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Dying to Find The Meaning Of One Wretched War

By Elizabeth Becker

WHEN ISHAYAMA KOKI was still listed as missing, I wasn't sure how I felt. I stumbled over tenses. Did Koki exist in the past, or the present? Then I left Cambodia and moved to Washington, where few people knew much about the war I could no longer bear and nothing about my Japanese friend who got lost trying to find it.

Cambodians were still fighting when I returned. I tried to explain why to friends but would end up sounding suspect or wooden. Sometimes I switched tactics and tried to describe the war through the tale of my friend Koki.

I would start with my misinformed first impression that Koki looked like one of those conventional Japanese who took vacations in teams led by a man holding a flag and blowing a whistle. His hair was cropped in a close crewcut. He was the shape of a panda bear and wore boxy shirts, baggy trousers, plain dress shoes. He squinted through thick black-framed glasses. But Koki was an intellectual, Japanese fashion. He was what his manner suggested: a sweet if slightly out-of-sync character, a white rabbit on an ill-defined mission.

Our first encounter was at the United Press International office in Phnom Penh. Koki was on deadline and had little time for conversation. But when he acknowledged the introduction, he bowed his head at a slightly impish angle. He seemed interesting, and when I asked other Western journalists about him, they said, yes, Koki was different. He mixed easily with Westerners and even seemed to like them, although his English wasn't too good. "Koki likes his whiskey," someone else said.

Soon I began bumping into him at the dinners and parties thrown together by the Phnom Penh press corps. We were a small group, principally young stringers; only the French and Japanese sent staff correspondents to Cambodia to cover the story day by day.

We were an extended, often bickering family. That was how the barriers dropped and I, a 25-year-old stringer with a degree in Asian studies and no experience in journalism, could become a friend of Koki, a 31-year-old correspondent for Kyodo News Service, a rising star with a strong background in English literature. We had little in common beyond our attitudes and the 10 months we shared watching the "pleasant" Cambodian war erupt into hell.



Gentle, quiet and formal though he was, Koki was not shy. He was socially curious and so susceptible to bouts of loneliness that he sought out companions far outside usual Japanese circles.

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He befriended photographers, drank with Australians, Americans and Europeans.

He was a habitué of Chantal's Opium Den, a private — and illegal — club set up by foreign journalists that became the after-hours gathering spot for Americans, Europeans and some Asians. Very few Japanese ever saw the outside of Chantal's wooden house, much less smoked a pipe there, but it suited Koki's taste for conversation and atmosphere. He would stretch out on the grass mats for hours watching the others and trying to absorb the complicated theories they constructed about the war.

Early on, Koki and I discovered a common interest in George Orwell. I can still see Koki, his eyes bright, telling me he had translated a book or two of Orwell's into Japanese. Koki would have been a most sensitive translator for Orwell. He not only understood but seemed burdened by Orwell's cross of wanting to believe in some political solution to society's ills while fighting a poet's nature, which told him that tampering with the human soul brings disaster.

Koki suggested founding the George Orwell Club of Phnom Penh. We were the only two members, and our meetings were to be held at the Tavernier Restaurant, on the square fronting the Post & Telegraph office. Koki said such clubs existed worldwide and it was fitting that one be established in a country whose war Orwell would understand. I remember the first meeting vividly; there were few others. The restaurant was empty. The neon lights were bright and hissed throughout our long, drunken meal.

Politely, Koki asked me what American feminists thought about Orwell, and I made some banal observations. Then Koki took over. He wanted to discuss one book, the book that had come to life for him recently, "Homage to Catalonia."

I had read it twice. Koki seemed to have memorized parts of it. He brought up passages to demonstrate that Orwell was a brilliant correspondent not only of the Spanish Civil War but of modern warfare itself.

It was as natural to discuss "Catalonia" in Phnom Penh in 1973 as it would have been to talk about Graham Greene's "The Quiet American." We were living on the edge, most of us fully aware that our sad little articles barely resembled the frightening war we were covering. There were no Greens or Orwells among us. Maybe, Koki asked how I felt reporting the war. I was an American. I had opposed American involvement in Vietnam in college. What was going on inside me, an American, here?

If anyone else had asked that question, I might have pretended I had an answer. With Koki I didn't. And once again, his question was a polite preliminary. He had an answer, to the question of how he felt. As a Japanese journalist, he felt an equally strong, if different, obligation in Cambodia. He pointed to a dingy yellow building on the square. That, he said, was the old Japanese military headquarters during World War II. That was why Koki felt a special sickness.

