douch maneuvered among the high command to get Bizot freed (the final order was given by Pol Pot); on the other, Douch's long subsequent career as arch-executioner.

And so, "my torturer" is not the man who tortured me. He is a retrospective locution: the man whose care and obduracy configured my world for a while and who, as I learned more, made it nonsense. And a state of contradiction too great for any single mind, even a good French one.

The long middle section of "The Gate" is very different: free of such complexity but remarkable enough. It describes the 1975 fall of Phnom Penh to the Khmer Rouge as seen from the French Embassy. Bizot was one of 700 French citizens who found refuge there, along with several hundred other foreigners and roughly 1,000 Cambodians.

France, as a supporter of Prince Sihanouk, a temporary ally of the Khmer Rouge, had won some temporary forbearance. The conquerors refrained from invading the embassy, which was able to stall for a while their pressure to give up the Cambodians. Meanwhile, regular negotiating was needed: for food, supplies, medicine and the timing and methods for eventual surrender of the Cambodians and the evacuation of everyone else, including the embassy staff.

The negotiator was Bizot, with his command of the language and relative instinct for the thinking of the Khmer Rouge. Every day he would step across the street to parley with Nhem, the city commander. A measure of trust, even of sympathy, evolved, not unlike that with Douch. As they stood together one day watching the stream of Phnom Penh's residents forced out to the countryside, Nhem remarked, "Comrade Bizot is sad!" Their elaborate dealings are a tragedy of manners, exquisitely told.

If Bizot's understanding wavers, particularly in the first part, it is tribute to a sensibility that insists on discerning beyond what can finally be understood. The sensibility is unerring. Upon his release by Douch, Bizot had walked through the capital to visit the French charge, who was finishing lunch. Offered what remained, the malnourished visitor praised the duck but declined the soup because it was cold.

"I had sacrificed too much, too painfully over the past months to be satisfied now with nonchalantly gulping down cold soup, as though it were unimportant." Food had become a sacrament. Starving Cambodian refugees rejected the tasteless rice offered by the foreign aid agencies, he notes. Eating was not enough; it was a biological necessity to eat well. He adds, "Today, thank God, I can once again eat food that is poorly prepared or that I do not like."

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