

VIETNAM 1975

RED HELL MY LOVE

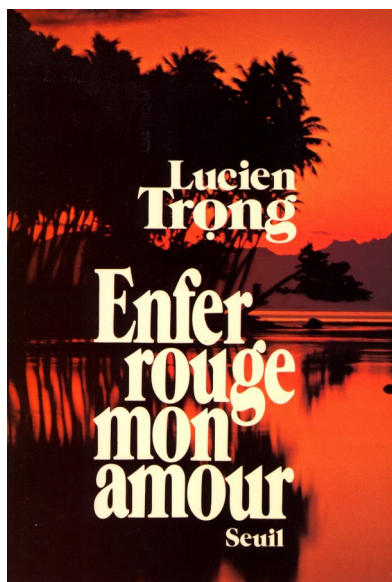


illustrated camp journal

LUCIEN TRONG

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RED HELL, MY LOVE



English translation of « Enfer rouge Mon amour »
edited in 1980 by

ÉDITIONS DU SEUIL

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PREFACE FOR THE SECOND EDITION

VIETNAM 1975 RED HELL MY LOVE

The first edition of "**Enfer rouge, mon amour**" published in 1980 by Editions du Seuil, was written when the author arrived in France.

With agreement* the Trilingual journal can be download on our website:
<https://www.vietnamredhellmylove.rd-h.com/>

(Vietnamese version "**Hoa nguc do môi tình tôi**" has been viewed around 800,000 times)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zamBr6-1rS4>

To commemorate the 50th anniversary of the "Liberation/Invasion" of Saigon by Communist forces, a 2nd version titled "**Vietnam 1975, enfer rouge mon amour**" has been written with Sketches drawn by the author, and some added details,

As well as a trilingual Music Graphic narrative: **Vietnam gulag**
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1BofxduzhY0>

This is the English version of the reviewed book.

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April 30th 1975. Lucien Trọng, then a twenty-eight-year-old teaching assistant at the University of Saigon, attempted to escape from Vietnam. Captured at the dock, he spent the next three years in a reeducation camp in the Mekong Delta. In late 1978, he was released and returned to Saigon. He escaped for good in May 1979 and now resides in Paris. His fascinating somewhat tremulous memoir combines two narrative strands....The first consists of life in the camp and the second relates a relationship with a fellow prisoner. What lifts it from banality is that it really happened, and the book itself is the price Trong has paid for suffering and growing up.

Moreover, his description of the camp is fair-minded and detailed, bringing much into focus. People quick to dismiss the book would probably include those who compares societies to omelettes, and people like Trong and Ly to the necessarily broken eggs. One of the many virtues of *Enfer Rouge, Mon Amour* is that it speaks from the ground, about many living people, using the voice of badly bruised, but still unbroken Vietnamese.

David P. CHANDLER *Monash University, Australia* (Pacific Affairs)

South Vietnam. In June of 1975, the new regime ordered hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese to report to authorities for "re-education". Re-education as it has been implemented in Vietnam is both a means of revenge and a sophisticated technique of repression and indoctrination which developed for several years in the North and extended to the South following the 1975 Communist takeover...

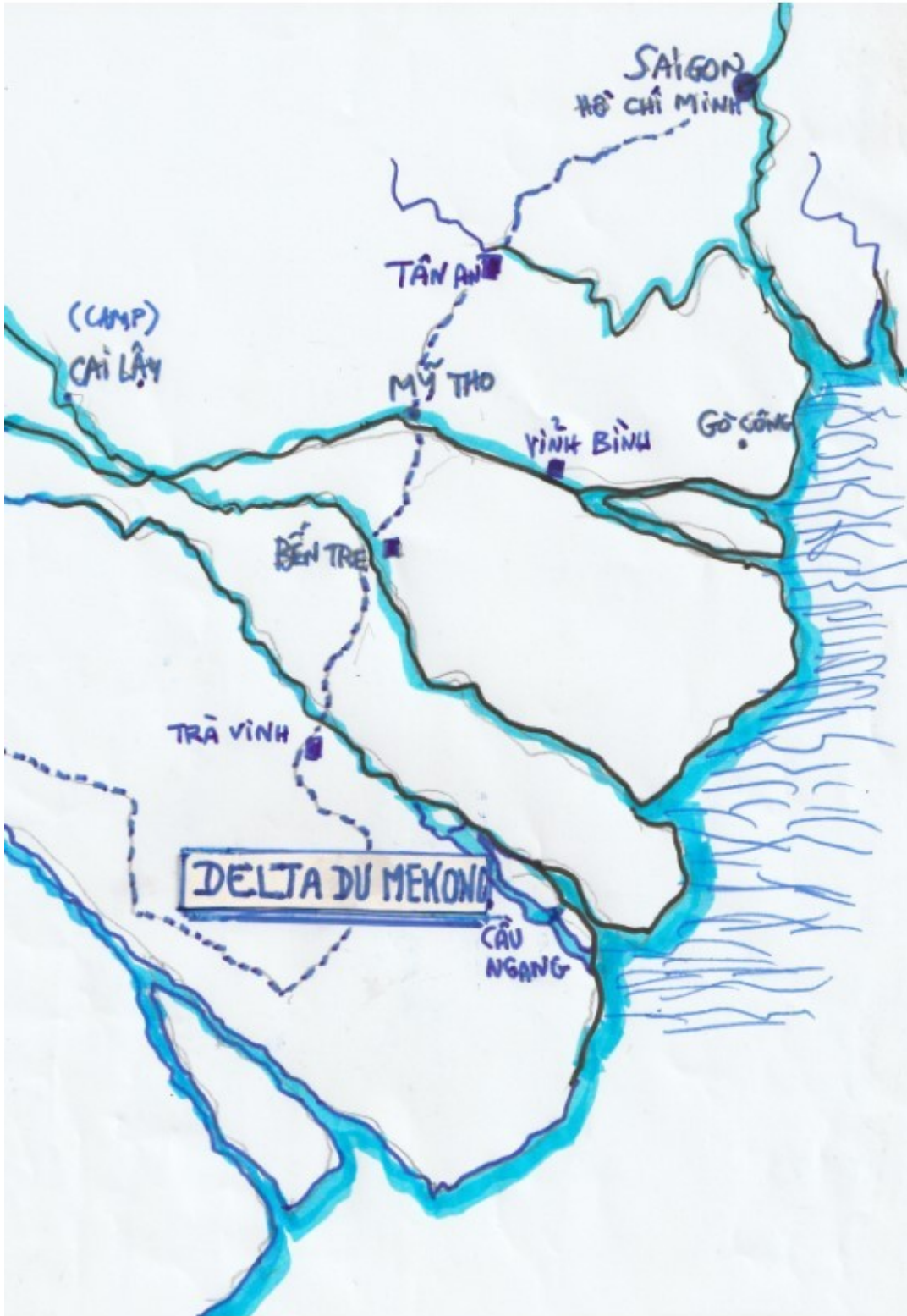
Amnesty International had appealed to Hanoi about the case of nearly 400 writers, poets and journalists and over 2,000 religious leaders, including Buddhist, Catholic and Protestant priests...

**REEDUCATION IN UNLIBERATED VIETNAM:
LONELINESS, SUFFERING AND DEATH**

(Ginetta Sagan - Stephen Denney)

To my fellow prisoners

Mỹ Phước Tây Camp - Cai Lậy
South Vietnam



FOREWORDS

It's sad to lose a friend. Not everyone has a friend. And it's even sadder to lose your nation, from now on we are nothing but wandering souls, stateless people.

