

7. Cụ Minh Già

At the end of September 1945, when I returned from Tân Trào to Hà Nội with Lê Giản and was assigned to the Security Service Bureau in Northern Vietnam, “old Minh” — cụ Minh già — was already there. After the August Revolution, the Party placed him in Public Security because he had long experience being arrested by French intelligence and spending years in prison. He headed the Political Department (now Political Security) under the name Bùi Đức Minh.

The same age as my father, he had once been an elementary school teacher and the two knew each other well. In the days of Nguyễn Thái Học, he joined the Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng, left teaching, and went underground. He was arrested by the French in the early 1930s. While in prison, he was awakened to Communist ideals, left the Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng, and joined the Communist movement early on. Afterward he was arrested again several times, tortured harshly, and imprisoned, but he continued to stay away from his family to serve the revolution until victory.

Despite his age and experience, we still called him “Anh Minh” in those days. (Only later would people call someone of his age “Bác” or “Chú.”) Never conceited, he treated us younger officers as equals.

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One morning in late 1945, Hoàng Văn Hoan — whom I had met in Tân Trào — came to the Bureau. He looked for Lê Giản but did not find him, so he met me instead. As we walked along the upstairs corridor, he asked me to take him to see “Hách.” I said there was no one by that name. He insisted there was.

I asked Hoàng Mỹ, and he replied, “That’s old Minh — who else?”

After that meeting, the “Reorganized Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng” appeared (to counter Vũ Hồng Khanh’s faction). In the list of founders was the name of “old Minh.” From then on, the Quốc Dân Đảng — especially Vũ Hồng Khanh (whom Minh often called “giáo Giản”) — saw him as a sworn enemy. They ordered their men to find a way to assassinate him.

But every day, “old Minh” still walked calmly to the Bureau to work.

He enjoyed traditional opera (tuồng). Despite threats from the Quốc Dân Đảng, he sometimes went alone to the Quảng Lạc theater on Hàng Bạc street. He wore a dark silk tunic, a folded turban, and leather sandals with rounded toes, and carried no weapon. He told me that carrying a gun only caused trouble when meeting the Chinese Nationalist troops.

Once he invited me along. Only then did I see how skillfully he could disguise himself. I saw him every day, yet with only a small piece of beeswax in his mouth he changed his appearance so much that if I had met him on the street without knowing, I might not have recognized him.

Later, Trần Quốc Hoàn told me a story from the underground days. Once, Minh escorted Hoàng Văn Thụ to Vân Nam. They took the train toward Lào Cai and planned to jump off when it slowed at a bridge to avoid inspection at the main station. Each jumped off in turn.

A railway patrol soldier happened to see Thụ as soon as he touched the ground and held him. Seeing this, Minh hurried back to Hà Nội to report to the Central Committee.

Fortunately, Thụ later returned safely as well. He told us how he explained to the soldier that he was going to Lào Cai to do business, saw one guy got off the train, thought the train had reached a station, and jumped off by mistake. A few coins slipped into the soldier’s hand convinced him to let Thụ go.

The journey to Vân Nam had to be abandoned. As for Minh, it gave him quite a scare — for had Thủ been arrested, he would not have known how to explain to the Central Committee.

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In 1951, the Public Security sector issued rules prohibiting the use of torture. But right after the August Revolution in 1945, interrogation was still rough. However, Minh told the younger interrogators:

“You beat people with batons or crank electricity. It leaves marks and gives you a bad name. The method Lutz used on me was worse — and left no injuries.”

Lutz was a notorious French intelligence officer. According to Minh, his method was extremely difficult to endure yet left no trace.

One young officer volunteered to let Minh demonstrate.

Minh tied his elbows with rope, then lifted his arms to the glass door handle. Suspended so that only his toes touched the floor, he could not stand firmly.

Then Minh used two fingers and tickled his ribs. The officer burst out laughing uncontrollably, tears running down his face, his body curling with pain and laughter. After a short while, he begged to be let down, unable to bear the strain. There were no marks on his body.

Another time, we captured a Quốc Dân Đảng ringleader who was also named Minh. Our interrogators reported that he could not withstand electric shocks and fainted repeatedly. Old Minh said, “I’ve known him for years. He’s experienced. Let me make him reveal himself.”

They brought the man to Minh’s office. We watched. Minh attached a hand-crank generator and tied wires to the prisoner’s ears, hands, and feet. He turned the crank lightly; the man moaned. Suddenly Minh cranked hard. The man screamed and fell to the ground.

We were about to help him up when Minh let go of the generator and hopped around the table on one foot, laughing: “A! I got you! I got you!”

He ordered him taken back to the cell. We asked why. Still smiling, Minh explained: “I disconnected the wires before turning hard. He thought I was going to shock him, so he acted it out himself.”

Back in the day, we all admired his sharp and witty mind!

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During the national resistance against the French, Minh was appointed Director of Public Security for Zone X. At the annual national Public Security Conferences, he often hosted the meetings — sometimes in Tuyên Quang, sometimes in Phú Thọ. Colleagues told me many good stories about him.

At that time Việt Trì was not yet occupied. Vĩnh Yên and Phúc Yên were still free zones. Boats from Tuyên Quang to Việt Trì often traveled at night to avoid French aircraft. There were complaints about the Public Security checkpoint at the Việt Trì landing.

One rainy night, a boat arrived at the checkpoint. An officer stood in the station and told passengers to climb up and present their travel passes. People grumbled — in such rain, it would be easier if he came down to the boat.

A man on the boat called out: “Officer, please come to the boat and check our papers. If we all climb up, we’ll be soaked.”

The officer heard him, but shouted: “Which bastard said that? Come up here!”

The man who had spoken stood up — a stocky, middle-aged man in brown clothes and a nón lá. He stepped to the prow and said:

“Which bastard? Your Director said it. Your Director said it.”

Everyone stared in surprise. The quiet man who had chatted cheerfully earlier turned out to be the Director of Public Security.

Naturally, the young officer was later disciplined, and the checkpoint changed its ways.

After the Border Campaign victory, Minh was appointed Consul of Vietnam in Kunming, where many overseas Vietnamese lived, and where he himself had once worked underground.

After the liberation of Hà Nội, he returned to the Ministry of Public Security and served as Director of the Labor Reform Department, overseeing prison camps, until illness forced him to retire in 1960. He passed away a few years later.

All who lived and worked with “old Minh” respected and loved him deeply.

Hà Nội, September 20, 1996