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Khieu Ponnary, 83, First Wife of Pol Pot, Cambodian Despot, Dies

By ELIZABETH BECKER

Khieu Ponnary, the quiet Cambodian intellectual who was the first wife of the Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot and a prominent member of the movement in its early days, died on Tuesday in Cambodia. She was 83.

A nephew, Ieng Vuth, said she died in the northwestern city of Pailin.

Despite the notoriety of her husband, Khieu Ponnary had been out of the public eye for decades. Sometime during the austere years of guerrilla war, she began suffering from mental illness. By the time the Khmer Rouge won power in 1975 and undertook the revolution that led to the deaths of 1.7 million people, she was incapacitated by her illness.

The daughter of a judge, Khieu Ponnary led a privileged life in the French colonial era. She attended the elite Lycee Sisowath in Phnom Penh where in 1940 she became the first Cambodian woman to earn a baccalaureate degree.

Intent on earning teaching credentials, she traveled to Paris with her younger sister, Khieu Thirith. There they met their future husbands, who became masterminds of the Khmer Rouge revolution.

Khieu Thirith, the outgoing if less studious sister, married Ieng Sary, who was part of the brain trust under Pol Pot, then known by his given name, Saloth Sar.

The two men were students in Paris and members of a Marxist-Leninist study circle; they spent most of their time plotting how to end French rule of their country. As they embarked on their secretive pursuit of a Communist revolution, the Cambodian radicals chose wives they could trust. By marrying sisters who shared their political goals they cemented that bond with family ties.

When they returned to Cambodia, Khieu Ponnary became a widely respected high school teacher, helping to support her husband as he began organizing for the revolution. Eventually both had to flee the capital to avoid arrest by Prince Norodom Sihanouk, then the Cambodian leader.

Ieng Sary became foreign minister of Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge victory. Khieu Thirith, then known by her married name, Ieng Thirith, became the minister of social

affairs in a regime that became notorious for overworking the population, starving many to death and tearing apart families.

They became the most public members of the short-lived Communist government, while Khieu Ponnary was largely invisible, housed separately from Pol Pot and put under the care of her sister.

Once the Vietnamese overthrew the Khmer Rouge in 1979, Pol Pot separated from Khieu Ponnary and took a much younger wife, with whom he had a daughter.

He died in 1998, escaping all efforts to capture him and try him for crimes against humanity.

Despite a sojourn in China for medical treatment, Khieu Ponnary never recovered. She lived with her sister and brother-in-law in Pailin, where they were granted amnesty by the Cambodian government, after a major defection from Pol Pot and the remaining Khmer Rouge in 1996.