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Minor Characters

By ELIZABETH BECKER

The Tuol Sleng Museum, housed in the former Khmer Rouge secret prison in Phnom Penh, is Cambodia's memorial to the nearly two million people who died during the genocidal reign of Pol Pot.

Among all those victims, one woman's life -- and death -- has come to symbolize the horrors of the Khmer Rouge regime. Her name is Hout Bophana, and her story is told in a movie shown twice a day at the museum. Sometimes called the Anne Frank of Cambodia, Bophana has become a folk heroine, known for the letters and confessions she wrote before her torture and murder by the Khmer Rouge.

Every novelist knows that minor characters have a way of taking over the narrative. But in the years since I first told her story in my 1986 book, "When the War Was Over," a history of modern Cambodia, Bophana has taken on a life of her own and shown me the same thing can happen in nonfiction. Then again, Bophana was overwhelming from the start.

In the immediate years after the Vietnamese overthrew Pol Pot, researchers got a first look at the hundreds of secret files kept at Tuol Sleng. Our priority was to reconstruct the history of Pol Pot's regime, which forced confessions of key political figures. But I also searched for average Cambodians, people whose individual stories could illuminate the larger tragedy. When I unearthed Bophana's file in 1981, my stomach dropped. The dossier was filled with love letters. In the middle of one of the 20th century's worst instances of mass murder, here was a beautiful young woman secretly writing love letters to her husband, knowing full well that in the closed Khmer dictatorship, she

would be killed if they were found.

Her voice, crying out from the grave, was impossible to ignore. Although Bophana had no role in the political history of her country, I knew she belonged in the center of my 500-page book. I recounted how she and her husband, Ly, had fled their hometown, East Baray, during the early years of the war and become separated. Ly took refuge in a Buddhist monastery to avoid being drafted. Bophana fled to Phnom Penh, but not before being raped by a government soldier and giving birth to a son. She sold her possessions for cash and worked at a Western-run charity for women.

Each presumed the other dead, until they were reunited after the Khmer Rouge victory. Ly had left the monastery and fought for the Khmer Rouge. Bophana was at the other end of the political hierarchy, a citizen of the defeated regime and a near-slave working in the fields near East Baray. For that reason alone, the two should have been wary of rekindling their love. The stakes grew even higher as the regime systematically tried to tear apart families, in order to exert maximum control.

But Bophana wasn't cowed. Instead, she dared to write letters to her husband. In them she was coquettish, dramatic and very real in her longing for his love. She proposed schemes to evade the rules so they could see each other. Sometimes she signed her notes "Flower of Dangerous Love." Other times she signed as Sita, after the heroine of the "Ramayana," the Indian epic that teaches the ideal virtues of duty and love in the face of separation and adversity. When Bophana was not yet 25 and her husband only 27, they were captured, tortured and murdered, just because of their letters, which had been stuffed into Bophana's file -- the thickest at the Tuol Sleng torture center -- as evidence, and left there as a rare, if not unique, account of the daily indignities and heartbreak under the Khmer Rouge.

When my book first appeared, Bophana was largely ignored by

reviewers, who focused on the larger story of how Pol Pot came to power and ruined Cambodia. But once the book started reaching Cambodians, especially in the large expatriate community in France, things began to change.

For one thing, Bophana was headed for the screen. In 1994, a young Cambodian filmmaker named Rithy Panh called me from Paris to say he wanted to make a movie of her life. "Bophana: A Cambodian Tragedy" was the first Cambodian-language film about the Khmer Rouge massacres, and won several international awards.

As the film gained popularity, so did my book. But I had no idea just how popular it had become until last year, when I began receiving e-mail messages from friends who reported seeing it for sale all over Cambodia. Fancy hotels and airport kiosks catering to foreigners sold the English-language paperback for as much as \$30, but in the open-air markets, knockoff copies in English and Khmer could be had for as little as \$3. I had also accepted requests to publish an official Khmer language edition. Sponsored by the United States Embassy and the archive where Khmer Rouge records are stored, it will be issued in advance of the trials of the Khmer Rouge, which may begin as early as next year.

From a safe distance in Washington, I was happy to think of all of those people reading "When the War Was Over," even if I did fret a bit about pirated copies that weren't earning royalties.

I stopped fretting when I returned to Cambodia this spring after a 10-year absence, and met Reach Sambath, a professor of journalism at the Royal University of Phnom Penh. Sambath, who had assigned my book to his class, said Bophana was easily one of his students' favorites. "She is very romantic," he said. But he didn't like asking his students to spend more than \$3.50 on the book, the price for pirated editions at the city's open-air markets. "I wouldn't pay any more myself," he said.

It turned out the expensive editions on sale at the fancy hotels and

bookstores were not pirated photocopies, but rather legitimate books purchased from my American publisher, PublicAffairs, and sold at a small profit by Meng Hieng of Monument Books. One of the very few legitimate book distributors in the country, Meng is waging a lonely battle with the Cambodian government to enforce copyright laws and ensure that quality foreign books continue to be sold in the country.

So why, I asked Meng, was he trying so hard to carve out a pocket of honest commerce in such a deeply corrupt country? "You don't know what it's like to grow up without books," he said. Meng is 34 years old. His entire childhood and adolescence coincided with the Khmer Rouge and Vietnamese occupation. As soon as the United Nations peacekeepers arrived in 1992, he started a book importing business.

I was so impressed with Meng that by the end of our meeting I gave up worrying about piracy and intellectual property rights, and agreed to sign over exclusive distribution rights to my book.

And then I visited Youk Chhang, the director of the documentation center on the Khmer Rouge, who had just finished translating my book into Khmer. I asked if there was anything from the exhibits at Tuol Sleng suitable for the book jacket. Yes, he said: Bophana. "The most popular is the movie," he said. "We show it every day."

I was overjoyed. In fact, I was surprised at how deeply satisfied I felt, knowing Bophana had evolved from her first appearance in my book to become a national figure. Today, she looms so large in the public imagination that not even Chhang remembered where he had first come across her story. "It's funny," he said. "I forgot she came from your book."

We settled on an image for the book jacket. Not Pol Pot, or Lon Nol, the Cambodian leader he defeated, or any of the other men who sent the soldiers to battle in those endless wars. Instead, the cover shows an image of the minor character who promised her husband she would

stay with him to the end and then return to Cambodia as a ghost and "win total revenge." She has more than fulfilled that promise.

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