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Photo Stirs up the Past

By Sophal Ly

Every month, about 50 nuns join Documentation Center (DC-Cam)'s Educational tour. There have been over 400 participants on each tour; the participants include villagers (victims and perpetrators) and commune leaders, Buddhist nuns, and Muslim teachers.

During April's tour, a nun named Iev Mao, 79, saw her husband's photo displayed at the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum (former Khmer Rouge Security Office 21). Her husband had been detained at Prey Sar Prison, where he died from torture.

This was the second time Iev Mao had visited Tuol Sleng. The first time she came was in 1979. Iev Mao had met a man who had been her husband's co-worker in Phnom Penh; he had told her that her husband was detained at Tuol Sleng. When Iev Mao learned this, she was so shocked that she fainted. She was sent to the hospital by the Vietnamese soldiers. She had not come back to Tuol Sleng again until she was invited for the April DC-Cam tour. Seeing the photo for the second time, she could control her anger toward the Khmer Rouge. She said, "When I see the photo, I can still feel the pain, the pain that is too great to describe in words."

Iev Mao's husband was a captain of the King Sihanouk, and she was a former royal drama dancer. In 1975, her family was evacuated to Kampong Thom province. After two months there, the Khmer Rouge took her husband to work in Phnom Penh. Iev Mao knew that it was a trick the Khmer Rouge used to gather up former officials. She said, "The Khmer Rouge asked for former officials. They said those who used to hold a particular position would be appointed to carry on the same position and work. Hearing this, my husband confessed that he was a royal captain. Although I tried to stop him from speaking out, he still insisted on claiming his title."

Then, the Khmer Rouge took her husband away. Next, Iev Mao was arrested, shackled, and sent to live in the jungle for a couple of years. In the jungle, she led a miserable life until 1979 when the Khmer Rouge was overthrown by the Vietnamese. Being set free, she went back to her home village where she alone. Her life was bitter because her relatives all had passed away, leaving her alone in the world.

At every DC-Cam tour to the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum and Choeung Ek Memorial, the nuns perform Buddhist chants for the spirits of the dead whose lives were lost during the brutal regime. Iev Mao was among the nuns, chanting and dedicating prayers to her husband and the other victims.

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