What you're about to read is not a novel, it is a part of my life. And if sometimes the events follow one another out of order, it's because I am afraid of forgetting. Testifying becomes an obligation for me, even if it may seem unnecessary. It's not about shouting my hatred. After much suffering, only regrets remain in me.

The deceased, the living of this Red Hell, please come to me and help me write this book.

Lucien Trong
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THANKS FRANCE AND MALAYSIA
FOR SHELTER AND DEMOCRACY

(I would like to apologize for my mistakes in English...)

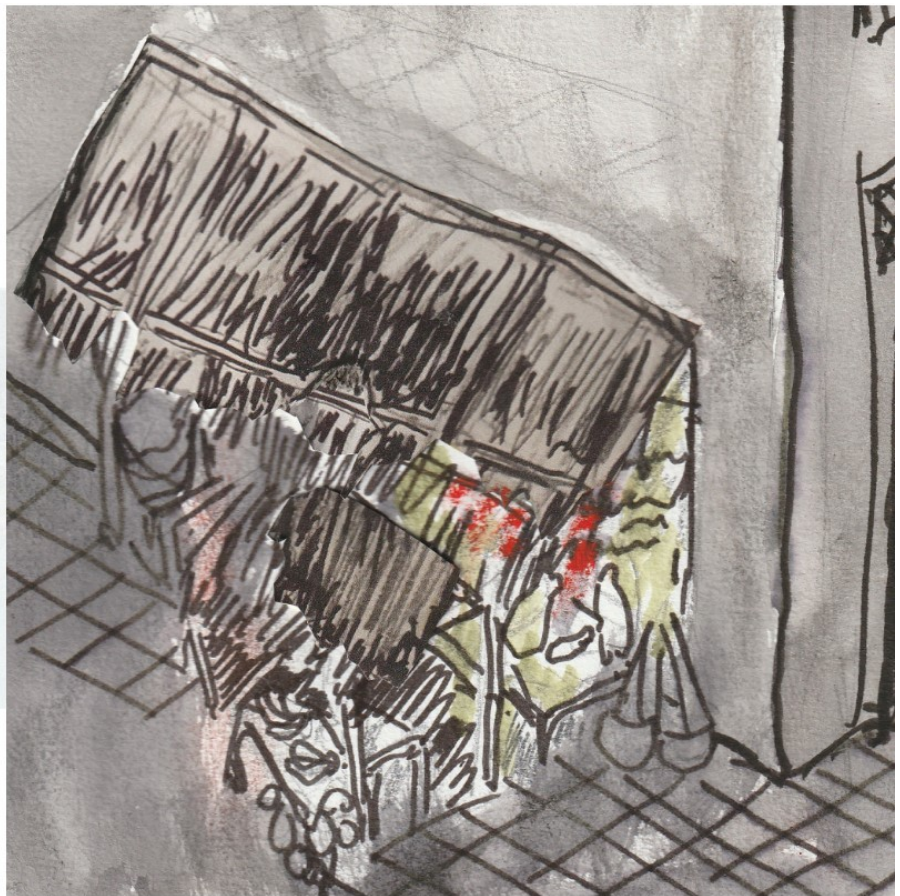


1

I was born during the war in a shelter, my mother told me. Not far from the ruins and smoky devastation of my village. The first Indochina war had broken out a few months earlier in 1947 with the uprising of the Viet Minh, a communist army led by Hồ Chí Minh, and the bombardment of Hai Phong port by the French fleet. My father was then an engineer at Citroen, an automobile company in Saigon. The imminence of my birth and the insecurity that reigned in Saigon worried my father. He decided to stay in town and sent my pregnant mother and their two kids to her parents in Bê n Tré in the Mekong Delta. My grandfather was a peasant who through his work, became a land-owner and Tri Huyện hàm, honorary title of “notability” of the district. When the war hit the delta, my grandfather's house considered one of the targets was burned down by Viet Minh a few days before I was born. Several members of my family were injured, including my grandfather who died shortly after.

Having no shelter, escorted by two peasant daughters who were our baby-sitters, my mother took the pass of exodus with the children. She hoped to return to Saigon. Along the way, I was born before the date. My mother wrapped the tiny baby in towels and tried to move away from the smoky devastation of the village, among the crackles of machine guns. She couldn't go very far then. The Viet Minh most effective weapon was sabotage. They sabotaged the roads, blew up the bridges. We were stuck in My Tho, not far from Bê n Tré, where we lived with nothing other than a few light luggage. The two maids Cuc and Dong were about sixteen or seventeen years old. To feed the three kids, they had to sell coconuts or whatever they could.

From the first day in My-Tho we were taken in by an old lady living alone, in her straw hut shop, selling cheap tobaccos. Without her compassion what could my mother do with her children? Bà Ba took pity on the newborn. Stuck, we had to struggle to survive. My weak mother was often ill after my early birth. Our survival was due to Dong the resourceful and shy Cuc, daughters of farmers living on Grandfather's lands. One day, my three-year-old brother died after a short illness and then another misfortune happened to us...



Native of Tan An, not very far from Bê n Tré, my father had studied in France, even though his family could barely afford it. My paternal grandfather was a kind of local healer with medicinal herbs. He performed in a sampan, going from village to hamlet to treat poor peasants, most of the time for free.

On his way, he met my grandmother a girl from a “good family” who packed up and joined him in his floating life. My grandfather was probably a good doctor, since a wealthy patient wanted to repay his gratitude by offering my father, then a smart school boy, a third-class ticket on a ship

from Saigon to Paris.

One day, my grandfather adopted a boy he had saved with his medical gift. Uncle Sanh, who later joined the opposing camp like many members of his biological family who were Viet Minh. In Vietnam at that time, it happened that in the same family, brothers could be on both sides. If my father had not gone to study abroad and instead stayed in his hometown infiltrated by revolutionary members, would he have joined the Viet Minh like Uncle Sanh?

My mother too had a sister, Aunt Di who was a Viet Minh sympathizer since she was married to a school teacher, who was a communist member. We will see later how our family fate was involved with Aunt Di and Uncle Sanh.

French Indochina was an economic colony, a federation of the three parts of Vietnam as well as Cambodia and Laos. It was formed shortly after French troops landed in Vietnam in 1858.

Vietnamese rebellions broke out a few years later. Nationalism intensified during World War I. In 1930 the Vietnamese Nationalist Party (Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng) sponsored an uprising by Vietnamese soldiers of the French colonial Army. Without support, all uprisings failed.

During World War II, France weakened, giving way to Japan for a short period. Ultimately France was defeated at the battle of Diên Biên Phu. France and Vietnam had tied up from then on a complicated relationship of love-hatred, albeit with a lot of complicity.

Following the Geneva Accord of 1954, the Việt Minh (also called Viet Công, Công for Communist) became the government of North Việt Nam, while free South Vietnam was allied with the Americans. The Viet Công used the legacy of the Nationalist Party to liberate the country from colonialism, but in reality they were subordinate to Moscow and Peking. Later, after victory, the Nationalists would be bitterly disappointed and quickly cast aside, or even simply eliminated !

Born prematurely and in such conditions, I was a sickly baby. One night, I was struck by epilepsy. Terrified, my mother, escorted by Dong, one of the girls, decided to take me to the healer across the river, despite the curfew. They smeared their faces and clothes with mud to make themselves ugly and avoid the outrage of the soldiers, French and north African colonies.

After a few barriers, passing the bridge with some exposed Viet Minh corpses, the soldiers stopped them. They finally let my pale mother and her skinny baby go but kept the young girl: Dong came back home the next day, bruised, changed. My mother had to sell her last black silk tunic to nurse her.



