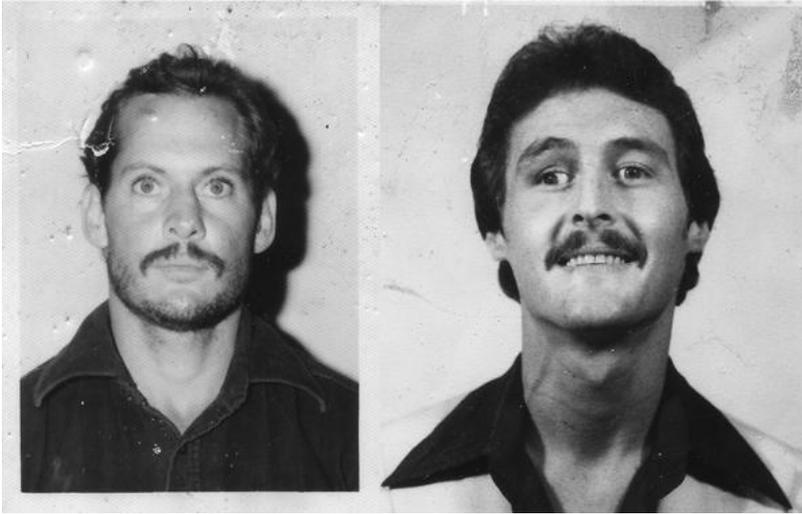


Duch fails to ID Westerners imprisoned in S-21

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The above photographs, of two unidentified men, were found with a cache of recently donated photographs of S-21 prison victims. Photograph: Documentation Center of Cambodia
As part of an ongoing search to confirm the identities of two Westerners whose faces emerged in a recent anonymous donation of photos featuring inmates from the notorious S-21 prison, researchers yesterday turned to a man they believed might have special insight into the duo's fate – their jailer.

Sitting in a small room outside his detention cell at the Khmer Rouge tribunal, where he is currently serving a life sentence for his crimes as the former chairman of the Phnom Penh detention and interrogation centre, Kaing Guek Eav, alias Duch, briefly studied the faces of the men, put them aside and began to talk.

There would be, however, no great revelations.

"He said there were only four Western prisoners at S-21, and he didn't really remember the faces of those people," the Documentation Center of Cambodia's Savina Sirik told the Post. Sirik, and her colleague Kok-Thay Eng, interviewed Duch for two hours yesterday to try and solve the mystery of the two men's identities.

Sirik, who heads up the Living Documents Project at DC-Cam, said Duch could not remember details about many of the photos they brought, which weren't limited to the two unidentified men.

Pictures included one of a church that Duch may have attended, and a photo of a man whose son had recently asked DC-Cam about the circumstances of his father's death under the Khmer Rouge.

They also presented an S-21 photo of a man named Andre Gaston Courtigne, a former employee of the French Embassy in Phnom Penh, on the off chance that he might be one of the two unidentified men. Duch could not say.

A spokesman for the French Embassy said yesterday that an investigation about Courtigne is ongoing, but there was no new information.

Wearing eyeglasses, a collared white shirt tucked into slacks, and loafers over white socks, Duch was dressed more like the mathematics teacher he once was than a man convicted of crimes against humanity.

The interview, said Sirik, was at times tense and uncomfortable.

“At times he laughed at me, like when I asked him certain questions, he just burst into laughter, and I didn’t really understand what his laughter meant,” she said.

Sirik said Duch appeared to be in good health. And in the same interview where he looked at photos of executed men, Duch reminisced about his own attachment to the art of photography.

“He said he got a camera himself, and that he used that camera to take pictures of him and his family and his friends, so we wanted to know more of this personal experience,” she said. “He said that was his hobby, to take photos of himself and his family.”

He asked if DC-Cam could locate a picture of him, his wife and daughter taken in the bedroom at a house near Tuol Sleng.

Youk Chhang, the head of DC-Cam, said Duch also kept photos of people collected from records kept by the previous regime.

One of the two unidentified photos is believed to be of Christopher Edward DeLance, who was seized while sailing off the Cambodian coast in 1978. Presented with this image, however, Duch was also not able to confirm the identity.

Both photos were part of an anonymous donation of 1,427 images made to DC-Cam earlier this month. The majority of the victims depicted in the collection are from Thailand and Vietnam.

But if there was a person to identify the photos, Duch would be the go-to source – not merely for his position of command but for what judges have called his “enthusiasm” in his role. Duch was intimately familiar with prison operations at S-21 and is known to have kept meticulous records of prisoners, often annotated in his flawless, finishing-school script.

DeLance and three other Americans – Michael Deeds, James Clark and Lance McNamara – died after being imprisoned in S-21, where they were tortured into confessing to working for the US Central Intelligence Agency.

Efforts to get DeLance’s relatives in the US to confirm the photo have proved unsuccessful so far.

DC-Cam’s Youk said that an employee from the US Department of Defense’s Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command (JPAC), which tries to account for Americans lost in conflict, reached DeLance’s brother, but he declined to cooperate in confirming the photo. Calls and emails to JPAC’s center in Hawaii were not immediately returned.

Asked if he believed that Duch’s memory failed him and that he really couldn’t confirm the identities, Youk was sceptical.

“I sent my two staff to talk to Duch, because they were born after the Khmer Rouge and they want to understand why the Khmer Rouge did such a horrible thing against their own population and others.

For me, who have survived the Khmer Rouge genocide, I have nothing left in life to believe what

the Khmer Rouge leaders have to say.”

At the end of the interview, Sirik gave it one last shot. She presented him with paper copies so he could study them another time, maybe something would jog his memory.

“But he didn’t want to keep them. I took back all the photographs that I wanted to give to him.”