Return to The Root

Nguyễn Tài

Preface

For a long time now, my friends have told me that I should record the stories of my life. I often replied that there was nothing out of ordinary. As for police matters, there are specialized agencies in charge of that. As for other matters worth mentioning, it wasn't yet the time to bring many of them up.

Yet, they kept urging me to write: even without any plan to publish, it could at least be for my family and loved ones.

On December 11, 1996, I had just crossed the "cổ lai hy" milestone–seventy years of age. So, at the start of 1997, I decided to compile this volume, *Back to the Roots*.

Back to the Roots is a collection of thirty short memoirs, arranged chronologically. They tell of my beloved family, the leaders who nurtured my growth, the friends who shared hardships with me, and the people across Vietnam who sheltered and helped me through the wars. Many have since passed on; to them I offer my deepest, most affectionate respect.

Spring of Đinh Sửu (1997)
Nguyễn Tài
(Tư Trọng)

1. 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

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

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

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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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

2. 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.

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

3. 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.

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[3] Name used under French colonial administration for southern Vietnam.
[4] Cambodian island that used to belong to Thailand.
[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.

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 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.

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[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.

Hà Nội, August 22, 1996

4. 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*.

* * *

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.

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.

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[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.

[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.

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.

* * *

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.

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

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

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.

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:

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

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.

* * *

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.

[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.

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.

* * *

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.

5. How I first met Uncle Hồ

At that time I was not yet nineteen.

In the Youth for *National Salvation unit of Hoàng Diệu Citadel*[23] (Hà Nội's pre–August Revolution codename), after the Japanese coup of March 9, 1945 I was admitted to the Indochinese Communist Party.

At dusk one evening, while I was engrossed in work with my comrades, Vũ Oanh came looking for me at my lodging—against the usual rules of secret communications.

He said it was urgent: at first light the next morning I was to set out for military training in the resistance base area.

He handed me a poll-tax card[24] and a tiny strip of rolling paper saying it was an introduction note. He then briefed me on the meeting place, what to bring, and how to respond on the road.

To be sent to train for fighting the Japanese— what joy could compare!

That night I only had time to hand my network over to another comrade, go to a safehouse to borrow an old brown peasant outfit, a *nón lá*[25], and gather a little money chipped in by the brothers. That was all I had for the journey to the base.

Guided by the couriers, our group of several dozen reached Vân village, where our side was in control day and night. Only then did we have the chance to meet as a group. The comrades chose An (later known as Lê Vinh Quốc) as leader in charge of liaison; I was assigned deputy leader, responsible for propaganda and mass work along the route. In the group were comrades who are still in the army today, such as Lê Ngọc Hiền.

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[22] *Việt Bắc*: the northern resistance base area during the First Indochina War.
[23] *Đoàn Thanh niên Cứu quốc thành Hoàng Diệu*
[24] colonial tax identification under the French
[25] Vietnamese traditional conical hat

We traveled by day, rested by night, slipping through forests and wading streams, until at last we reached Tân Trào. The courier told us to sit and rest under the banyan tree[26] and wait for senior cadre to arrive.

Seeing we had just come up from the lowlands, villagers gradually gathered to ask questions. I did as my assignment required.

As I was speaking, an elderly man—indigo shirt slung over one shoulder, indigo trousers rolled to the knee— came to listen, then put many questions for me to answer. I told of the famine below, of bodies along the roads that I myself had seen; I explained how the Japanese had kicked out the French yet continued to oppress and exploit our people; I spoke about the Việt Minh Front and its national salvation policies. He asked me: "What have you young people come here to do?" I answered that we had come for military training to drive out the Japanese and win independence for our people.

From that exchange, I remember his words exactly, such as: "Before the French came to seize our country, the people in the lowlands were enslaved first, those in the mountains after. Now it is independent up here first; in time the people down below will be independent too."

A representative from higher up came to meet us: an old felt cap on his head, a suit jacket of cloth dyed with black, trousers rolled to the knee, bare feet; most striking of all, a leather shoulder strap and a large pistol at his hip.

He introduced himself as Văn. He asked about our route, our health, warned us about malaria, and told us to wait a few days before beginning training. Among us were comrades who had lived in Hà Nội and recognized him as Võ Nguyên Giáp[27].

After the group meeting, Văn spoke privately with An and me, giving instructions. In that narrow conversation, we told him that some comrades knew his real name. Văn told us to remind anyone who knew to keep it secret.

From then on, every couple of days, the two of us would go to Mr. Tiến Sự's house to report our work to Văn.

