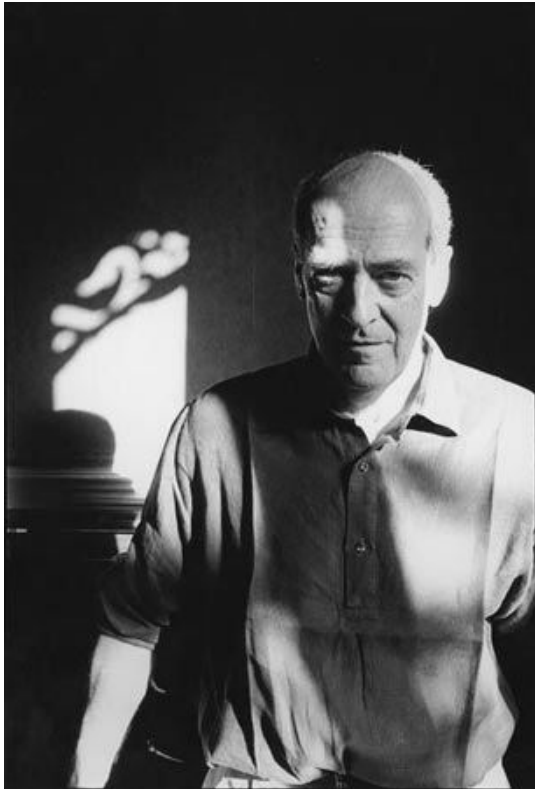


## Duch a "polite," "tireless worker," according to former prisoner

Written by  
Tuesday, 14 April 2009 04:00

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The day before Francois Bizot was released from M-13 prison, "Comrade Duch" allowed him to organize a farewell party for his co-detainees. The French scholar was granted leave to accompany one of the prison guards to his home village, where they purchased dozens of chickens. Later, the fowl was made into chicken soup, which Bizot ate along with his fellow inmates, who were still in restraints.

"French comrade, don't forget us, please," they pleaded with him. It must have been a surreal experience.

"It is on behalf of all those people that I would like to give testimony today," [Bizot told tribunal judges Wednesday](#), as he became the first witness to testify at Duch's trial. His story was fascinating, and stretched into Thursday morning's session.

It became clear as he spoke that he was still haunted by his encounter with Duch decades earlier, and remains conflicted about his feelings toward his former captor.

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Before becoming familiar with Duch, Bizot had been convinced, as many people are, that those who perpetrate inhumane acts against others must be "monsters," a "different species."

He came to realize was that the truth was "much more tragic, much more frightening," he told the court.

Once again, Hannah Arendt and her writings about [the "banality of evil"](#) come to mind.

Always a slight figure, Duch looked especially pathetic Wednesday next to the tall, robust Bizot. Although a couple years Duch's senior, Bizot, who is now a professor at the Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient, appears healthier and looks much younger.

Speaking in rapid French, Bizot explained how he and his two research assistants had been captured by Khmer Rouge forces in 1971. The young ethnologist was accused of working for the CIA and brought to M-13, the interrogation and detention center Duch oversaw before becoming head of S-21. (His two assistants were brought there as well, and later killed).

At that time, the camp consisted of three huts, which each housed around 40-50 prisoners, and was patrolled by guards Bizot described as "childish and perverse."

Duch, it appears, used his influence to grant Bizot certain privileges, such as daily baths and as much rice as he wanted during mealtimes. Duch interrogated the Frenchman personally and, according to Bizot, was always polite and never used violence against him.

Despite ill health -- Duch, like many at the camp, suffered from bouts of malaria -- Bizot described his captor as "a tireless worker," incredibly dedicated to the revolutionary cause.

He did not get the impression that Duch was a sadist, but rather someone zealously devoted to an ideology. Bizot said the revolutionary reminded him of many of his friends in France, passionate Marxists who, if anything, suffered from "a diabolical naiveté."

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Over time, it appears Bizot was able to convince Duch that he was, indeed, a scholar, and Duch lobbied for his release. Bizot said he was under the impression such decisions had to be made by someone above Duch.

The night before his release, Bizot was able to chat some with Duch as he warmed himself by an open fire. He was struck by how seemingly ordinary his captor appeared. The men discussed their families and Duch described how he had joined the revolution. He also told Bizot that he did not particularly like his job, but he was willing to take up any responsibilities delegated to him by *Angkar* -- even beating prisoners.

"I cannot rid myself of the idea that what Duch perpetrated could have been perpetrated by someone else," Bizot told the judges.

The "ambiguity in humanity" he observed in Duch -- the evils of which seemingly ordinary men are capable -- "causes my personal tragedy today," Bizot said.

Listening to his testimony made me wonder if Bizot might be somewhat affected by [Stockholm syndrome](#).

It is also certainly possible that, as a foreigner, he may have been shielded from some of the worst abuses at the camp.

Ouch Sorn, [who testified at the court after Bizot](#), painted a far more harrowing picture of life at M-13 -- prisoners detained in pits, shot and beaten with bamboo sticks. He also claimed to have seen Duch personally beat a woman until she was unconscious. How many of these different circumstances might be explained by the fact that Ouch was detained two years after Bizot, and that M-13 had moved to a new location, is unclear.

Unlike Bizot, he did not appear ambivalent about his former captor.

"The other nations love their own people," Ouch said. "But the Khmer people mistreat their own people. They are worse than animals."

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\* *Pictured: Francois Bizot in 2000. Photo by Francesco Gattoni.*