

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*¹ (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 card² 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*³, 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.

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 tree⁴ 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.

¹Đoàn Thanh niên Cứu quốc thành Hoàng Diệu

²colonial tax identification under the French

³Vietnamese traditional conical hat

⁴The famous Tân Trào banyan, a landmark of the Việt Minh base area in 1945.

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 Giáp⁵.

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 Quốc⁶, along with rumors that he had died of tuberculosis.

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.

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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.

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⁵ 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.

⁶ Alias of Hồ Chí Minh.