On the first evening in Tân Trào, during our unit's nightly session reviewing the day's work, I relayed the old villager's remarks; we concluded among ourselves that in the base area the people's understanding was high— perhaps even higher than in the lowlands.

One day we went to cut palm leaves for roofing. I carried my bundle back first and was resting when a comrade hurried in, grabbed my arm, and whispered something strange: to shorten his path he had slipped behind Mr. Tiến Sự's house and had seen the very old man I had spoken to on our first day talking with Văn. He even overheard the man say: "You fellows are doing that in a very foolish way."

At the time we regarded Văn as the highest-ranking cadre there so this was very strange.

Let me also add: in my family many had long been active in the revolution; my uncle and my brother were in prison. So I had vaguely heard the name Nguyễn Ái Quốc[28], along with rumors that he had died of tuberculosis.

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[26] The famous Tân Trào banyan, a landmark of the Việt Minh base area in 1945.

[27] Võ Nguyên Giáp (1911–2013) was Vietnam's preeminent military commander and strategist—the architect of the 1954 Điện Biên Phủ victory over France and a key leader of the People's Army in the wars against the United States—later serving as defense minister and statesman.

[28] Alias of Hồ Chí Minh.

After hearing what was overheard at Mr. Tiến Sự's house, I spoke with An and insisted that only someone like Nguyễn Ái Quốc would dare speak that way to Văn. We agreed to find a way to test our hunch.

At our next regular session with Văn, just before leaving, we said there was a secret matter to report. He permitted it. I began: "About the old man…" The moment he heard that, Văn lifted a finger to his lips, signaling me to stop. Without answering, he told the two of us: "Let it be just between you two— don't spread it further."

He gave no confirmation— and yet it was as good as an answer.

My heart pounded. That night I lay awake, tears streaming. I thought of my uncle and brother still in prison.

I whispered to myself: if Cụ Nguyễn Ái Quốc has returned to the country, the revolution will surely triumph; the day I see my loved ones again is not far.

* * *

Later, recalling that scene, I understood that Bác was immersing himself among the people to grasp the real situation and gauge their understanding.

But I also tell myself: had I known, under that banyan, that he was the leader who founded the Party, the teacher of Việt Nam's revolution, I would never have dared to speak so boldly, while still so naive, in front of Him.

December 1994

6. Creating Newspaper in The War Zone

When the first course of the *Anti-Japanese Military Academy*[29] came to an end, Văn (Võ Nguyên Giáp) appointed me to take Lê Hiến Mai's place at the Liberated Zone's printing house since he was assigned to lead a troop back to Sơn Tây.

At that time, the newspaper *Nước Nam Mới* (*New Vietnam*), published by the Liberated Zone, had only put out a few issues.

According to Văn, the printing house was a secret location; once assigned there, one was not allowed to go anywhere else. Indeed, the printing house was deep in the forest; in Tân Trào, only one person knew its location, who led me there and then went back.

Hiến Mai introduced me to the three comrades who had already been working there, and explained to me the tasks of the newspaper as well as the printing work itself.

There was no printing machine as I had imagined; only two white stones, called *lithos*. The newspaper was printed on blue paper, each issue about one quarter the size of a modern daily sheet, and it had four pages in total.

The larger stone was big enough to print two pages at a time, while the smaller one could print only one page. Therefore, we had to write and print page 1 first; while that was being done, we wrote pages 2 and 3; at the same time, we had to smooth out page 1 again so that it could be used to write and print page 4.

Anyone who has worked with lithography knows that the stone must be polished flat, without any bumps or pits, and that the letters must be written in reverse, in black ink directly on the stone. Then one rubs lemon juice over it to make the letters stand out, rolls ink evenly across the surface,

[29]The Anti-Japanese Military Academy held the graduation ceremony for its first course on July 13, 1945.

and finally uses a roller to press the paper onto the stone, so the ink adheres to the page. If the roller is not applied evenly, the print comes out faint or missing letters.

At the printing house of *Nước Nam Mới*, the roller was nothing more than a short bamboo tube, half the width of a newspaper page, wrapped in a piece of bicycle inner tube, with a chopstick through its core so that both hands could hold and roll it from the ends.

I counted once–it took about a hundred rolls of that bamboo roller to finish printing a single page. From that alone, one can imagine how many times the roller had to be turned to complete all four pages of the newspaper, and how much effort it required each time the number of printed copies increased.

Văn told me that the movement was growing rapidly. In the past, the newspaper had come out only once in a while, each issue with just a few dozen copies. Now, he said, we had to shorten the time between issues, and each printing should reach several hundred copies.