No one believed in the survival of the wrinkled monkey that I was becoming under the influence of illness and malnutrition. But, it was my brother who died very quickly from diarrhea.

My mother was not able to register my birth, or his death. As soon as military conditions permitted, we returned to Saigon while the war continued.

Dong gave birth to a mixed race baby, left us and worked in a bar. We heard several years later that she left Vietnam for the United States with an American officer. If I talk a lot about my babysitter, it's because she represented for me the destiny of Vietnam: a generous being, who passed from one hand to another, for whom the only possible freedom was exile, but who would never forget.

In Saigon city, our life despite the war, was quite comfortable. But as their marriage was arranged according to traditions, my parents didn't get along well. Married at nineteen to a young, brilliant but unfaithful husband, my fragile mother suffered a lot.

According to Confucius, women are subordinate to men throughout their lives. A good excuse for my father to go out without her. My mother remained silent, but she became like a fading flower.

I remember a scene that marked my young mind for life. Pretending to go out with friends, my father often came home very late at night. After about ten years of marriage, my mother could feel that my father was then involved in a more serious relationship. One evening, she decided to follow his car by renting a rickshaw.

Family conflicts



She was then accompanied by her bodyguard who happened to be me, a thin boy of seven years old. My nine year old sister stayed at home with Cuc, her babysitter.

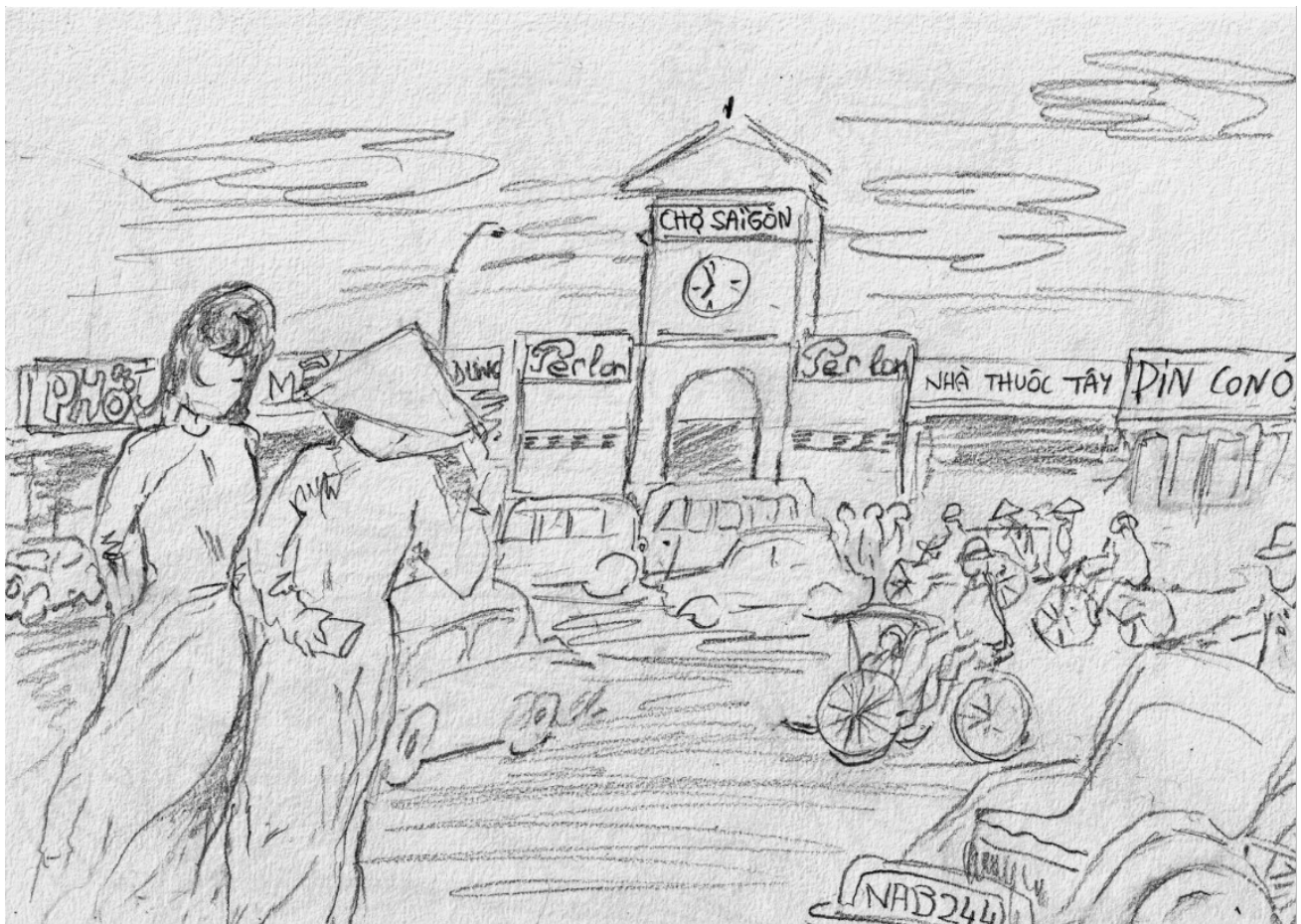
When my mother saw my father's car in front of an apartment she almost fainted. The driver took us back home in a hurry. Later that night my father came back, possibly drunk. For the first time, my mother complained about dining late and keeping the children waiting. She didn't finish that my father took a chair and with that chair broke most of the furniture. I still have in mind the image of my frightened mother protecting my sister. I grabbed my father's waist. He dragged me around but I resisted. I was small but very tough. I did not let him go until he stopped

smashing. To tell the truth, he did not mean to hurt us, just hit the closets. But in my head at that moment, I decided never to start such a family. Or not having a family at all.

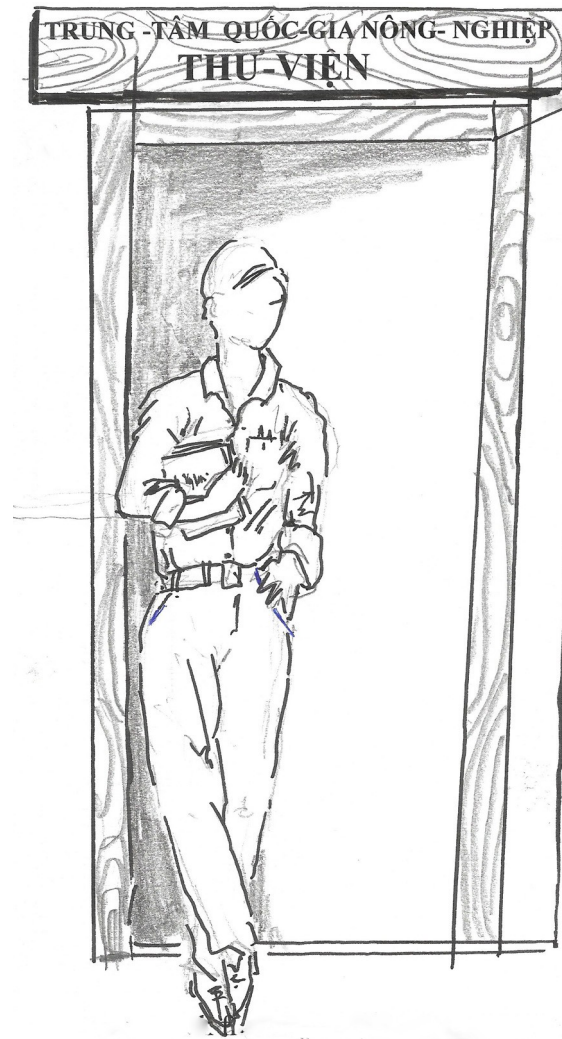
So I grew up in the middle of a national drama coupled with family conflicts. But I couldn't reconcile anyone. And the war continued, much more in the provinces than in Saigon. Even though my parents were Buddhists, my father who took good care of our education, sent me to a Christian school named Taberd, a famous and puritanical school run by priests. I could study French and catechism there. Religious education simply made me ashamed of everything that preoccupied a teenager.