He talked about the Japanese occupation of Southeast Asia, a bitter commentary on his country. The Japanese army had murdered the Chinese in Singapore, starved children in Burma and occupied Cambodia. These soldiers of the Imperial Japanese Army were ghosts marching across Koki's soul.

In this war, he asked, what were the Japanese? Some were reporters like him, scribbling down numbers of dead, inflation rates

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and meaningless background information from the Japanese embassy. Some were photographers, the best in the war. But were they not all shadows of the American establishment? In this war, were the Japanese Asians?

After that meal the George Orwell Club of Phnom Penh became a euphemism for our friendship, a password. We trusted each other.

We shared our work and our suspicions about the war. It seemed clear that Lon Nol was losing the war in a criminal fashion: The corruption in Phnom Penh was unrivaled, even in Saigon. Yet though he detested the Lon Nol regime, Koki kept in touch with politicians, trying to find out why they stayed on and what outcome they could hope for. It was in this pursuit that he came across a small Cambodian book called "Regrets of the Khmer Soul," the only written record of life with the Khmer Rouge. It was all the politicians were talking about.

The author had deserted the communists in 1972 and come back to Phnom Penh to warn his fellow Cambodians that the communists were ruthless but would win because they were not corrupt and seemed dedicated to improving the peasant's lot. Koki wanted to believe there was a better alternative to Lon Nol. We pooled our money to pay his Cambodian assistant Toy to translate the book for us. It was the basis for my first piece on the Cambodian communists and for Koki's deep curiosity about them.

Koki tried to develop a Japanese perspective on the war, but felt his home office failed to understand it. I remember his disappointment when Tokyo refused to run his account of the first refugees to appear en masse outside Phnom Penh.

He wrote that the sight of the homeless walking through dry clouds of dust on the road to Phnom Penh jogged memories of his own days as a refugee. He had been very young, fleeing with his grandmother from the final bombardments of World War II in Japan. He had felt lost. He had been afraid to let go of his grandmother's hand. He wrote little more than that; for once he wanted to ignore politics and paint the bare emotions that were choking the country. But to his editors, the article must have seemed more like a cluster bomb of innuendoes.

This was what occupied Koki, drove him into rages. He spoke little about his personal life, his wife and two small children. He was intrigued by the fact that the smallest per-



Koki and young Cambodian friends.

sonal disturbance could cloud my mood and throw my day out of whack. He would counter with humor, sometimes entertaining me as though I were a 3-year-old; other times he resorted to adult humor and told me about the life he had left in Tokyo.

I had never heard a samurai ethic for corporations. Koki said he was stuck in the same company forever. He described how Japanese companies could "recomm" where you should live, put together your vacations, indicate where your children should go to school. At times Koki wondered whether he could ever go back to that stifled life. Maybe he could take his family to Spain and write a novel. I said why not?

He said I didn't understand Japan. His children had to receive high marks at preschools so they could attend the right elementary school, high school, college. . . . He had attended Tokyo University, so should his children. . . . Maybe he would write a novel about Cambodia, an "homage to Kampuchea." He laughed and clucked his tongue, trailing off as if he were talking to himself.

The American bombing that summer seemed constant. Koki was not the only reporter who grew to like whiskey. The town became filled with visiting journalists, and the windows shook as the B52 strikes got closer; days and nights were indistinguishable marathons of night, fatigue and anguish.

I saw less of Koki but spent one afternoon with him and Toy trying to find the war. We set off in Koki's car. He and Toy were a matched set: both portly, both wearing glasses and dressed the same. We stopped the car at the "front," where Lon Nol's army had decided to call it a day. Their position had little to do with where the Khmer Rouge were; they were depending on American warplanes to do the fighting.

Koki climbed out of the car and said it was too hot. He pulled his handkerchief out of his pocket and tied its ends into knots until he'd made himself a homely cap to protect his scalp from the sun. The Cambodian soldiers had never seen such a sight. Koki was oblivious to it all. There was no story, no fighting, just soldiers laughing and talking to Koki.

At some point I asked Koki to join me studying the Khmer language. He said that was a coincidence, because he and two Japanese photographers, Naoki Mabuchi and Taizo Ichonose, were discussing a similar plan. Koki set up his studio as a classroom, but predictably, the photographers learned quickly while we "intellectuals" never got be-

eyond a basic 200-word vocabulary.

On Aug. 15 the bombing stopped and the American embassy declared victory since Phnom Penh did not fall the next day. Soon Cambodia was no longer a top story.

