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### Books : Disappearing the king

#### The mystery of what happened to the Lao royals after the communist victory in 1975 is unveiled

What became of the last king of Laos, Savang Vatthana, his consort Mahneelai and the crown prince Vongsavang, was for a long time after the Pathet Lao victory in 1975 not known for certain. It was officially given out that after the king was forced to abdicate and placed under house arrest, he and his consort and the crown prince were packed off in 1977, like so many others of the old regime, to "re-education camps". This book, first published in Australia in 2003 and now available in a local edition, seeks to discover what in fact happened. It is as thrilling as it is sordid, and very well written.

The book is divided into three main sections, centring on places: first, the former royal capital, Luang Prabang; then, the present administrative capital Vientiane; and last, the remote north-eastern prison camp in Viengxai, close to the Vietnamese border, where 40 royals and senior military officials of the old regime died, thoughtfully listed in the appendix "Inmates of Prison Camp Number One".

Krammer is assiduous in tracking down persons who can lead him to the truth, including Princess Mahneelai, consort of the crown prince, now living simply and obscurely in Luang Prabang, and taking refuge in her Buddhist faith, and, in Vientiane, the prime minister, answering only prepared questions and working from a compound that was formerly the American school, announced by "one of those murals that extol the drudgery of peasants".

Krammer's chief informant, though, was Khamphan Thammakhanty. Son of a salt trader, he rose to be a senior intelligence officer in the Royal Lao Army. He was advised by his superiors in 1975 as the old regime collapsed to volunteer for re-education under the triumphant Pathet Lao. He was "transferred to the communist gulag in north-eastern Houaphan province, where he would spend fourteen years in detention without trial". There he was required to act as cook to the inmates in a camp designated Number One, which "like the rest of the country under the Pathet Lao, became a microcosm of paranoia and repression".

Released in 1989, he found his way eventually to Portland, Oregon, where from 2003 he lived in retirement, providing "the definitive account of the last days of one of Southeast Asia's oldest dynasties". The king died of old age and deliberate neglect, like his queen, his eldest son and many others.

"It was difficult for us to believe that the purpose of keeping us in those conditions was to ensure our elimination and the elimination of the entire royal family," says Khamphan in the book.

There is no doubt that Christopher Krammer can write, and with style. He has a marvellous gift of the well-turned phrase which summarises perfectly the situation. His arrival in Luang Prabang by air has officials carrying out "the slapdash formalities of tropical communism"; he works for a while with "Roberta, a life-worn, chain-smoking veteran of bureaucratic aid battles". Trying to find maps of the remote area where the gulag was located, he discovers that "the USSR survived here on a map pinned to a wall in Vientiane, a dead empire preserved in the aspic of Lao inertia". In an official's office, "the bookshelves bulged with the latest works of that bestselling North Korean philosopher despot Kim Jong-II", while at Xam Nua, "At 6.30am the Ministry of Culture loudspeakers mounted on lampposts began their ritual scourging of the population, bellowing distorted music and messages".

But most telling is the passage concerning the only known photograph to survive of the former king and queen at the camp: "The photograph showed two elderly people, a man and a woman. I knew who they were, but had never seen them looking so wretched and bedraggled. Savang Vatthana and Queen Khamphoui were kneeling on the ground in the Lao style, legs tucked behind them and to one side, with their hands clasped in prayer. There was a rudimentary flower arrangement, a poor man's baci bowl, in front of them, and some battered oil drums behind them. The queen's hair was dishevelled, and the king wore a plain black tunic. Gone was their regal dignity, replaced by distress and fear. This single image, passed hand to hand across the Lao diaspora and dissident networks, represented the agony of an entire people."

Krammer has a host of colourful minor characters in his pages, travellers picked up along the way and also mentions the important work of the archaeologist Madeleine Colani, who not only investigated the giant receptacles at the Plain of Jars before WWII, but also the standing stones grouped around stone

tables, looking "like an overgrown cemetery" in Houaphan province. No protected site, "in Laos, with its poverty and war, and the obscurantist ideology that followed the conflict, the burial grounds at Hua Muang, situated some 1200 metres above sea level, had been forgotten by the world".

There seems to be one small contradiction concerning, of all people, Castro, who on page 169 we are told had visited the Viengxai caves "after the bombing stopped in 1973", but on page 192 "was said to have visited Viengxai when American planes were still bombing the area". These caves, according to recent press reports, are to be opened to tourism, though no one should underestimate their current difficulty of access and, let it be said, the limited interest they are likely to generate: The Pathet Lao redoubts hardly compare to the Ho Chi Minh trail.

The overall framework gives a view of Laos at the dark period of war followed by totalitarian repression. To the outside observer, it seems incomprehensible that the gentle Lao one meets today produced such ideological pervers aiming to starve to death persons they considered their former opponents. Now controlled by what Kramer terms "a secretive party led by a ruthless gerontocracy", there does seem to be an opening-up, even to the point of commemorating the first king of Laos, Fa Ngum, who now has a statue and a square to himself in the capital. But 1975, "year zero" in another nearby context, seems to do no more than confirm the poet Burns' contention:

Man's inhumanity to man

Makes countless thousands mourn!

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