Return to The Root

Nguyễn Tài

My father Nguyễn Công Hoan, his children and students

Around 1930, I was still just a child. After graduating from the Hanoi College of Pedagogy, my father began his life as a schoolteacher—what we jokingly call "gõ đầu trẻ"[1]. His first post was at the Hải Dương town elementary school. Later he moved to Nam Sách district in the same province.

To mark the occasion, he even wrote a short story titled *GODAUTRE* in French style. A few years later, he wrote another story for children, *Tấm Lòng Vàng ("A Golden Heart").* Although written as fiction, it was in fact based on a true incident from those years in Nam Sách—an incident in which my parents themselves were directly involved.

According to the civil service regulations of that time, every government employee had to spend a few years working in the highlands. So after his years in Nam Sách, my father was assigned to Lào Cai, where he taught at the town school. My mother and the children, however, remained in Hải Dương.

Perhaps because he was lonely living by himself, for a time my father brought me up to Lào Cai. During the day, while he was teaching, I would play with Chồ, the son of the school handyman.

Our house stood next to the railway, with only a thin concrete fence. What I loved most was watching, every morning, a few men running alongside a small rail trolley. Once it gathered speed, they would leap onto it and ride a long stretch down the tracks. (Only later did I understand that they worked for the railway service, responsible for inspecting the line and reporting any damage in need of repair.)

When I was in Lào Cai, my father sometimes took me out with him. Years later, when I was grown and read the short stories he published in the column *Xã Hội Ba Đào Ký ("Turbulent Society")* of the journal An Nam, I recognized in them the scenes of the gambling houses in Cốc Lếu– places I had passed by as a child, though at the time I hadn't understood what they were.

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Around 1933, my father was transferred from Lào Cai to teach at the Kiêm Bị school of Kinh Môn district, Hải Dương province. Every Sunday he would return to Hải Dương town to be with the family, since Kinh Môn was only about twenty kilometers away.

When I was still a child living in Hải Dương, my father once took me back with him to Kinh Môn. My grandaunt Đúng, my grandmother's younger sister, also lived there, in a neighborhood along a hillside street lined with small shops. One day my father brought me to visit her by bicycle. Our house stood at the foot of the slope.

On the way back, as we rode downhill, the bicycle brake suddenly snapped. We went hurtling straight ahead and crashed into the wall of a house at the bottom. Both of us were thrown to the ground. I landed face down, unconscious, with my stomach slammed against a big stone, leaving a swollen lump. I was rushed to the district hospital, which stood on a hill near the school.

When I woke, I found myself still lying on the hospital table. My father, too, had been injured: the broken brake lever had cut into his thumb, bleeding heavily until they bandaged it.

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[1]Literally "knocking on children's heads," a Vietnamese slang.

A few years later, my mother and the children all moved to Kinh Môn to live with my father. Besides the three of us siblings, there were also Uncle Bông (later called Thành), Thụ (my cousin's son), and Các (my mother's younger cousin). All of us stayed together and went to the same district school in Kinh Môn.

The school had only three classrooms. The beginner class, for seven-year-olds, was taught by thầy[2] Khản in the last room. The next class up, the preparatory class for eight-year-olds, was taught by thầy Đản in the middle room. My father taught the three higher grades in the first room. I myself was placed in the preparatory class with thầy Đản, since I had missed the beginner class because of a bout of smallpox when I first started school. As a result, I struggled with my studies. Even so, at the end of the year I was promoted to the next level, Elementary, though I was still behind.

I was worst at mathematics and dreaded it most —who could have guessed that years later, by the time I reached middle school (what would now be high school), I would end up among the best in math!

When I sat for the Sơ học yếu lược exam—the certificate awarded after three years of primary school — my father was away, grading papers elsewhere. During the exam at the Kinh Môn school, I remember people gathering outside the classroom windows, opening their black umbrellas and writing out the solutions in chalk on the fabric for their children and nephews to copy inside.

The proctor in my room, a friend of my father's from another school, went even further: he wrote the full set of answers on a sheet of paper and quietly told me to copy it down onto my exam. That year, I ended up ranking first in the district on the Sơ học yếu lược exam. The whole family laughed about it.

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At the Kinh Môn school, there were many lively moments.