I saw little of Koki. He was planning a trip to Nepal and was worried that Tokyo would consider the trip irresponsible. He wanted a camera and ordered us both automatic "idiot boxes" from Japan. My last memory of Koki is taking his picture while he took mine.

Weeks passed and Naoki told me Koki had not gone to Nepal. The vacation had been the final straw. He had been called back to Tokyo. Naoki said he had driven Koki to the airport and Koki had told him to say goodbye to me. Koki didn't write, but I would not have expected him to. For all of us, Phnom Penh was a suspension of whatever we had called life before. Our friends were made in war and lost with reassignment to "real life."

Shortly after I returned to Phnom Penh from a respite in Bangkok, Taizo, the photographer, was reported missing in Khmer Rouge territory. No one had been lost for over a year — generally because every journalist had finally realized the Khmer Rouge meant business when they said they didn't want any foreigners near their zones.

Naoki said he thought Taizo had tried to break into the Angkor temple complex to photograph the Khmer Rouge and "win the Pulitzer." By the war's end there would be more Japanese journalists missing or dead in Cambodia than any other nationality. Koki was the last.

One afternoon I came back late from the battlefield and was told an official of the Kyodo News Agency had come to Phnom Penh to investigate Koki's disappearance; he wanted to talk to me.

Naoki told me that Koki had never gone back to Tokyo. He'd gone to the other side, near Kompong Speu, with permission from the Khmer Rouge. Naoki said Koki had felt pressured to make the trip because a Japanese journalist had spent one or two nights with the Khmer Rouge in that area and his agency felt Koki should be able to at least match the story.

Then Naoki confessed it was not simply competition that drove Koki, and he told me the whole story. Our Khmer class had not been what it had seemed. The three Japanese wanted to learn Khmer well enough to cross over to the other side without interpreters, to look for the answer behind the war. Koki had not told me because he knew I thought travel

to the other side too dangerous. At the last minute Naoki had got cold feet.

I asked the American embassy if they had spies who could help find Koki; they did not. I asked a French expert with connections to the Khmer Rouge for help; he said there was little hope if Koki had been missing that long.

I left Cambodia in 1974, about six months before the war ended on April 17, 1975. The Khmer Rouge marched into Phnom Penh and ordered everyone to leave. Three million people were driven into the dry, hot countryside to raise food or die. A few Cambodians, soon hundreds, escaped to Thailand and told stories of starvation, summary execution of army officers, bureaucrats and intellectuals. The Khmer Rouge denied the stories and resolutely refused to allow in journalists.

I did not want to believe the stories; I had hoped the communist cruelty was the result of war and would end with peace. But I read the news articles and became convinced that something horrible was happening in Cambodia. I called the Kyodo News Agency in Washington to ask if there were any news about Koki. The man on the other end of the line said no, there was no word.

The only way I could unearth news of Koki or the country was to go back, at least to the refugee camps on the border. I began plotting a return trip. My newspaper would not send me to the region without a visa to Cambodia. For two years I tried to get one, and, finally, in 1978, the Khmer Rouge issued their first visas to foreign journalists and gave me one. The trip proved Cambodia was the deadly prison the refugees had described. Almost as soon as I arrived, I realized that if I were to ask for someone by name I would be putting his life in jeopardy. Instead, Ieng Sary, the country's foreign minister, was handed a list of the missing journalists. Sary barely glanced at the booklet. He passed it on to his aide and said contemptuously, "The Japanese delegation already gave us the list. We know nothing."

Five days later, the Vietnamese invaded Cambodia and overthrew the Khmer Rouge. Suddenly news came spilling out of the country. Cambodians I thought would surely have been killed turned up alive on the Thai border — some asking after my health. For a moment it seemed possible Koki, too, was alive, but only one Japanese survivor surfaced — a woman. There was news of Taizo — apparently strong evidence that he had been executed near Angkor. There was no news about Koki.

Another three years passed. Documents were unearthed describing how Pol Pot's security force had tortured and killed thousands of people, including foreigners. Refugee stories were confirmed by enormous pits filled with the skulls and skeletons of the victims of Pol Pot's four-year reign.

When Koki disappeared in 1973, Kyodo News formed a committee to search for him. In 1981, a Japanese team was allowed into the village where Koki had last been spotted. They found a woman who knew about Koki.

She said he had died of malaria and typhoid at the beginning of 1975, before the war ended. She had treated him at a Khmer Rouge clinic. There was no suggestion of torture, but he had probably been forbidden to leave. The woman said when Koki realized he was dying he asked her to share his belongings with other people in the clinic. Koki's wife was a member of the investigation team. She and the other members of the committee agreed that their search was over. Koki is no longer missing.