The Hardships of Schoolteacher–Writer Nguyễn Công Hoan

Speaking of the difficulties the French colonial authorities caused my father, many people may only know the episode of his novel *Bước Đường Cùng ("The Dead End")* being banned in 1938.

In fact, the story cannot be understood correctly if one isolates it to that single incident. While he was teaching in Nam Định, my father was "punished" by the colonial administration and reassigned to teach in the village of Trà Cổ, Hải Ninh Province[1] that meant being sent "up-river" a second time —contrary to the civil–service rules of that era–the first time having been Lào Cai.

This happened before the banning of *Bước Đường Cùng*.

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In 1936, when the Popular Front[2] came to power in France and political prisoners in Việt Nam were granted amnesty, my father was teaching at Cửa Bắc School in the city of Nam Định.

Our family lived on Paul Doumer Street[3] facing Rồng Market. At that time my uncle Nguyễn Công Bông and my elder brother Nguyễn Tài Khoái were studying in Nam Định in the same class as Phạm Văn Cương (Nguyễn Cơ Thạch) and Phan Đình Đống (Mai Chí Thọ).

Thus I learned that Đống's elder brother, named Phan Đình Khải, a political prisoner from Côn Lôn[4] had just been released and was living right in Nam Định. Later, Khải took the name Lê Đức Thọ.

I saw Phan Đình Khải come to visit my father. But unlike other guests who usually sat in the living room, the two of them would each time carry chairs out to the balcony to talk.

Only later did I understand: it was so that Khải could watch whether any secret police were tailing him.

That connection with Phan Đình Khải at the time was one of the factors that led my father to write *Bước Đường Cùng*.

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Many have said that my father was "transferred" to Trà Cổ by the French because *Bước Đường Cùng* was banned. In truth, the decision to send him to Trà Cổ had already been made before he wrote *Bước Đường Cùng*. The deeper cause was that the French colonial authorities had begun to sense "a problem"—something they had just detected and deemed worthy of close attention.

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In the early 1930s, when I was only four or five, I sometimes heard the family mention my fourth uncle, who had left home and vanished.

Some said that back in our village he often shut himself in his room to study hypnosis. After he disappeared, an acquaintance in the village reported having glimpsed on a train to Sài Gòn someone who looked like him–but in a flash he was gone.

Only when Phan Đình Khải was released from prison and returned to Nam Định did he tell my father news of my fourth uncle.

Arrested in Sài Gòn, my uncle gave only the name Phạm Văn Khương, and said his family had all died. (Later I came to understand this name: my grandfather was Nguyễn Đạo Khang; Khương is

[1] Hải Ninh was an old province in northeastern Vietnam; today its area largely belongs to Quảng Ninh.
[2] The French government formed in 1936 under Léon Blum.
[3] Now Trần Hưng Đạo Street in Nam Định.
[4] Côn Lôn/Côn Lôn đảo: today Côn Đảo archipelago, used by the French as a penal colony.

how Khang is pronounced in the Southern accent—easy to remember and an expression of affection for his family.)

My uncle was sentenced to death by a colonial court for "communism and sedition." Like Phạm Hùng, though in a different case (the Nhà Bè affair).

Later, after denunciations in the book *Indochine SOS*[5] by the female communist journalist André Viollis, and intervention by the Red International, both Phạm Hùng and my uncle had their sentences commuted to life imprisonment, and were exiled to Côn Lôn.

Khải told us this that at Côn Lôn, when mail arrived, other inmates would cheer, "Ah! I've got a letter!" But my uncle–counted as having no surviving family–never received any. So once, just for a bit of fun, on mail day he suddenly cried out, "Ah! I don't have a letter!" Hearing only the shout, friends rushed over, thinking he'd finally heard from home, only to catch the punch line.

According to Khải, by that point it was no longer necessary to hide my uncle's identity, so he finally let our family know.

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Under the new policy of the French authorities, and with Khải's guidance, our family was thereafter able to send letters to my uncle. Using the name Phạm Văn Khương, my father noted his prisoner number and the outside holding jail associated with Côn Lôn on the underside of a stone frog used as a paperweight.