Nevertheless I appreciated the colonial-style buildings, the century-old flamboyant trees in the central courtyard, and the outline of the black soutane of the priests in the long calm corridors, and above all a teacher who inspired me with great admiration. Frère Désiré was the principal. After obtaining my Baccalaureate and before my departure for France, the last time I saw him, he said to me: "Now that you are about to enter adult life, remember one word in all circumstances: «Oser». Dare to do what you decide to do."

At the time, the current government was Ngô Đình Diêm, who gave us back the pride of being Vietnamese. Saigon was at that time a calm and prosperous city. Unfortunately, this honest and talented man was badly advised by his family, notably by his sister-in-law, the brilliant and beautiful Mrs Ngô Đình Nhu. I heard that President Ngô Đình Diêm and his brother were assassinated in 1963 while I was in France. Shortly after, President Kennedy was shot dead. It seemed that Mrs Ngô Đình Nhu quickly sent message of sympathy to Jacqueline Kennedy. May be to remind her that "everyone has their turn"! So we realize that no one is perfect. And politics were not trustworthy at all!



After finishing high school, my father managed to send me to France to study forestry. Most of the time secretive and solitary at boarding school, I didn't know much about Paris the “Luminous City”. I spent some time at Oxford University Library completing my botany papers, and after graduating I returned to Vietnam. In 1970, I was appointed Assistant at the Agricultural Center of the University of Saigon, after a short training course in «Library science» in Florida. I found the United States a fantastic country, where anything could happen. But everything was so huge, the city too large. If you didn't have a car, you stayed home. I found Paris much more “on a human scale”. But Americans could be very familiar with you very quickly and call you by your nickname.



I completed my six-month military internship at Thu Duc, obtaining the rank of second Lieutenant. Hard time but useful. Instead of joining a fighting battalion, and may be quickly injured, I could return to University, a favor for the Educational civil servant. At that time, war intensified, and most of the friends I had made during training were quickly sent to the front. Few of them came back safe or without being wounded. Thank you my friends, the anonymous soldiers who sacrificed their youth, their life to defend this country. Thank you to the young Americans who died for freedom and for this beloved land. If I were not a civil servant at the ministry of Education, I too would be a victim of the war: this war that the French called the dirty war? The Americans thought so too. To me all wars are dirty, whatever the reason.

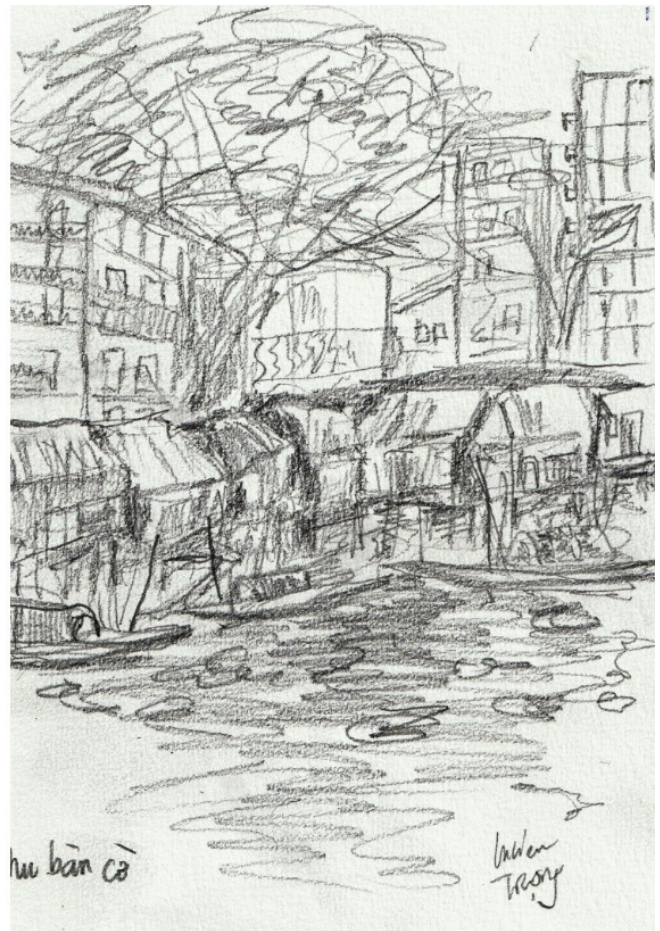
My sister Lan became very beautiful and “fashionable”. She used to wear her hair brushed up like Brigitte Bardot and her eyeliner like Elizabeth Taylor. She looked particularly sumptuous in her high-necked red Vietnamese Ao dài dress. Her elegant figure was noticed by a high-ranking officer during a party given by the playboy vice president, pilot Nguyễn Cao Kỳ. Hâu invited her to dance and tried to get her address. Recently widowed, Hâu was not that young, though he was a good officer: he wore several medals on his military shirt. Shortly after that day, Hâu brought to my parents gifts and asked for her hand (and everything else).



I just returned from France to attend the wedding. Lan followed her husband to where he was assigned. But my parents didn't get much closer! Neither did my father and I. Lan and I were quite close. When we were kids, we used to play theater with our young baby sitters, using sheets and curtains and our mother's make up. The stage was a large wooden bench twice of a regular bed. We used to hide under this thick wooden bed to avoid bombings, so many times. We had wonderful souvenirs; with laughter and tears. When Lan left home, the house seemed empty. My only refuge was reading and painting. Most of my relationships went nowhere.

Why always return to Vietnam? When I could stay in Paris or Manila or the United States, find a job and have an easy life? Because I loved my country, my family and above all because I loved Saigon? Because I hadn't met anyone who could tie me down? At that time, most Vietnamese students joined the Vietnamese Patriot Students Association. During part of my short stay in Paris, I met a Vietnamese student who had been in France several years before me. I supposed he belonged to this Association. A few weeks before I returned to Vietnam, seeing that I was alone, his Vietnamese girl friend introduced to me to her friend, a sweet and shy girl from Huê, the imperial city in Central Vietnam. This kind person didn't seem indifferent to me. But was it because of my imminent departure or something else, my attitude of running away? I didn't postpone my trip. Was it my destiny? Otherwise, would I become a member of this Association sympathizing with Communism? If I did stay... I remember a French saying, «Avec des si, on met la Tour Eiffel en bouteille» (with many ifs, the Eiffel tower could be put in a bottle)! For me one thing was certain, I was tied to Saigon.

In fact a symbol of South Vietnam, Saigon "made-with" the war, and with simplicity bore the traces of the past occupations: China town, Champa temples, colonial houses, pink brick Church, long shaded avenues. In the stores, good wines, thousand-year-old eggs, cheese, fish sauce and Coca Cola. The buildings sit next to small, low, obscure houses made of corrugated iron sheet, palm leaves, cans, and rags. Yes, there was poverty, there was corruption; beggars and pimps. But at all costs, nobody starved. Theater, cinema, festivals were not reserved only for the rich. On a simple motorcycle, father, mother and two or three children crowded together happily. Nobody bothered us. We lived in a democratic world. There was press, religious freedom. The government cared about our well-being. In the chaos of war, the South Vietnamese knew how to juggle with happiness and misfortune. The fanatical communist ideology of the North Vietnamese would destroy this fragile illusion.



