

## [Messages from a Former Cambodian Prison](#) [1]

September 18, 2017 [History](#) [2]

[Journalism](#) [3]

[Truth-telling](#) [4]

### **Report by Alyssa Sorresso**

#### **Why Silence Perpetuates Torture**



Last spring, in the remembrance room of Tuol Sleng, a tall message board stood alone. Visitors were supposed to write their memorial wishes there, but over the years, the words had overflowed, filling the room's walls and ceiling as well as the board. I was a visitor, too, struck by the many notes of love and peace, rest and grief, haunted by what had happened in Cambodia decades ago. But I also couldn't help noticing more recent messages by other Americans. I took pictures of ones like this:

*It is starting again in the U.S.A. Keep your eyes open and voices loud. Never again.*

Tuol Sleng, a former prison in Phnom Penh run by the Khmer Rouge, was our last stop before my husband Dan and I left Cambodia at the end of March. We'd been gone from America for six months; this was the halfway point of a trip around the world we began last September. (We've only now settled into a new home in Paris instead of returning to Chicago.)

Like so many Western travelers, we were drawn to Cambodia's nearly virgin jungles, Angkor Wat, and spicy Khmer curry. And as we traveled there and throughout Southeast Asia, we saw a mixture of extreme wealth and poverty. In Cambodian cities, Lexuses rolled past three-year-olds begging for change in the middle of traffic; high-end hotels with crystal-blue swimming pools nestled among metal shacks, their swanky rooftop bars serving Moscow Mules to expats.

At Tuol Sleng, also known as Security Prison 21 (S-21), Dan and I waited to enter the grounds of what's now a memorial museum, sprinkled by a welcome spray of water. The mid-afternoon heat rivaled any heavily humid August day in Chicago. I used the museum's brochure to fan myself. I watched other visitors drop off their audio guides and quietly exit. Phnom Penh had already been hard to navigate, and I felt as if we were entering its belly.

I didn't notice the concrete wall surrounding the grounds, topped with spools of barbed wire, until we'd crossed under the entrance archway. Audio guide in hand, I placed the earphones over my head and pressed play. The narrator was a Khmer man speaking English with a slightly stern tone, warning me to heed the seriousness of the museum. As he began to speak, Dan and I separated, and I became swept up in that somber voice.

The grounds were made up of five long gray buildings, each three stories tall, their windows covered in wire fencing. A white, twelve-foot board with black lettering loomed in front of the first building on my left. It displayed the eight rules of Tuol Sleng, first in the original Khmer, then translated into French, and lastly in disjointed English. "The Security Regulations" hovered above a chilling list that included:

*Don't be a fool for you are a chap who dares to thwart the revolution.*

*You must immediately answer my questions without wasting time to reflect.*

*Do nothing. Sit still and wait for my orders. If there is no orders, keep quiet. When I ask you to do something, you must do it right away without protesting.*

The commands reminded me of what I'd heard barked at kids I worked with as a teaching artist in juvenile detention centers in Chicago. They had also been expected to wait, to be quiet, to acquiesce without question.

Past the rule board and through the open door of the building, I saw a shackle—for a wrist? a foot? a neck? I didn't know—abandoned beneath a remnant bed frame. On the wall, an unframed photograph printed on large poster board depicted the black blood and mangled limbs of the victim found within. Such photos were taken by Vietnamese journalists, among the first people to discover S-21 after the Khmer Rouge fell from power.



What would it have been like to uncover such a scene, the floors wet with fluid, the stench of death still fresh? I stood close to the photograph, fighting that odd, numbing pull away from such horrific violence, wanting to be just an observer. I knew there was more to come.

I escaped to the courtyard outside with its soft patches of grass and smooth sidewalks. On several white benches, visitors solemnly listened to their audio guides and the stories of more atrocities the narrator relayed. I did, too, sitting on a bench shaded by mango trees. Harvest season was past, but I imagined the fruit they had borne among the long spears of green leaves—bright and fragrant, yellow and tantalizing.

My narrator brought me back to April 1975, when the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK) took the Khmer people hostage in their own country until January 1979. An army of peasant boys were led by Pol Pot, and in the first few days of rule, they forced two million people to evacuate their homes, live in cooperatives, and labor in fields for days with crude machinery or none at all.

While traveling in Cambodia, Dan and I had talked about S-21 with several local guides before we even saw it. Some told us that 30 percent of Cambodia's population died during those four years. The estimated number of dead fluctuates higher or lower, depending on the source. But what conveyed the magnitude most clearly to me was something our tuk-tuk driver said on the way to the museum: that during the time of the Khmer Rouge, Cambodia “cut off its own head.”

