

Harry Nicolaides

# The King & I

## Life in a Bangkok Prison

*The article was published in the 'Monthly' magazine in April 2009. Harry Nicolaides speaks about the unexpected turn in his life after he was arrested in Thailand for writing a book insulting their royal family.*

[part C']

In the weeks leading up to the King's 5 December birthday celebrations speculation circulated about a general amnesty. Many prisoners wrote letters home with news of their imminent release; others packed belongings into bags; some sold prized possessions such as handmade chess sets. Through the bars of our cells we could see the fireworks over Bangkok. Thai men love their King as the father of their nation; it is a genuine affection for a leader I have not found anywhere else in the world. We waited eagerly, Thai and foreigner alike, but - perhaps because of the political upheaval - no amnesty was announced.

There was very little to indicate that Christmas was approaching in Bangkok Remand Prison. The night itself passed like any other, unobserved but for a few foreign nationals shedding a tear. I received cards and parcels from friends and family, but this was still the most difficult period of my incarceration.

In my many comings and goings from my compound to the visitor's area at the front of the prison I had encountered Victor Bout, according to the CIA - though vigorously disputed by Victor - the world's leading arms dealer. Victor often passed on books he had finished with, including Henri Charriere's *Papillon*. He also counselled me when he saw I was in despair. He would observe wryly that in Russia he would be given more space in which to die than Thailand gave him to live. Victor, described in the media as the Merchant of Death, became a regular visitor to our compound, where he discussed how he was entrapped in Bangkok, arrested without a warrant, and held without trial or hearing. Thailand is a legal mousetrap, he would say.

There are eight compounds in Bangkok Remand Prison, with 500 prisoners in each. Next to us was a larger prison housing those sentenced to seven or more years. The

remand prison is, in principle, for un-sentenced prisoners, extradition and appeal cases, and those serving fewer than seven years. It is the Casablanca of prisons, albeit without the heroes or romantic intrigue of the film - unless you count the lady-boys. There is a thriving black market; there are corrupt officials, government loyalists and dissidents; and twice a day an old navy propeller airplane flies overhead.

The population is made up mostly of Thais, but there are small numbers of people from all over the world. Stories of false travel documents, multiple identities and fake credit cards are ubiquitous. I encountered political refugees from Sri Lanka with official UN travel papers requesting the host nation extend asylum to the bearer of the documents. There was a widespread tale of a man from Lichtenstein who was sent to the remand prison while his papers were authenticated. Thai officials had never heard of the tiny European principality.

Another man carried a genuine African passport but, because a large number of African nationals had been found with false travel documents, was nevertheless arrested and detained. He was travelling with his wife, whose travel papers bore identical stamps and dates to her husband's, and were accepted. The two were separated for a month before the Thai authorities realised their mistake. The man was released without apology or compensation.

Every month, 50 to 100 Burmese workers would arrive at the prison. These workers had been lured to Thailand by unscrupulous businessmen to work in the construction industry. When they had completed a month's work the employer, rather than pay up, would do them in as illegal immigrants; they would be arrested and marched into the prison, often still wearing tops bearing the name of the Thai construction company.

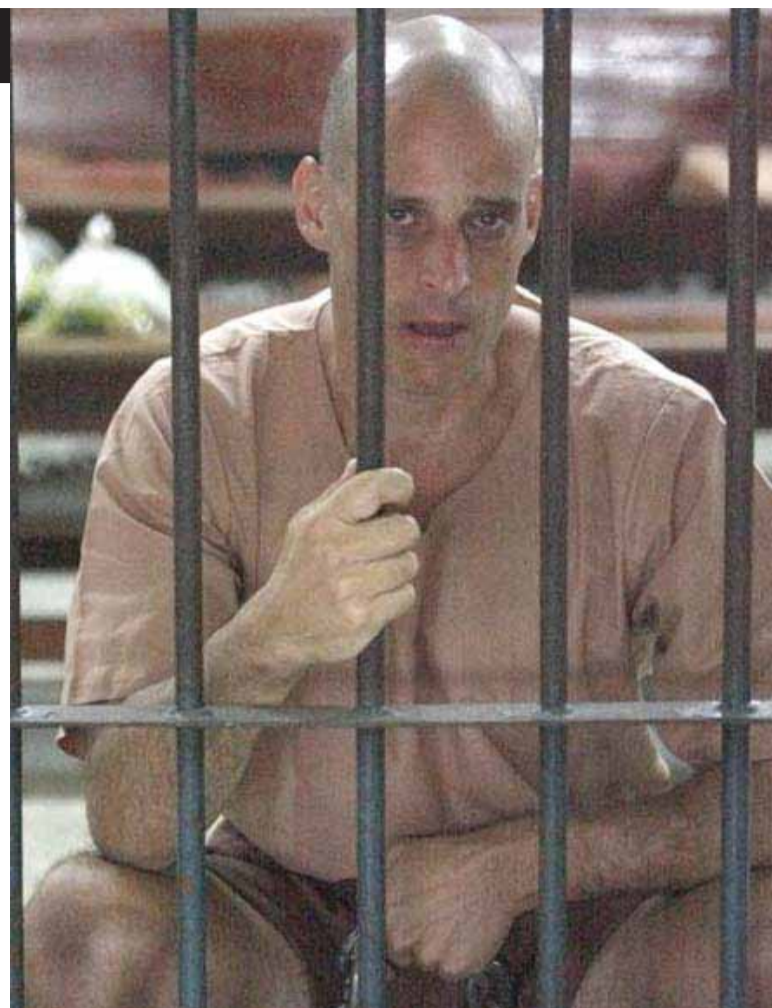
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Compound Six. Rumours had been circulating for a few weeks: the administration wanted to separate sentenced from non-sentenced prisoners - something it should always have done, in accordance with the United Nations' Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners. When 12- and 13-year-old Cambodian and Burmese refugees are forced to share a cell with sex offenders, it is clear there is little regard for international human rights.