I was in charge of the Agronomy Department Library, and of the Students Affairs. There were numerous demonstrations against the war and against the government of President Nguyễn van Thiêu, led mainly by students and starting with our Department. Politics did not appeal to me, but I sometimes joined the students in their ideology. May be because I was still naive and Utopian?

On several occasions, I had to request the Chief education officer to intercede with the Police to liberate the students from our Department. In reality, some students were communist sympathizers but I didn't mind, or didn't know it. The police questioned me vaguely the day after a bomb exploded at the Television Center next to the Agronomy Department, but I was not worried. My brother-in-law's position could be a guarantee for my political behavior.

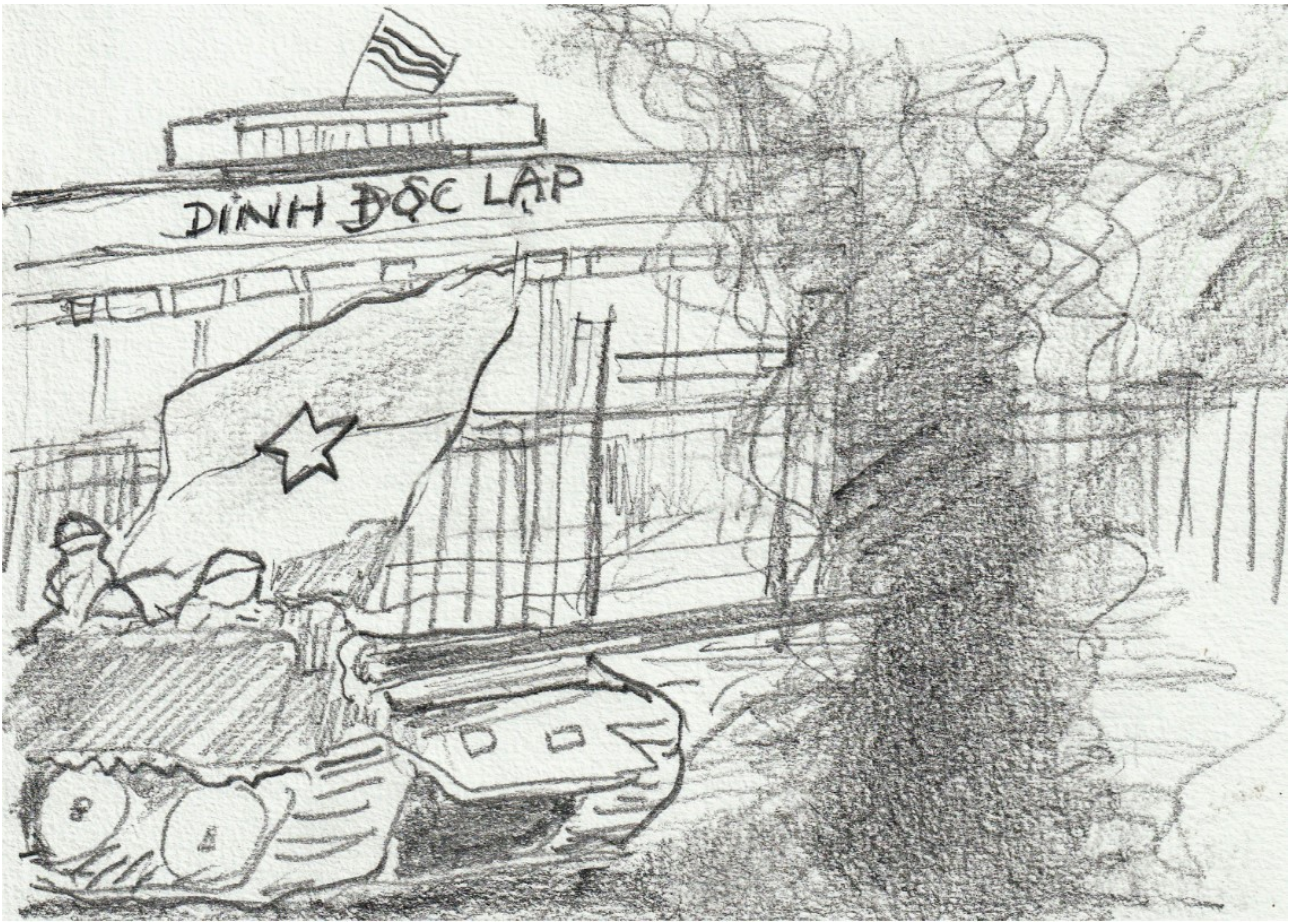
What I liked the most were certain exhibitions of my paintings at the

“Alliance Française” for the benefit of flood victims or for charitable purposes, and the distribution of gifts to orphanages with part of the sale...

In late March 1975, while I was in Manila, I learned that the North Vietnamese troops had advanced from Central Vietnam. In fact as a Librarian of the Department of Agriculture, I was attending an ASEAN Congress about the exchange of agricultural documentation. Some colleagues advised me to wait for the event. It was out of the question. I wanted to be with my family in these circumstances which would be difficult. On the other hand, my stay in France had shown me that I couldn't hope to be happier than in my native country. Moreover, I had heard that the Liberation Front had promised a neutral Vietnam, hadn't it? What did I have to fear? Life could be better without the corruption of the Thieu regime. Behind the “South Vietnam Liberation Front” manipulated by them, and which gave them the legacy to fight the American army presented as imperialist, the North Vietnamese skillfully obtained the sympathy from the world. And through the popular movements «Make Love not War» of the famous singer Joan Baez or Bob Dylan... It would be too late when the world would discover the true face of communism.

I returned from Manila on April 5, 1975, after the collapse of Ban Me Thuot, on the high plateau. Like bowling, from the North to South, towns fell one after the other. Without a significant increase in military aid from the American allies, impressed by the demand for Peace from within, South Vietnam failed.

On Wednesday April 30, 1975, the first communist tanks entered Saigon and broke through the iron gate of the Presidential Palace after the resignation and departure of President Nguyễn van Thiệu. The fall of Saigon was preceded by the evacuation of American civilian and military personnel. There was dispersion and panic. Everyone tempted to flee. Many feared bloodbath as reprisals like the mass grave discovered after the Viet Cong attack in Huế in 1968. Thousands of South Vietnamese ran on foot across the borders of Cambodia, Laos to Thailand or more often by boat where they had to face storms, pirates... They were called the Boat-People. “If electric poles had feet, they would walk away too!” said the rumor.



Hâu, my brother-in-law was then a lieutenant-colonel and Governor of Vinh Binh province. Feeling unsafe, Hâu, Lan and their five-year-old daughter Ngoc left their province to seek refuge at my parents' house in Saigon.

They might have forgotten to notify the American adviser, who was probably evacuated after searching for them. They also forgot that the opposing camp knew everything about them, having placed secret spies among their closest employees. They would find out a few weeks later...



Indeed, Saigon fell without much bloodshed, which gave credence to the idea of a popular mass revolt among international public opinion. But the reality was that, "spies" from the North, infiltrated the urban network, occupied important positions in the administration and in the army. They participated in the operations when the communist army invaded the South. The people passively resigned themselves to the government of the strongest. What else could they do?

Very quickly the attitude of the "Northern brothers" demonstrated that the liberator was an occupier. The Liberation Front FNL supposedly lead by South Vietnamese, but in fact manipulated by the North, quickly disappeared. The leaders of this Front were eliminated or given secondary posts without importance or decision. For example, Mrs Nguyễn thi Binh was promoted to the position of spokesperson of the Front, to win the sympathy of the free world. After victory, she was appointed Minister of primary Education or something like that.