Pol Pot—a name I'd only heard in passing in a high school history class—sought to extinguish any trace of elitism from the Khmer people. His peasant revolutionaries rounded up soldiers, politicians, city residents, intellectuals, activists, artists, religious leaders, diplomats, engineers, technicians, students, and anyone else who seemed suspect, bringing them to what were essentially concentration camps. The museum website notes that there were at least 150 such camps, but S-21 was the most infamous—a secret political prison for captives who were thought to be spies of the CIA or KGB (as reported by *Washington Post* correspondent Elizabeth Becker in 1981). According to the Killing Fields Museum of Cambodia website, only seven of many thousands at Tuol Sleng survived.

It had been an old high school called Tuol Svay Pray; once the Khmer Rouge took over, the name changed to Tuol Sleng, which means “Hill of the Poisonous Trees.” At least 17,000 people were taken to Tuol Sleng—entire families. “Killing the whole tree by the roots,” the soft voice of my narrator explained, was a common justification for murdering wives and children along with other family members. I doubt the mango trees were there during S-21's operation; their

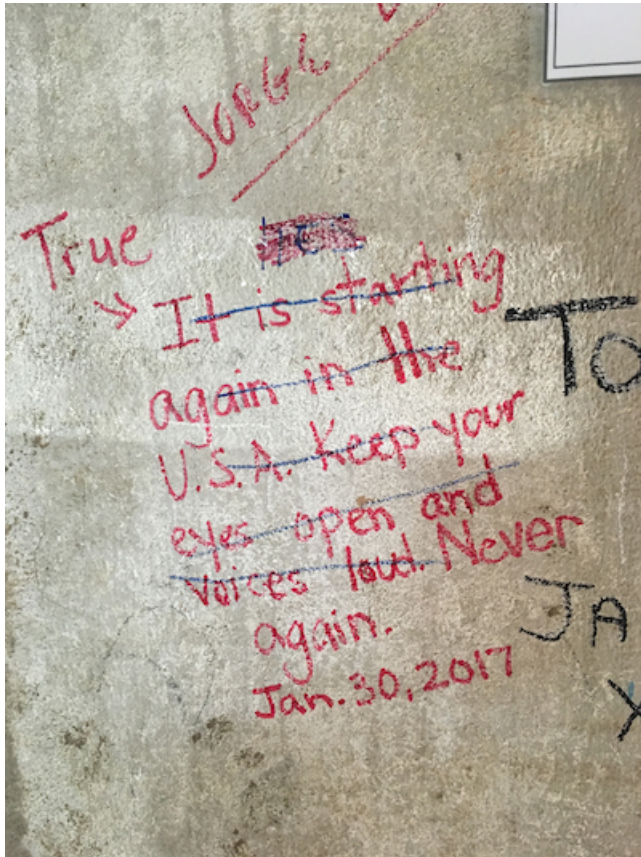


fruit would have tempted prisoners, the trees themselves a sign of hope.

I left my bench and entered the second building. Here, black-and-white photographs were displayed on several upright boards. The photographs documented who had been imprisoned; who had made false, forced, and lengthy confessions; who was about to be killed as a result of their confessions; and who had worked there as staff. More than once, I saw the same person twice. Khmer Rouge leaders were so paranoid that staff—boys and girls, the audio guide said, between fifteen and nineteen years old—were often accused of treason and then became prisoners themselves.

In this room, I saw displays of many instruments of torture: Prisoners had been chained together by the neck and ankles, forced to lay on the floor for hours; hung by their armpits; dunked in vats of feces. They were skinned alive, their organs removed without anesthetic, their fingernails plucked. They had been kept in brightly lit rooms 24 hours a day, separated two-by-two into cells the size of a New York City closet. They'd been given four spoonfuls of rice porridge to eat a day. They had endured daily strip-searches and been hosed with water every four days for cleaning.

I was stunned by the descriptions I read, the faces I saw, the breathtaking scope of the killing. At the same time, it made me think of Guantanamo with its pictures of black hoods and electrical lines attached to bodies—or US prisons with 24-hour solitary confinement and scalding hot showers that result in death—or spoiled meats and mold and broken phone lines at ICE detention centers—or the trail of forced confessions from poor and black people by the Chicago police. Everything I saw at S-21 was new, yet also sadly familiar.



