



JAN MICHALSKI PRIZE FOR LITERATURE

First selection du Jury – Edition 2011

Peter Fröberg Idling

Pol Pot's Smile

Do you remember „The Killing Fields“ movie directed by Roland Joffè (1984)? The story of the Khmer Rouge seizure of power in Cambodia, 1975 when the entire country was turned into a concentration camp by the communist leaders. These young Cambodian intellectuals decided to create the ideal classless society according to Marxist theory of class conflict, which they studied at the Sorbonne in Paris. They killed almost 2 million Cambodians to achieve their goal. The main ideologue of the genocide, Saloth Sar (Pol Pot), was a graduate from the Sorbonne and admirer of French Romantic poetry.

Peter Fröberg Idling, a Swedish journalist, tells the story from another perspective. In 1978 a group of Swedish intellectuals and members of The Swedish-Kampuchean Friendship Association (John Myrdal among others) came to Cambodia (Kampuchea). What the delegates brought from the country which happened to witness the largest genocide of the late 20th century was an optimistic documentary film, a record of propaganda songs, and a book describing a wonderful country and wonderful revolutionaries. They noticed no crimes.

Idling describes the Swedish travel through Cambodia of the Khmer Rouge and poses a question about the responsibility of Western left-wing intellectuals and political activists for the Cambodian genocide committed by the Khmer Rouge (their seizure of power in Cambodia fascinated, among others, the American linguist, Noam Chomsky and Birgitta Dahl, Speaker of the Swedish Parliament).

Idling's book is a magnificent piece of literary reportage. On the one hand, the author reconstructs the details of the Swedish intellectuals' travel through Cambodia. Where they have been, whom they met, what they saw and what they knew, why they did not see any signs of crime and why they understood nothing of what was happening. Why their reports, pictures, letters and films bore no traces of the murdered and tortured people? Why they did not notice things reported by the fugitives from Cambodia's „killing fields“? On the other hand, Idling's reportage concerns the history of the Cambodian genocide.



Idling strives to answer the question: who were the intellectuals who caused the deaths of one-fourth of the Cambodian population? What were their motivations? What were the sources of their fanatic violence. How could they manage to hide their crimes from the world for such a long time? And, finally, why nobody, including themselves, claims responsibility?

Idling creates a mosaic of reports, voices, scenes, images, and styles. He quotes newspapers, letters, memoirs of the Khmer Rouge functionaries, their ideological slogans and radio speeches. He even writes down his own dreams. Idling analyses meager reports of the witnesses who frequently claim poor memory or lapse into silence. Neither genocidal executioners nor their Swedish admirers feel like answering questions.

The writer purposely does not avoid ambiguity, even claims helplessness. The reader finds himself alone – confronted with the collected materials and questions left unanswered. The fragmented narration incorporates him into one of the worst nightmares of the late 20th century. It also portrays a writer who internalizes the Cambodian drama as his own cognitive and existential crisis.

Most emphatically, the story of the Swedish intellectuals who did not notice the Khmer Rouge genocide in Cambodia is not only a reportage. It is also a metaphor of the world where people are being tortured, countries are being invaded and destroyed, murders are being committed and yet there is always someone who can state that it only seems to be true for in reality, in a far distant land a new wonderful world is being born. In Idling's book it beams with Pol Pot's smile.

Włodzimierz Bolecki
Member of the Jury

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Peter Fröberg Idling
Pol Pot's Smile
Titre original : *Pol Pots leende*
Atlas, Stoccolma, 2006