The population had to participate in noisy meetings waking them early in the morning, making them stand for hours in the sun or rain to cheer the leaders of the North who came to visit Ho Chi Minh City, the new name of Saigon. They hated the new leaders for causing them misfortune. To welcome the reopening of the railway line from Saigon to Hue and Hanoi. This symbolic link between the North and the South actually served to transport officers from the North on their way to the South for the occupation and to bring wealth from the South to the North. The vast rice fields have been emptied, the economy has deteriorated, undermining the former prosperity a little more each day. The illusion of fraternity under the communist regime has disappeared, after arbitrary arrests and spectacular public executions.



Replacing the commercial signs that had become useless, giant portraits of Ho Chi Minh or other communist leaders and banners praising Marxism-Leninism were displayed in the streets. The red color prevailed in the bloodless city. The loudspeakers sprouted like mushrooms, broadcasting patriotic songs from Beijing. The musical flow was interrupted only to encourage volunteers to clean the sewers. The alternative was to curse the American imperialism and the Thiệu regime

with hysterical and hostile slogans. The same venomous style was repeated on television, radio, and in the only Newspaper hastily created: Saigon Giai Phong (Saigon Liberated). Political meetings took the place of former innocent leisure. Informing and spying became the only legal distractions. To protect the safety of one's family, one became a clumsy theater actor in a bad play.

The "people's" government quickly summoned soldiers and officials to present themselves with some clothes for a short period of Re-education. We later learned that they would stay for an indefinite period. In order to prevent any escape attempts, the senior officials were sent to the North, where the climate and prison conditions were harsher.

I decided to leave the country by all means. I didn't tell my parents about this perilous and dangerous journey. I prepared my departure, and it had to be done quickly. The monsoon season was about to begin with a high risk of typhoon. Alongside police checks and pirate attacks, things are getting more serious. A month after that fateful day, an incident will hasten my departure. An assassination attempt on my brother-in-law.

Early one morning, Hâu and Lan, who still stayed with us for security reasons, left the house for the first time. Watching them cross the street, before closing the gate, I had a strange feeling. Lan looked terrified from across the street. So I went out to check when I heard the loud voice of an engine on my left. I saw a scooter a few blocks away, with two men wearing dark glasses. The man sitting behind pointed a revolver at Hâu who was running to my right. There were several gunshots and I heard Lan screaming. As Hâu was able to enter a neighbor's house, the two men fled passing between me and my sister, each standing on opposite sides of the street. In a second, I guessed that the man holding the gun would shoot either at my hysterical sister, or at me petrified in front of the gate. This situation might have disturbed the decision of the murderer, and saved both me and Lan. The scooter went by like a storm. The gun was pointed at me, but the man didn't shoot.



But who wanted to kill Hâu? The answer was clear. “They” knew who Hâu was, and where he had taken refuge after leaving the province. The information came from inside of our homes by employees. All they had to do was wait and ambush. It is certain that Hâu had many enemies as an officer. This was not the first ambush. I no longer hesitated. In the following days, when Hâu presented himself for re-education, I fulfilled my own destiny.

I sold my car, a small yellow Daihatsu for a few ounces of gold, which was enough to ensure my trip and my survival during a few days.

To prevent people from fleeing by sea, the government confiscated all the large commercial ships. Only small fishing boats remained.

In addition, control of coastal cities was strengthened. Barriers at the mouths of large and small rivers multiplied. The main objective of the patrol along the coast was to comb out the candidates who tried to escape.

After all, they were right. Many boats were sunk with corpses and wealth at sea; it was better to snatch all the gold before the shipwreck. People now had to show a pass to move from one town to another. They also needed a license for fishing. Finally after much searching, hoping and despairing, I left Saigon on June 10, 1975, after six weeks living under a regime that definitely, was based on lies, terror and hypocrisy.

Dressed in several layers of old clothes, and carrying a plastic raincoat, some lemon and water in a small bag, very early in the morning, I headed towards Go-Công, a small coastal fishing village. I left a little note to my parents.

After a long journey on a crowded bus fortunately without problem, I arrived at the address. I didn't trust the crew or the shifty-eyed captain but I had no choice.

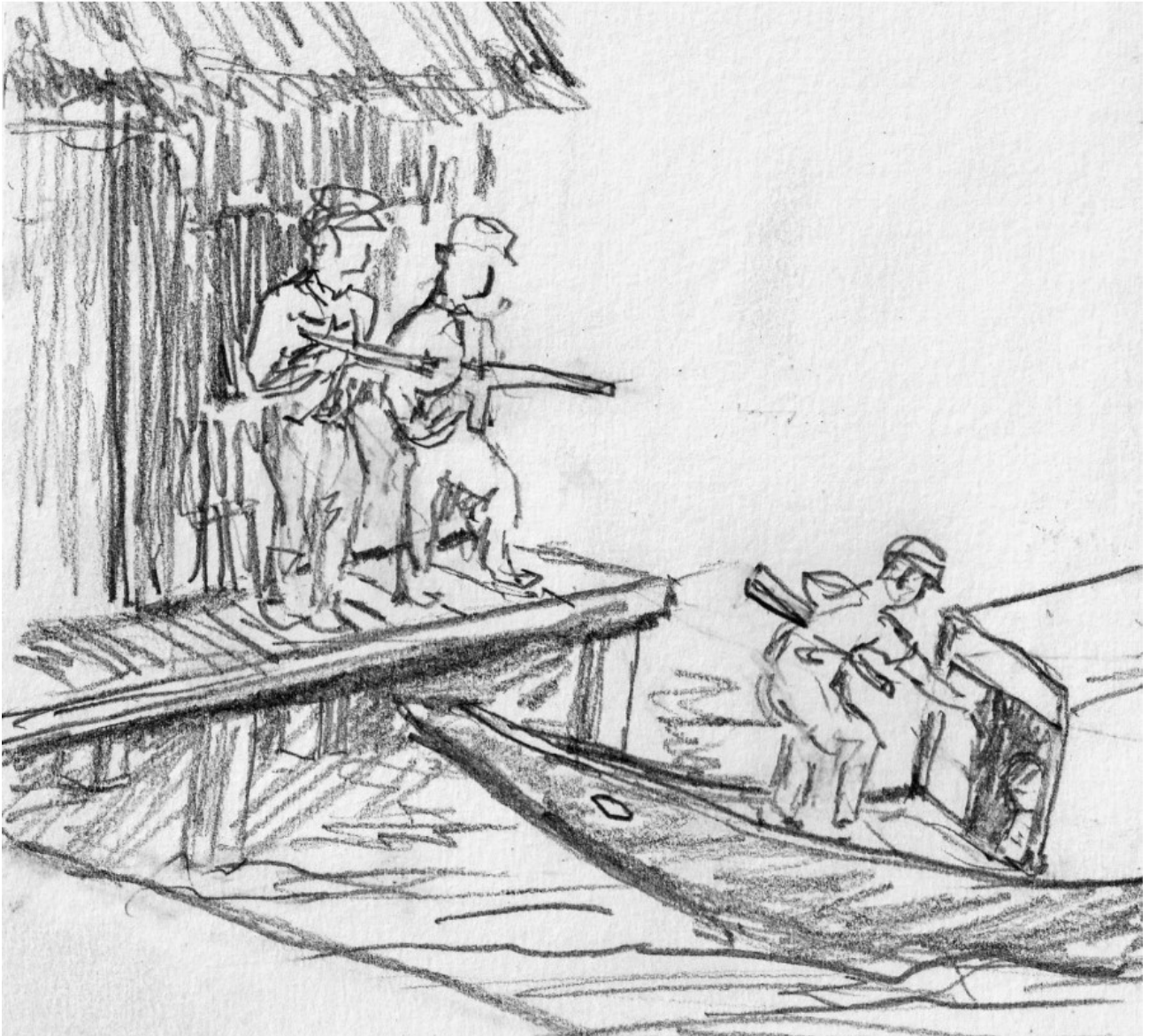
They told me that the other passengers would only embark at the estuary, on small sampans. Since I was the only "customer" in Saigon, they asked me to get on the boat immediately. The boat was a medium sized fishing boat, about ten yards long. The captain took me into the cabin and closed the sliding door.

