



Acknowledgement by the Author

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The Exhibition Catalog

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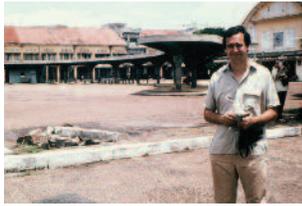


LIVING HELL

Democratic Kampuchea, August 1978

A Retrospective Exhibition and Seminars with Gunnar Bergstrom

Gunnar Bergstrom has not returned to Cambodia since he joined a delegation that toured the country thirty years ago. For fourteen days in 1978, Bergstrom



and other members of the Swedish Cambodian Friendship Association undertook a “public relations” tour choreographed by the Khmer Rouge, whose intention was to use the Swedes to rally support for the Khmer Rouge from abroad—particularly from other communist countries. During Bergstrom’s trip, Khmer Rouge cadres took him and the other delegates to Phnom Penh as well as Kandal, Siem Reap, Kampong Som, and Kampong Cham provinces. They saw hospitals, factories, and schools. They watched workers plant rice in the fields. They even had dinner at the Royal Palace in Phnom Penh with Pol Pot and Ieng Sary, the Khmer Rouge leaders and masterminds of the carnage. But while the Khmer

the world—about the things he saw, ignored, and was never shown during his first visit. To mark Bergstrom’s return, the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam) in collaboration with the Living History Forum of Sweden, has put together a traveling exhibition entitled *Gunnar in the Living Hell*, which features never-before-seen photographs taken exclusively from Bergstrom’s personal archive of his 1978 tour. They are in color—unusual for pictures taken in Democratic Kampuchea. Starting on November 18, 2008, the exhibition will open at *Reyum Arts Gallery* and at the *Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC)* in Phnom Penh. It will also travel to Kampong Cham, Takeo and Battambang. Finally, the exhibition will be put on permanent display at the *Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum* in Phnom Penh. A duplicate exhibition will be shown at the *Living History Forum* in Stockholm, Sweden in the summer of 2009 and will travel around Sweden beginning in early 2010. Gunnar and his colleagues also filmed parts of the trip, and the *Documentation Center of Cambodia* keeps those films.

filter what the Swedes saw, or were the Swedes willfully blind to the conditions surrounding them? Were the Swedes hapless bystanders—or were they, too, victims of the Khmer Rouge, manipulated and duped by the regime?

Hopefully, *Gunnar in the Living Hell* will expose the truth behind his tour and others like it, spark discourse and scholarship about the international community’s willful neglect, then and now, and encourage other people who visited Cambodia during the Khmer Rouge years to share their stories and experiences. And perhaps more than anything else, the exhibition may foster reconciliation for Cambodians who saw or heard about foreigners who visited the country, survivors who have wondered for the last thirty years why the international community never came to their rescue. While the tribunals may bring reconciliation, they must also involve former victims, perpetrators and bystanders—whether it was people who willingly committed crimes, or other people who provided tacit support with their silence. Bergstrom was a



Rouge leaders “wined and dined” the Swedish delegates, turmoil roiled the rest of the country. Cambodians were overworked, starved and resigned to the wanton destruction of their country. Many were dying. After the Swedes returned home, they proclaimed that Cambodia was at the early, albeit imperfect, stages of creating a model communist society. They said communism would save the Cambodian people. It was not until Gunnar heard the stories of thousands of miserable refugees who poured into Thailand a year later that he realized he had made a grave misjudgment.

On November 15, 2008, Bergstrom will return to Cambodia for the first time since 1978 to speak with over 400 commune chiefs and villagers. He will tell Cambodians—and ultimately

Gunnar in the Living Hell tells the story through the lens of one man, Gunnar Bergstrom. Some of the photographs included in this exhibition depict Bergstrom and the other delegates happily smiling with Khmer Rouge cadre in the Cambodian countryside, at the Royal Palace, Angkor Wat, and in an almost-deserted Phnom Penh. Other photographs present a skewed and manipulated glimpse into the daily “life” of the regime: Cambodians eating communally, working in rice fields, building dams and other irrigation projects. But as with most visual documents produced for the Khmer Rouge, Bergstrom’s collection includes no photos of the torture, starvation, death, and despair for which the Khmer Rouge is so reviled. These omissions beg the questions: Was there any justification for the Swedes’ support of the Khmer Rouge? Did the Khmer Rouge cadres

member of that second group, which is why his return to Cambodia is so important. (sjd)

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