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One time, before we had moved there permanently, my father brought my elder brother and me to the school to play; we even sat in on a class. While we were sitting quietly, my father assigned my brother Tài Khoái (my elder brother, who later died in 1947) to learn by heart the poem *Vợ Chồng Người Bán Than Trên Núi (The Charcoal Sellers on the Mountain)* by Tản Đà. Near the end of class, my father called on Khoái to recite. He stood and delivered the whole poem flawlessly from memory — while many of the pupils, despite repeatedly studying it, still could not.

The school stood on the hillside. In the afternoons, after class, it was time for physical exercise: each group of students followed their thầy up to the hilltop, which was level enough for drills. During recess, or after the exercises, we often took leaves of wild pandan, big enough for several children to sit on, and slid down the grassy slope like a sled. At that time we did not yet know that in cold countries people had real snow sleds.

The hill was high and windy, perfect for flying kites. The only trouble came when a string snapped and we had to chase the kite across one hill to another— down a slope, up another, tiring work, though as children we thought only of the fun, never the effort. The real nuisance was the sharp burrs in the grass, which clung all over our clothes and took ages to pick off at home, making it impossible to hide from our parents.

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[2]Thầy: Vietnamese term for teacher, used with respect, similar to "master" or "sir."

At the foot of the school hill grew a tall silk-cotton tree, blazing red when in bloom. When the flowers withered and fell, they gave off a foul smell. Its fluffy white cotton, however, was waterproof; we tossed it from the hillside and watched it drift through the air, a delight for children. During recess, the older pupils often competed to hurl stones at the tree to see who could strike it.

In Kinh Môn town, there was at that time a half-French customs officer. He carried a hunting rifle on his shoulder as he patrolled for contraband alcohol, often passing by the school. One day, as he walked past, the older pupils were throwing stones at the silk-cotton tree. By chance, one stone missed and struck him instead. Furious, he tried to chase down the culprit. The students taunted him, shouting in broken French and Vietnamese, "Le Français porte le cái bắp cầy!"—"The Frenchman carries a corn cob!"— mocking his rifle by comparing it to a cob of corn, an insult that revealed their resentment toward the French.

This only enraged him further. He soon learned that the stone-thrower was Mạc Văn Chục, a pupil in my father's class. Chục's family lived far from the school, on the road to Phú Thái station, so he cycled back and forth every day. The officer lay in wait for him at a crossroads with his gun, intending to shoot. Poor Chục was so frightened he did not dare return home that evening. Only after my father intervened did the man give up his attempt at revenge.

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When I was a delegate for Hải Hưng province in the Eighth National Assembly, there was one time in 1990 when I returned to meet voters in Kim Môn district (Kim Thành district had by then been merged with Kinh Môn). As a child, I had thought the old three-room school on the hillside was enormous. On that visit, I saw only a small house still standing where the old school had been. I could not tell whether the original building had been torn down and rebuilt, or if that little house was in fact the very same school from 1933 or 1934. That day I asked around, but no one could give me an answer.

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In 1936, my father was transferred to teach in Nam Định city, at the Jules Ferry School—also known as the Cửa Bắc School. He taught the second-year secondary class. There were three such classes: one taught by Vũ Văn Ninh, whom the pupils called "Ninh the Hunchback"; one taught by Nguyễn Tảo, nicknamed "Tảo the Short"; and one by my father.

In our household there were, as before, several cousins and siblings studying together, just as we had in Kinh Môn. But unlike in the district town, Nam Định city had a cinema. My father set a rule: according to each child's monthly class ranking, whoever kept or improved their standing would earn a ticket to the movies; whoever slipped in rank would get no ticket. Looking back, it was a simple way of encouraging competition within the family.

One month, some of the cousins and brothers did not earn tickets. But that month the cinema was showing a Charlie Chaplin film—too good to miss. Knowing how fond my father was of me, everyone conspired and asked me to speak to him, to let all of us go see Chaplin this time. Those who had lost their ticket this month would promise, even if they won one the next month, not to go. My father agreed, and in the end everyone was happy.

