

Candel, Kampot, Cambodia

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(Some impressions of the life and work of a member of the Canadian Delegation on the Fixed Inspection Team at Kampot, Cambodia, during the first year of its activities.)

A team was established in Kampot, on the south coast of Cambodia, on September 15, 1954, with a strength of seven: two Indian officers, two Canadian officers, two Polish officers and a Polish-English interpreter. During the first year the composition of the team varied from nine (an addition of an Indian (English-French) interpreter and a Polish-French interpreter) to only four (one officer from each country and a Polish-French interpreter). This group lived together in a large villa, ate their meals together there and had their headquarters there. The writer was a member of this team from the beginning until August 20, 1955.

During the early months the life was novel, the work new and interesting and the relationship between members grew from being formally polite to relaxed and informal associations. However, when such a small number of persons with vastly different backgrounds are together for work, for meals and for relaxation, relationships tend to become strained. This situation was aggravated by the climate: it rained nearly all day every day for the first month and then intermittently until early November. It wasn't a cool refreshing rain but a warm tropical one. It was difficult to dry laundry and the dampness permeated everything; clothes, bedding, etc. When the dry season arrived we had hot dry weather for seven months: the dryness was appreciated but not the heat. Then the rains started again.

Language Difficulties

Another factor which tended to separate the members of the team was language. It is very difficult to carry on detailed and interesting conversations through interpreters. Also, because we were together all the time, it was mutually agreed not to discuss politics or religion or any other topic that might bring to the surface deep-rooted prejudices. Thus, conversations were kept on a light plane and topics were soon exhausted. Because of the language and background, eventually the Poles tended to keep pretty much to themselves and the Indians and Canadians spent considerable time together. But, "familiarity breeds contempt", and therefore we soon found it better not to be too much in each others' company. When team members went to Phnom Penh for a few days each month they invariably went alone, so that they would spend their time in a different atmosphere and with different people.

A logical escape from this "desert island" was to seek companionship with the local inhabitants: French, Cambodian and Chinese. Here again the language problem arose. In Kampot only five persons, apart from the team members, had any knowledge of English. The answer to this, and the eventual inactivity of the team, was to learn French. Most officers on the teams in Cambodia managed to pick up a good working knowledge of that language.