Also likely following Khải's advice, our family roasted bran and mixed it with molasses sending parcels to Côn Lôn many times to help prisoners suffering from beriberi[6].

Weeklies and monthlies could be sent, but daily newspapers were not allowed. Money could be sent as well, but the prison authorities held it in custody, disbursing it to inmates little by little.

Sometimes our family did receive letters from Côn Lôn. "Letters," in truth, were only a preprinted slip with a few blank lines, just enough for the prisoner to fill in the recipient's address, report on his health, and add a few words of greeting to the family.

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It was likely from that point that the French authorities realized that the prisoner whose death sentence had been commuted to life, known only by his own statement as Phạm Văn Khương with "no surviving family," was in fact the younger brother of the schoolteacher–writer Nguyễn Công Hoan.

His real name was Nguyễn Công Miều Later, after August 1945, he used the name Lê Văn Lương.

Which is to say that schoolteacher–writer Nguyễn Công Hoan had a younger brother, a "die-hard communist," then imprisoned on Côn Lôn.

What's more, former Côn Lôn political prisoner Phan Đình Khải, residing in the city of Nam Định, had visited our house many times.

And on top of that, schoolteacher–writer Nguyễn Công Hoan had just joined the French Socialist Party, Indochina branch, in Nam Định, and had attended the May 1 rally, the first to be held publicly at Hà Nội's Exhibition Grounds.

Therefore, this person must be watched, and handled with caution.

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[5] *Indochine SOS* (1935), reportage by French journalist André Viollis exposing brutal abuses in French Indochina.

[6] Beriberi: disease caused by Vitamin B1 deficiency.

In my view, the foregoing story was the true, underlying reason that the French colonial administration in Indochina resolved to "punish" my father—both in his life as a writer and as a teacher.

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Thus the French colonial authorities forcing my father to go "up-river" a second time—against the civil-service rules of the day—was not the end of it.

After a year in Trà Cổ, they "transferred" him again, this time to teach in the town of Thái Bình.

In his very first year there, French secret police searched our house and arrested him that same afternoon. They had found and seized a book, *Stalin, the Man of Steel*, which they claimed was banned. He was released pending trial so he could keep teaching in Thái Bình, but he was simply waiting for his day in court.

The French secret police expected the Native Court in Thái Bình to convene and sentence my father to prison.

Then something no one foresaw: back during the Popular Front period, guided by Phan Đình Khải, my father had joined the French Socialist Party, Indochina branch, in Nam Định. Several French schoolteachers there also belonged to the Socialist Party; they were "Socialist comrades" with my father.

They met him and learned that his birth was registered in Hà Nội. By law at the time, anyone born in Hà Nội could not be tried in the Native Court; he had to be tried by the French Court, which sat only in Hà Nội and Nam Định.

They then discovered that the "banned" book was merely a Trotskyist[7] publication attacking Stalin, and in fact was being sold openly in bookshops—therefore not a banned book at all.

They went directly to the presiding judge of the French Court in Nam Định to intervene. As a result, the French Court there declared my father not guilty.

The French secret police in Thái Bình suffered an unexpected defeat. But they never took their eyes off our family.

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After the August Revolution of 1945, my father was appointed Director of the Censorship Office for the North in Hà Nội, under the Ministry of Information and Communications, headed by Trần Huy Liệu.

He often joked that perhaps because under the French the censors had banned *Bước Đường Cùng* and given me such a hard time, now the superiors entrusted me with this post–so I could better empathize with fellow writers and journalists.

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Why my father, then teaching in Thái Bình, came up to Hà Nội to work right after the August Revolution–very few people knew. Nor did he consider it something to brag about.

Here is the story:

After the Japanese coup against the French on March 9, 1945, my father was still teaching in Thái Bình. He took part in the Việt Minh's open activities there. As the movement surged, the Japanese caught wind of it and began repression.

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[7] anti-Stalinist socialist current active in Indochina in the 1930s.