A severe stomach ache distracted me from my fear. The boat began to leave the shore as I could tell from the steady sound of the engine.

After half an hour, I heard the engine stop. I suddenly felt that several people were quickly jumping on our boat, which was moving dangerously. From my dark cabin, I could see nothing. When I heard the crackle of gunfire and orders shouted in a North Vietnamese accent, I knew things went wrong.

I saw what my country had become in just a few weeks. I swore I would never live under a communist regime. I had already planned what to do if my plan failed. I searched feverishly for the small plastic bottle of eye drops, which contained diluted arsenic. The bottle was there but empty, and my jeans pocket was slightly wet. I clung desperately to sleeping pills, which I swallowed with some water.

Everything was so fast. Very quickly I felt sleepy and began to lose track of time and space. I moved like in a dream, tripped and fell on the wooden bottom of the boat. It seemed to me that I was slipping into a very dark and deep well.





2

Two tubes of Valium didn't seem like enough to kill a young man. I woke up with a terrible headache and was completely paralyzed. Unable to recognize where I was, and what had happened. After a long period of time, I was able to raise myself painfully onto my elbow. I found myself in a large, dark hangar. A small yellow bulb hung under an old tiled roof, lined with a network of barbed wire. On the left, a metal door; on the right a tiny window with iron bars; behind my back, a small wall which separated me from a toilet pit. Around me, people were sleeping or resting on the cement floor, side by side, packed like sardines, with just a small path in the middle. They wore dirty gray clothes; some of them were bare-chested.

The room smelled of a mixture of ammonia, urine and garbage. Insects swarmed on the damp ground. Skinny rats ran over the body of the sleepers. It was a nightmarish vision. The old man lying next to me, a tiny wrinkled face, with white hair, opened his eyes and his mouth at the same time: "Ah, there you are! I thought you were dead when they dragged you here! Putting his hand on my forehead, he added shaking his head: "Don't move, you still have a fever." As I look particularly stunned, he said "You are "en prison", you understand, you are in My Tho jail"! He said "en prison" in French. Oh my God, what I feared the most had already happened.

Ông Sau, my neighbor told me some time later that the guards threw me unconscious in the cell, my face swollen and my arms tied. I was stunned for several days. When I started to move, he forced me to drink, and eat some rice. He found me a torn rug to separate me from the cement floor. I was drowsy all the time, my plastic raincoat over my face and arms to protect me from the battalions of mosquitoes and also from the smells of the toilets, especially when someone was using it. What seemed strange to me, in that large hangar where crowded desperate people languished, was that there was so little noise. Just whispers and shadows.

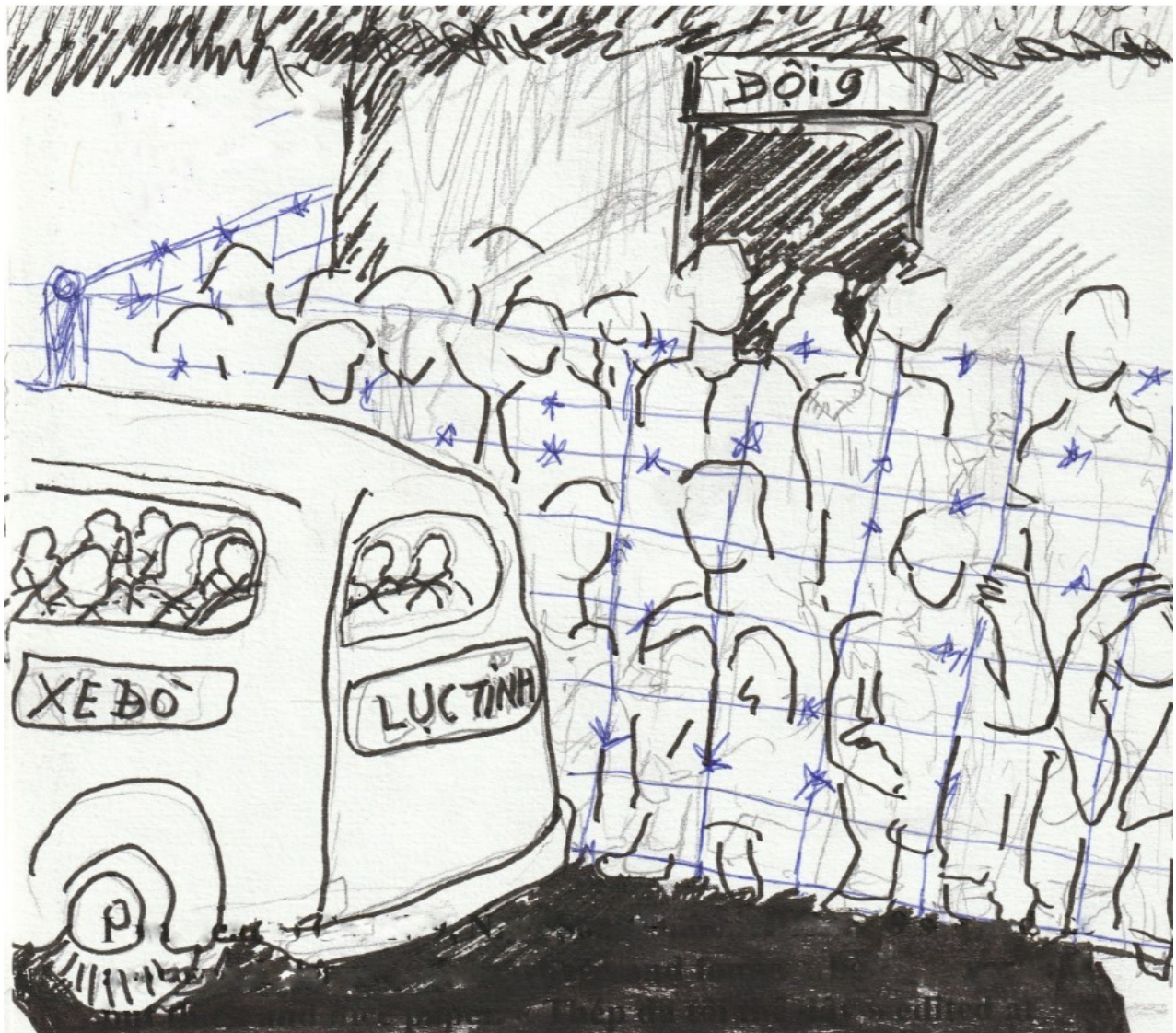
It was in this physical and psychological state that I was summoned to the Bureau. I was taken to the chief of the prison, handcuffed. Like a robot, I found myself in a small room furnished with a desk and two chairs. On the wall there was a large red flag and a portrait of Ho Chi Minh. I admired this talented man, still I didn't like the cult of personality. Since the collapse of Saigon, I had a sort of allergy for this giant portrait that we see on every street corner or in front of administrative buildings. In some houses it occupied the highest place formerly reserved as an altar of ancestors and Buddha. A country practicing Buddhism and the ancestor's worship was now obliged to venerate only one man.

