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Prisoner of the Word: A Memoir of the Vietnamese Reeducation Camps

Le Huu Tri
Black Heron Press (March 2001)
Unknown $25.95 (350pp)
978-0-930773-60-1

Huu Tri was a young lieutenant serving in the South Vietnamese army when Saigon fell to the North Vietnamese in 1975. As an employee of the "Old Government," he and others like him were viewed as a threat to the incoming communist regime. Consequently, he spent more than five years in what were euphemistically called "reeducation camps," but were actually work camps where thousands of men were forced to clear forests for agricultural purposes.

What Huu Tri believed would last a few weeks, stretched on for years. The prisoners were repeatedly told that they were on the brink of release, only to discover that they were being transferred to another camp. Hoping against hope, the author writes, "I knew that if I wanted to return home soon I would have to obey the camp rules and work hard. I decided I would participate wholeheartedly in all of my sections' activities. Everyone else seemed eager as well."

Meanwhile, as the title of the book suggests, the prisoners were all too eager to believe any bit of information—most notably rumors—that bolstered their confidence that there would be an end to the imprisonment. This enthusiasm made the prisoners easy prey to manipulative schemes designed by the cadre to instill obedience in their charges. Early release would be promised, then withdrawn for insignificant reasons; food rations were increased to lift morale, then decreased as a way of forcing the men to work faster and harder so as to receive more than the 200 grams of uncooked rice they were normally allotted.

Prisoner of the Word is not characteristic of the genre of memoirs that would seem to indulge the author in some cathartic and poetic reliving of past events. There is an emotional distance to this first person narrative, and the prose is spare and utilitarian, wanting only to tell the story and drawing little attention to itself as a creative form. While sometimes uninspired in its delivery, this book would be useful to students of the Vietnam War, and others interested in the often banal, but ever challenging aspects of labor camp life.

HOLLY WREN SPAULDING (May / June 2001)

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