*It is starting again in the U.S.A. Keep your eyes open and voices loud. Never again.*

*Every U.S. citizen, 'specially Republican voters, should come and see what they did.*

*Fuck Trump.*

The remembrance room was in the third building, a triangular space tucked away at the end. Signs that said *Do not write on the walls* had clearly been ignored for years. On the visitor board, walls, and ceiling, people had squeezed

letters into the smallest of lines, winding in and out of other sentences like a thick macramé of tangled disbelief.

Someone had crossed out the red anti-Trump message “It is starting again”—only to be thwarted by another visitor who wrote “True” with an arrow pointing back to the original message. I wondered who else would come along and cross out “True” in order to replace it with “False,” and why they might feel the need to argue in a place of reflection.

But I understood this exchange. Dan and I were at odds with America as well, unsure how to feel about the country we loved. We had been in Amsterdam when the election results came in, and the news of Trump winning had devastated us. Now, Americans were at Tuol Sleng, writing on the walls of a genocidal memorial museum thousands of miles away from their own country.

It echoed the 24-hour verbal sparring of MSNBC, Fox News, or Facebook: *No, you're not right—no, I'm right—no, you're wrong—no, you couldn't possibly know what you're talking about.* We are always crossing each other out. After the long months of my trip, I don't remember what I wrote on the remembrance wall, although I know I did write something. Part of me hopes now that I could have ignored the sparring and instead squeezed in a statement of peace for the lost. But I could well have underlined that “True” and dotted it with as many exclamation points as I could fit.

I left the last building for the solace of a marble water fountain, which softly gurgled on the edge of the courtyard. On the rule board in front, the fourth S-21 commandment decreed:

*While getting lashes or electrification you must not cry at all.*

According to museum displays, Tuol Sleng staff had been afraid the noise inside would alert the community outside the prison about what was happening there. As I walked around the fountain's perimeter, where the names of each victim were engraved in gold on its panels, I wondered how someone could resist letting out cries of pain. What tremendous will power that must have taken—or what broken spirit.

And I still wonder how someone could ignore their neighbor screaming on the other side of a concrete wall or how afraid any of us would have to be in order to resist such cries. If any sounds make it through at all.

---

### Publishing Information

- [Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum](#) [5] (website).
- “[The Death Chambers of the Khmer Rouge](#) [6]” by Elizabeth Becker, *Washington Post*, August 2, 1981.
- [The Killing Fields Museum of Cambodia](#) [7] (website).

### Art Information

- “Barbed Wire” © Alyssa Sorresso; used by permission.
- “Light and Doorways S-21” © Alyssa Sorresso; used by permission.
- “True-False S-21” © Alyssa Sorresso; used by permission.

## Messages from a Former Cambodian Prison

Published on Talking Writing (<https://mail.talkingwriting.com>)

---



Alyssa Sorresso is a creative nonfiction writer who loves telling stories out loud. She has performed her stories internationally and around Chicago, including for reading series such as 2nd Story, Story Club, and You're Being Ridiculous. Alyssa's writing is published or forthcoming in *Calyx*, *Creative Nonfiction*, *Queen Mob's Teahouse*, *9 Lives: A Life in 10 Minutes Anthology*, and elsewhere. Her essay "Don't Borrow Trouble" was listed as "Notable" in *The Best American Essays 2015*. She now lives in Paris with her husband Dan, working as a freelance writer and editor.

For more information, see [Alyssa Sorresso's website](#) [8]. You can follow her on Instagram and Twitter [@alyssasorresso](#) [9].

**Source URL:** <https://mail.talkingwriting.com/messages-former-cambodian-prison>

### Links:

- [1] <https://mail.talkingwriting.com/messages-former-cambodian-prison>
- [2] <https://mail.talkingwriting.com/tw-channels-and-categories/history>
- [3] <https://mail.talkingwriting.com/tw-channels-and-categories/journalism>
- [4] <https://mail.talkingwriting.com/tw-channels-and-categories/truth-telling>
- [5] <http://www.tuolslenggenocidemuseum.com>
- [6] [https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1981/08/02/the-death-chambers-of-the-khmer-rouge/3e20745d-0c5d-4854-b3a3-74d0962f5536/?utm\\_term=.18c14b6d2a16](https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1981/08/02/the-death-chambers-of-the-khmer-rouge/3e20745d-0c5d-4854-b3a3-74d0962f5536/?utm_term=.18c14b6d2a16)
- [7] <http://www.killingfieldsmuseum.com/s21-victims.html>
- [8] <https://www.alyssasorresso.com/>
- [9] <https://twitter.com/alyssasorresso>