A few days earlier, a young man claiming to be an old student had come to visit, but my father couldn't recognize him. An acquaintance warned us he was Japanese secret police, sniffing around for an angle, so we should be careful. My father didn't care–only after he was arrested did he see the warning was true.

The Japanese arrested him in Thái Bình, then brought him to Hà Nội, and jailed him in the basement of the Shell oil company building on Gambetta Street (now Trần Hưng Đạo Street).

At that time in our family, some were still imprisoned, others had gone underground to work in the resistance. Only my mother remained at home, nearly driven mad with grief and fear, as threats pressed down on every side.

After August 19, 1945, the Japanese in Hà Nội had to hand over some detainees to the Revolutionary side; my father was among them. Thereafter he was assigned to the Censorship Office for the North, and he stayed on in Hà Nội from then on.

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This story was closely bound up with my elder brother, Nguyễn Tài Khoái.

The Second World War had broken out. The French colonial regime in Đông Dương tightened the screws on civil liberties— relaxed only briefly under the Popular Front in France.

At the end of the school year, my father was away in Hải Phòng, serving on an exam board.

One night someone shouted at our gate: "Mr. Hoan! The *Quan đốc* is calling!"[8] (meaning he had urgent business at night). When the gate opened, a jumble of French and Vietnamese secret police—dozens—poured in. As they pushed through they barked, "Where's Bông? Where's Khoái?" (my uncle and my brother).

They sat the two down on the spot, hands cuffed, then searched the house, ransacking everything–especially books and papers. After that they led the two away. Later we learned they were held at the French police office in Nam Định.

In this sweep my uncle Nguyễn Công Bông was sentenced to five years and exiled to Sơn La. My brother Nguyễn Tài Khoái was arrested the same year, but for lack of evidence and because he was still a minor, he was released and allowed to continue his studies.

Two years later, my brother was arrested again right in class, along with several schoolmates. This time the Thái Bình court sentenced him to two years. He appealed in Hà Nội, and the term was reduced to one year. After serving his sentence, he was put under house arrest with our family in the town of Thái Bình, required to report monthly to the French police office.

But even while under surveillance, he slipped away to work in the underground. Soon he was arrested a third time and received a five-year sentence, imprisoned at Hỏa Lò, Hà Nội[9].

Early in 1945, amid the ravages of the famine, a townsman brought word one day that my brother was being escorted from Hà Nội back to Thái Bình to stand trial once more. At noon, because the jail had not yet received prisoners, he waited in the courthouse yard. When our family arrived, the escorting guards allowed us to speak with him. We learned he had been brought back to Thái Bình for an additional trial, connected to another case that the secret police had not known about before.

Before the August Revolution of 1945, our home served as a contact point and meeting place for cadres of the Thái Bình Provincial Party Committee, who were still operating underground.

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[8] *Quan đốc/Đốc học*: district/provincial chief school inspector under the colonial system.

[9] Hỏa Lò Prison in Hà Nội, used by the French for political prisoners.

After March 9, 1945, my brother was released from jail in Thái Bình and joined the revolutionary mobilization right there in the town. After March 9, 1945, my father took part in the Việt Minh's open activities in Thái Bình, which is the context in which the Japanese arrested him.

As for my brother, when word came that the Japanese were about to arrest him again, he received an order to leave Thái Bình secretly for another location. Later, Lê Quang Đạo told me that at that time he and my brother were working together in Bắc Giang.

After the August Revolution of 1945, my brother Khoái served in Hải Phòng, Nam Định, and Thái Bình, then returned to Nam Định near the time of the Nationwide Resistance. While he was in Hải Phòng, there was a trip to Hà Nội for a meeting; that was the last time the two of us saw each other, before he passed away in mid-1947 in Nam Định.

My parents were heartbroken greiving for him.

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In 1948, I received a letter from my father sent from Việt Bắc[10], informing me that because of my brother's death, my father decided to join the Indochinese Communist Party.

Hà Nội, August 8, 1996
On the anniversary of the August Revolution.

[10] *Việt Bắc*: the northern resistance base area during the First Indochina War.