Compound Six differed from Five in one important way: the guards were more enterprising, accepting weekly payments from wealthy foreign nationals awaiting extradition to the US, India and Australia. One British national controlled the library, refurbishing it with a private bookshelf lined with bestsellers, several large cupboards, exercise equipment and a small galley. In an echo of *The Italian Job*, he and his mates were called the Self-Preservation Society.

In the mornings I would often see cream spread, breakfast sausages, honey, butter, muesli, croissants and cheese laid out for certain prisoners on one of the tables. Payments were being made to the commodore's bank account by third parties outside the prison. The commodore's wife would do the shopping at a local supermarket and the commodore would smuggle in the contraband after hours. Meanwhile, other prisoners lined up endlessly to get hot water from a rusted pot, and could not get basic medicines.

Begging for food scraps was the only way some prisoners survived, and I became accustomed to seeing open hands and mouths about the compound. I liked to share my small half chickens but they were nevertheless the object of lustful stares, and often stolen. The office staff would call, "Come to the office and meet your chicken!" I could feel the covetous eyes of prisoners when I collected it. I ate chick-



en every day for six months.

Rivalries over food and possessions often led to violent fights. One squabble over an old T-shirt resulted in the exchange of a few punches between two similarly sized prisoners. Just when it looked like they would settle down, a trustee - privileged prisoner - intervened, triggering a brawl. The two Thai prisoners were taken to the library, where they were kicked and punched before being dragged to one of the workshops and beaten with heavy wooden truncheons. These reprisals were brutal, cowardly and entirely unnecessary.

In my cell was an artist doing time for murder. He was very skilful, rendering exquisitely detailed ink sketches of prison life that he would give me in exchange for cigarettes. His work was stunning, but I grew increasingly concerned about the translator I was using to communicate with the artist. The go-between was a well-known police informant and one of Thailand's largest false-passport merchants. From him the authorities had seized up to 26,000 fake passports, visas and other travel papers for use around the world - documents which, he claimed, Thai immigration officials are now selling on Bangkok's black market.

He kept insisting that I give him the drawings to smuggle out through a guard, but I had misgivings about being set up. I knew that if I was caught it might jeopardise my case, so I concealed them as best I could, hiding them in new envelopes.

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By the time my trial came

around, on 19 January, I had learnt to be detached and I was ready to face my fate. Once again, I was shackled and transported to court. This time a large media contingent was present, despite my expectation that it would be a closed hearing. The Thai authorities made no attempt to conceal the shackles. It seemed those who had set in train the case against me were not only aware of the likely condemnation of the use of chains, but anticipated international antipathy towards Thailand and its monarchy. The case was heard in the morning and the judgement delivered in the afternoon: six years reduced to three for pleading guilty. Now I had a sentence, which was preferable to the abyss of uncertainty.

I returned to the compound a celebrity. The inmates had viewed my case on television and were happy I had received only a small sentence compared with the 50-year terms some had been given for credit-card fraud. There were prisoners who suggested I would be out by the end of the year, as Australia has a prisoner-exchange treaty with Thailand whereby its citizens must serve only part of their sentences in a Thai prison before being repatriated to an Australian one. There was also some speculation that I would be released on the occasion of the Queen's or King's birthday, when it was expected a general amnesty would be declared. I learnt later that some prisoners resented my seeming good fortune.

*Continued in Tuesday's edition*