One year, during the Easter school holiday, my father took my brother and me to visit the historic sites of Lê Lợi in Thanh Hóa. My brother, who had a gift for drawing, sketched many views of Lam Sơn in pencil. On the way back we stopped in Ninh Bình town to visit Non Nước Pagoda. There we saw the footprint of a mandarin, carved deep into the surface of a stone. My father told us the story of that footprint and cursed roundly the arrogance of the official who had it made.

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When I moved up from the first-year secondary class to the second year, I entered my father's class.

In those days, each school year had several rounds of exams. That day, the test was on memorized lessons. The name of every pupil in the class was written on a small slip of paper, folded into quarters. Whoever went up to recite would finish, then draw a slip and read aloud the name written on it. The student whose name was called would then step up to the board for their turn. Next, they would draw another slip with the title of a lesson written on it, and had to recite that lesson on the spot.

Schoolchildren, of course, are always mischievous.

That day, I don't recall exactly what encouragement from my friends led me to it. My real name was Nguyễn Tài Đông, but when it came time to write our names on those folded slips, I mischievously wrote it in reverse wordplay, turning it into "Đỗng Tài Nguyên." Then I tossed it in with the rest for the draw.

During class, the exam began. After a few pupils had recited, one drew a slip and called out: "Nguyên!" The whole class froze in confusion—there had never been anyone named Nguyên in our class. I, of course, knew at once. I stood up and started toward the board, giving a wink to the boy who had drawn the slip. But he didn't understand, and kept holding up the paper, calling again and again: "Nguyên! Nguyên!"

That drew my father's attention. He took the slip to have a look. By then I had reached the blackboard and drawn for my lesson. I launched straight into recitation, and the class, hearing me read smoothly from memory, was certain I would be marked highly, as had the others who recited well.

But when it came time to grade, my father gave me a big "egg"—a round zero. The reason: my prank of twisting my name into wordplay.

Hà Nội, June 26, 1996

A request to eat fish

Speaking of Sài Gòn, my mother often recalled one story.

In 1936 our family was living in Nam Định. My father was teaching at Cửa Bắc School (Jules Ferry), and also writing. His book *Kép Tư Bền* had sparked a lively literary debate at the time.

When the school had a three-month summer vacation, friends in the South invited him to visit. My father made a trip through the provinces of Central and Southern Vietnam. Wherever he went, he sent letters or photographs home.

Passing through Huế, he had to set aside nearly half a day to sign his books as keepsakes for readers there.

After visiting many provinces in Cochinchina[3] (as it was then called), my father went over to Cambodia–then called "Cao Miên"– to see an old friend, Đào Trọng Đủ. In his letters home from that leg of the trip, he wrote that after touring the palaces of Angkor, he went on an excursion to Koh Kong[4], a small island on the border of Cambodia and Siam. He also wrote ahead to say he would return to Nam Định by the express train from Saigon.

[3]Name used under French colonial administration for southern Vietnam.

[4]Cambodian island that used to belong to Thailand.

One day, the "wire-house"[5] delivered a telegram from my father: It gave the exact date he would arrive back in Nam Định, and—most unusually— asked my mother to have fish ready for him the day he returned.

My mother couldn't make sense of it. Had he gone so long without eating fish that he had to telegraph about it? Or was some friend from the South coming back with him who especially liked fish?

Still, knowing my father loved *Canh nấu dấm*[6], she went to Rồng Market in front of our house, bought a big fish, fried part of it, and with the rest made a delicious pot of sour soup.

By noon, my father knocked at the door. Before he even put down his luggage or washed his face, he asked: "Where's the fish?"

My mother was puzzled—no friends had come home with him. "What fish dish is this for?" she asked.

My father held out his hand. In it was a small bamboo cage, and inside, an adorable kitten.

"For this Siamese cat!" he said. "A genuine Siamese.[7] It was brought back from Koh Kong!"

The whole family burst out laughing, delighted by my father's playful, mischievous streak.

Hà Nội, August 23, 1996

Where are the *rươi*[8]?

Perhaps it's the same in any family: when the head of a household has a favorite dish, everyone else tends to pick up the habit—and the taste.

I don't know from which generation, but in our Nguyễn clan certain foods have been handed down from long ago to my father's time, and then to ours.

Every year the family must make *mắm tôm chua*[9] and *mắm rươi*[10].