There were only four of us. One person specialized in writing the reversed letters; the remaining three worked on polishing the stones and printing. We worked together day and night. The hardest part was printing at night. There were no oil lamps. We lit the place using rolls of banana leaves soaked in resin from the trám tree.

Those "candles" often exploded. When they burst and hit our hands or legs, they burned painfully. But worse still was when they hit the stone. If the sparks landed on a blank spot, it was not too bad—we could scrape it lightly and keep printing. But if they struck a line of text, even in just a few spots, sometimes we had to polish the entire stone smooth again and rewrite everything from the beginning.

Printing a newspaper back then was nothing like printing today. At a reunion of old Liberation Army comrades held in Thái Nguyên in 1992, as we reminisced about those days, Văn mentioned the newspaper *Nước Nam Mới*. According to him, he was the editor-in-chief at that time, and I was in charge of editing and printing. Back then, I never thought of myself as the editor of *Nước Nam Mới*. Still, in that role, I have a few unforgettable stories to tell.

Once, after finishing the printing of an issue, I brought it to Tân Trào to give to Văn for distribution. He handed me a drawing, but it bore the name of another newspaper — *Việt Nam Độc Lập*, clearly marked as the paper of the Cao Bằng base. This issue was made up only of drawings, titled "Rescuing an American Pilot," with about eight or ten illustrations.

They depicted an American airplane shot down by the Japanese, the pilot parachuting to safety, landing by chance in a Việt Minh base area, being rescued and cared for by the Việt Minh, and finally guided across the border to return to the Allied forces.

I asked Văn, we were making *Nước Nam Mới*; why were we now printing *Việt Nam Độc Lập* from Cao Bằng? Văn only said that it was urgent; we needed just a few dozen copies, and they had to be delivered right away.

I returned to the printing place, and we agreed to print this issue as quickly as possible. None of us could draw, and I myself had no artistic skill, so we had to copy from the original sketches, drawing and writing the reversed letters by hand. Within just a few days, it was done. I immediately brought the printed copies to Tân Trào and handed them to Văn. He praised me for finishing the printing in time to send the papers abroad.

At that time, we had already built a small airfield, and it so happened that an Allied plane was landing. This event showed that the Việt Minh had a strong base and forces, and that we were cooperating with the Allies.

We were all deeply encouraged by the success of this work.

But a few days later, I received a few verses — some praising, some teasing. They said, in essence: "The Việt Minh base must have been so harsh that the American pilot, tall when he parachuted down, had become short by the time he reached the border."

I compared the printed copy with the original drawing, and indeed, because I hadn't paid close attention while sketching, the American pilot in the later panels appeared shorter than the Việt Minh guide.

As I mentioned earlier, we had to print the pages one by one — first page 1, then pages 2 and 3 together, and finally page 4. That created many difficulties in arranging and printing the articles on the two lithographic stones of different sizes. When an article was too long to fit on the front page and had to continue on the next, it was always a headache for me.

Once, even the following page didn't have enough room (since we didn't have typefaces of varying sizes like today), so I had no choice but to cut out a few sentences to make everything fit.

Unexpectedly, one day I received an article submitted for publication. It told the story of a propaganda officer who spoke with great passion and eloquence, but when someone later asked the villagers what he had said, they replied that they had no idea what his talk was about.

The article ended with a few lines that I still remember to this day: "Hundred bows, thousand bows to our comrades in propaganda — when you speak, please make it so the people can understand. And as for our comrades in journalism — please stop cutting off the beginnings and endings of articles, leaving readers unable to grasp the full meaning."

At that time, to be honest, I wasn't very pleased with that piece, but Văn had instructed that it must be printed, so I went ahead and published it in full.

Later, when I met Văn, I complained to him about it. He only laughed and said, "If they're right, we should accept it and learn from it." Then he quietly revealed to me that the drawing for "Rescuing an American Pilot," as well as the article criticizing propaganda and journalism, were both written by "Ông Ké" — that is, Uncle Hồ himself.

I once mentioned how I had secretly come to know who "Ông Ké" really was. So when I heard that, though I still felt a bit resentful, I could find nothing more to say. After all, it was something from when I was nineteen.

Years later, when I read Uncle Hồ's book *Sửa đổi lề lối làm việc (Rectifying the Working Style)* I finally understood its full meaning.

Once, when I visited the Revolutionary Museum and saw that they still kept a few issues of *Nước Nam Mới*, I suddenly felt deeply moved, remembering Uncle Hồ's words of advice sent to me long ago, when I was making the newspaper in the resistance base of Tân Trào.

September, 1994