

## A life-saving talent

Written by

Tuesday, 30 June 2009 06:00

---



Tuol Sleng survivor Vann Nath [testified before the tribunal](#) today and, while he has told his story publicly many times before, it was a poignant moment in the court's development. Nath, who is in poor health, had expressed concern in the past that he may not live to see justice done.

Hopefully, the fact that he has now confronted his former captor in an international court will bring him some measure of closure.Â

"I never imagined that I would be able to sit in this courtroom today," he said. "This is my privilege; this is my honor."

He is one of only three people alive who were detained at Tuol Sleng. After being held in general captivity for around a month, Nath was selected for special duties because of his artistic abilities. His patriotic paintings of "Brother Number One" pleased Comrade Duch and the Tuol Sleng chief decided to "keep [Nath] for use," as was annotated on a list of detainees destined for execution.

Throughout his time at Tuol Sleng, Nath realized his survival was wholly dependent on his skill as a painter. He said he channeled all his energy and talent into trying to please *Angkar* and that Duch came to inspect his work nearly every day.

I find it interesting how often survivors of murderous regimes like the Khmer Rouge were simply lucky enough to have a skill considered useful in a particular time and place. At the suggestion of one of the blog's readers, I recently began *Into that Darkness*, the portrait of former Treblinka chief Franz Stangl, and happened upon a passage that fits with this theme. It tells the story of Stanislaw Szmajzner, a Jewish boy who survived the Sobibor camp because of his talent as a goldsmith:

## A life-saving talent

Written by

Tuesday, 30 June 2009 06:00

---

"I knew that work was the only security we had," he told author Gitta Sereny. "I worked day and night. The trick was to make oneself indispensable."

No doubt Nath, under guard in his workshop, had similar thoughts. At the same time, while he was feverishly painting tributes to Pol Pot, he was already planning how he would put his skills to use if the Khmer Rouge fell from power. He wanted to show the world how the detainees at Tuol Sleng had suffered.

Nath has done this, creating some of the images most associated with the Khmer Rouge period. They are [heartfelt and striking works](#). In truth, while his official court appearance may have been today, his paintings have testified to the horror of Tuol Sleng for decades.Â

\* *Pictured: Spectators watch Vann Nath testify at the tribunal Monday. Â*