

Ghosts of a Genocide Past

By: Lauren Turnowski

The man with the one eye stood staring at us and it was hard to look and perhaps even harder to look away. There was something behind that solitary eye that intrigued, something hidden beneath the acid scars of his face, something that made it seem like his story would devastate and sadden even the most hardened of souls. Maybe it was his proximity to the genocide museum that piqued such a curiosity, the location perhaps a fitting back-story to his personal journey to this place, a survivor amidst the ghosts that haunted the hallowed hallways of the concrete structure behind him. And perhaps it was this idea _ this hope, really _ that this man with the single eye may have been one of few fortunate to survive that enabled us to confront his reality and see past the devastation to the truth.

Between the years of 1975 and 1978, the Tuol Sleng prison, or S-21 as it was referred to then, held nearly 13,000 people incarcerated by the Khmer Rouge regime of Cambodia. Housed in a former high school, S-21 was intended to be a secret internment camp, a place where those who opposed the party could be interrogated and imprisoned. The majority of those who passed through the gates of S-21 were members of Cambodia's elite and intelligentsia, as they were the ones whom the party viewed as a direct threat to their Marxist mission of creating a completely agrarian society. The Khmer Rouge's enigmatic leader, Pol Pot, became increasingly paranoid as his reign over the country persisted, causing him to order the detainment, torture and murder of his own people at alarming rates. For Pol Pot and his followers, this ardent belief in the quest for purity and equality amongst his people somehow justified the ultimate extermination of between one and two million people, all the while echoing the insanity and extreme paranoia that has come to define genocide on such a mass scale. Yet despite the ongoing devastation and carnage, the world looked the other way, and the haunted halls of the S-21 prison stand as a testament to the brutality perpetuated by this indifference.

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The dirt road that leads to the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum is unassuming and not unlike any other street amongst the mass of motos and crumbling building facades that clutter Phnom Penh's cityscape. There are no signs, no markings of any sort, to indicate that one is approaching the museum; rather, the building just sort of emerges into your line of sight, a vision of concrete and shaded courtyards, surrounded by flowering bougainvillea and swaying palm trees. There is an imposing sense of calm that pervades the structure, an effect which is simultaneously eerie and comforting. Yet one needs only to

step inside the rooms of the compound in order to eliminate any prior feelings of tranquility. The muted yellow walls, pock-marked and faintly splattered with rust-coloured blood, the broken, tiled floors, and the iron-gated windows all serve to create a sense of fear and horror that is so palpable it permeates the skin, the mind and the soul. The entire first floor of the complex consists of room after room like this, identical in shape and size, each containing a single metal bed, attached to which is an instrument of torture, such as an iron ball and chain, or a steel animal trap. Adorned on one of the walls is a black-and-white photograph of a prisoner, mouth agape, eyes wide, having obviously met his demise in that very room. The effect is chilling, and one is nearly suffocated by an intense sense of restricted vision and limited freedom—a feeling of wanting to escape from this place but of being unable to.

And then there are the photos of the prisoners: black-and-white and haunting. The Khmer Rouge, like the Nazis before them, were notorious for the meticulousness with which they documented their victims; the picture of each stolen life existing as a testament to this methodical madness. Women with shallow eyes and sallow skin. Men with cavernous clavicles and frightened faces. Mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, lovers, friends — one after the other, their faces stony and stoic, as if their bodies are vessels already devoid of their souls. They are young, they are old, they are beautiful. They are the faces of the innocent made to look guilty, yet their only crime was their integrity. They are given no names, no ages; they are stripped of their identity save for the number that is pinned to their shirt, and in some cases, their skin. Yet in their anonymity they document the atrocity of genocide, their numbers signifying a value that is beyond numerical. The power of their powerlessness is overwhelming and upon exiting the building in which their photos are held, one feels deflated, as if the absence of so many relevant lives has somehow deemed one's own superfluous.

There is an art gallery at the museum, a space where artists and historians come together to convey their interpretation of the tragedy. The work currently on display features a photography exhibit of former officers of the Khmer Rouge who are still alive and living in Cambodia. Each frame contains two photos — one from the past, of the soldier in uniform, and one from the present-day, of the 'reformed' soldier, fully integrated into contemporary Cambodian society. The former is a colourless vision of stoicism and dedication to the cause; the latter, a vivid testament to humanity's ability to forgive, forget and forgo a once-tortured soul. Yet it is not the photos that most astound, but rather the written testimony provided by these former officers that speaks volumes about the tragedy of genocide. Asked to speak retrospectively about the war, and their involvement in it, the majority of the respondents proclaim little remorse or apologetic sentiment. It is this indifference that is most alarming — their insistence that they did nothing wrong somehow deeply perturbing.

Yet upon examining these statements with a more finely-tuned microscope, one is confronted by a plethora of questions about the general state of humanity and what it is, specifically, that allows for a willful participation in such atrocities. What was it about these men and women-and about their situation that enabled them to blindly kill their own people without so much as a saddened look over their shoulder? Could it truly have been that simple for them? Or is there something deeper, darker, hiding behind the blankness of their faces, the indifference of their words? Looking through the hardened pupils of the soldiers' eyes to the depths of their souls, one can almost see the fear and the trepidation that lurks within and for a brief, flickering moment, an understanding surfaces, a knowledge that there is an underlying psychology behind any mass genocide so complex that we may never know the truth, never fully understand the mentality that defines such evil, and will continue to live with the questionable nature of humanity plaguing us evermore.

The man with the one eye is gone, the place where he once stood is now empty. The late-day sun splays its rays across the concrete edifice of the museum like wax melting slowly from a candle. It is hauntingly beautiful. In this brief moment between day and night, each minute yearns to be held a bit longer. Cambodia must have been like this once _ a place where time longed to be kept still. And now? The languid past has been overshadowed by a tragedy, vast and ruthless. A belaboured future lies ahead. And so it goes. The sun finally descends behind the building, marking the start of its journey through space, and through time, only to emerge again at the yawning dawn of a new day.

And so it goes.