"Sour, spicy, salty, astringent, with pork belly" pretty much sums up the prep for *mắm tôm chua*.

But *mắm rươi* is indescribable. Not to mention the making of the paste itself— you first have to buy the *rươi* in season: "the twentieth of the ninth month, the fifth of the tenth" on the lunar calendar each year. Nor are we even talking yet about eating it raw as relish, or steamed into a custard— and if you steam it, you must do it right. Just the fresh-herb platter alone already runs to many kinds: cabbage, mustard greens, celery, chrysanthemum greens[11], aromatic herbs, mandarin peel, slivered scallion, and ginger. Of course, you still need pork belly. Skip any of these and the flavor falls short.

From before the August Revolution[12] my father had already loved these two kinds of *mắm*. At ordinary meals he didn't drink, but whenever there was *mắm*, he insisted on a few cups of rice liquor.

On *mắm* days the family lingered at the table longer than usual, yet we always finished before my father. He took his time, and at the very end he would inevitably haul out the whole lot of colonial

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[5] Old Vietnamese phrase for the Post & Telegraph office.
[6] *Canh cá nấu dấm*: a Vietnamese fish soup with vinegar or souring agents.
[7] *Mèo Xiêm*: Siamese cat breed, historically associated with Siam (Thailand).
[8] *Rươi*: seasonal tidal ragworms used as a Northern Vietnamese delicacy.
[9] *Mắm tôm chua*: a Huế-style fermented shrimp relish, pleasantly sour, spicy, and aromatic.
[10] *Mắm rươi*: a fermented paste made from *rươi*.
[11] *Rau cải cúc* (also called *tần ô* or garland chrysanthemum/shungiku).
[12] The 1945 August Revolution in Vietnam.

officials–French and Vietnamese–and give them a thorough scolding to conclude the meal. By that sequence we could always tell whether his *mắm* meal was nearing its end.

Still, perhaps because the family didn't drink, it felt almost like eating alone; so he never seemed as happy as when close friends came to share the *mắm*.

Of course, with friends present there could be no end-of-meal tirade against the officials.

After 1954, now and then he would invite literary friends— Tú Mỡ, Nguyên Hồng, Tô Hoài, Nguyễn Huy Tưởng, Hoàng Trung Thông, and others—to the house to drink and eat *mắm*. Once, after the meal, they all lay down for a nap, woke refreshed, then said their goodbyes, each heading home. Truly, those were cheerful meals and drinks together.

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Back in Nam Định, around 1937, one afternoon my father told my mother: a friend from faraway Sài Gòn had just arrived and would join us for dinner. Asked if he could eat *mắm rươi*, the friend said yes; so serving our family's traditional dish would be just the thing.

With the late notice, my mother hurried to Rồng Market to buy provisions—assorted herbs and pork belly— so the *mắm rươi* could be ready in time to welcome the guest.

By dusk my father's Saigon friend arrived. They ate and drank for a little over an hour— the meal nearly done, it seemed.

Suddenly the whole house heard the Saigon friend call out loudly: "Where are the *rươi*?"

Everyone burst into smiles, though no one dared laugh aloud.

Because the *mắm rươi* was already on the tray. My father's friend from Sài Gòn had followed every step just as my father did: adding the condiments and *mắm rươi* properly to his bowl; and he had enjoyed the *mắm rươi* from start to finish.

And yet here he was asking, "Where are the *rươi*?"

It turned out he had thought *mắm rươi* meant there was still another dish yet to be served!

A hearty laugh was had by all.

Hà Nội, August 22, 1996

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[13] 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[14] 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.

[13]Hải Ninh was an old province in northeastern Vietnam; today its area largely belongs to Quảng Ninh.
[14]The French government formed in 1936 under Léon Blum.

Our family lived on Paul Doumer Street[15] 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[16] 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 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*[17] 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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[15] Now Trần Hưng Đạo Street in Nam Định.

[16] Côn Lôn/Côn Lôn đảo: today Côn Đảo archipelago, used by the French as a penal colony.

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

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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[18].

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.

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.

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

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[19] 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.

* * *

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.

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

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!"[20] (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[21].

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.

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.

* * *

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

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

In 1948, I received a letter from my father sent from Việt Bắc[22], 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.

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