I was immersed in these thoughts when a man with a coarse face, partly hidden behind his sunglasses, came behind the desk. As soon as I declined my identity, his questions were more specific. He was walking around the room and I had to turn my head the whole time. His questions focused on the identity of the people organizing my escape, the correspondence, the name of the American ship waiting offshore.... I really didn't know anything to be able to reply. As my answers inevitably became confused, he took a gun from his pocket and slammed it down on the table. I felt dizzy and fainted.

My cellmates told me later that I was lucky to lose consciousness at the right time to avoid torture. And not show off in the streets like the American pilots caught in North Vietnam, wearing a “Phan Dong“ (reactionary enemy) board hung around their necks followed by curious children, and wondering if they would be executed at the next public square. Back at My Tho jail, they took me back to the cell, and left me a piece of paper and a pen so I could make my “self declaration”. Like the others, I should repeat it several times. We had to be careful because we thought the confessions would be confronted, compared to detect any discrepancy. But what's the point when there would be no trial, when the punishment would be almost the same for everyone, forced labor with no defined duration!

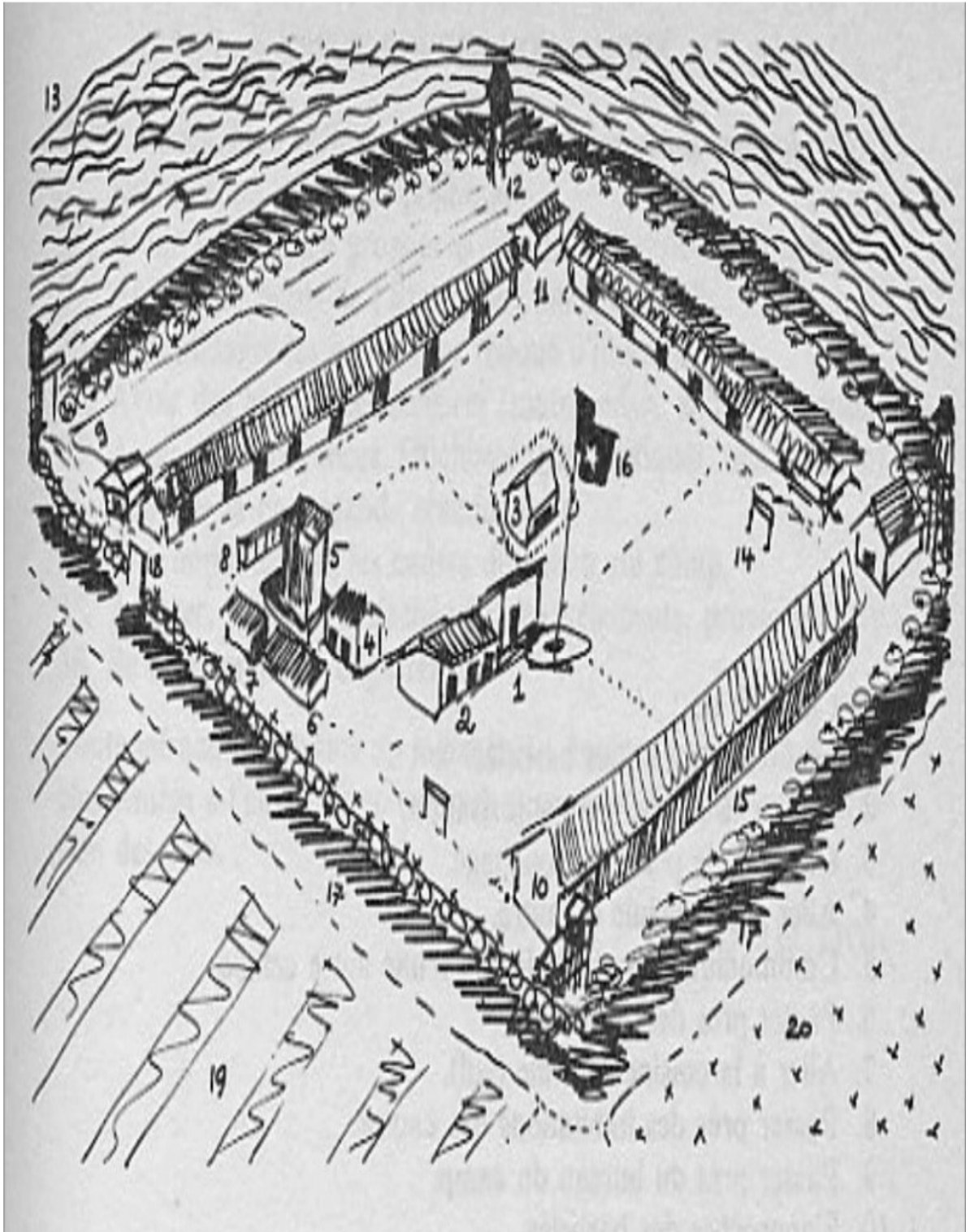
A few weeks later, as the hangar became too full, the prison Bureau selected prisoners for the re-education camp and informed us by microphone. I was among them. I hurriedly wrote a note to my parents and gave it to Ông Sau who would try to get it outside. It seemed strange to say, but I was almost getting used to this place, to the presence of my

neighbor and benefactor. I was a little afraid of what would happen to me next. I could not say anything to Ông Sau after entrusting him the short note to my family, just whispering thanks. A few minutes after the information, they put us on several buses, all blinds down. They tied us six by six in rows with electric wire so strong that our arms quickly became paralyzed. Maybe I'm wrong, but the guards seemed happy to tighten the ropes. I felt dazzled by the sun, outside the shaded cell. After endless hours of travel, we finally reached the destination, "My Phuoc Tây camp" in Cai Lậy province, in the heart of the Mekong Delta.



It was late afternoon. Working time was over. As we were gathered in the central courtyard, the crowded residents dressed in dirty rags, stood outside the cells. They stayed in the small courtyards in front of their cells, and kept staring at us. They seemed to be watching entertainment, or looking for someone they knew. Just a few months after the liberation of the country, the citizens of this liberated Vietnam were already like that!

They remind me of some scary images of zombies in horror films. We had to spread all of our poor possessions on the ground. The guards promptly took away most of it, except our clothes. They showed us our cell and our cell Leader. I was assigned to Cell number 9.



Mỹ Phước Tây Camp (South Vietnam)

1. Management Bureau
2. Executive House
3. Prison for women
4. Central kitchen
5. Theater stage
6. Infirmary
7. Pigsty
8. Conex boxes
9. Latrine pond
10. Cells

11. Guard House
12. Watchtowers
13. River
14. Football field
15. Barbed wire
16. North Vietnamese flag
17. Minefields
18. Central portal
19. Vegetables fields
20. Rice fields



Cell N° 9

Regulations of the re-education camp

*(The offense involves punishment by a chain in the cells
or conex with suspension of visits and parcels)*

Get out of the barbed wire (escape)

Leave the cell without permission

Change sleeping place

Go from one cell to another

Contact a prisoner from another cell

Get close to the conex Get close to the kitchen

Get close to the executive house

Get close to the Bureau

Get close to the barbed wire

Go to the toilets outside of hours

Keep more than 5 piastres

Keep tools, sharp objects

Storing and drinking alcohol

Play cards or games of chance

Cooking outside the authorized time

Have contact with female prisoners

Have contact with outside people

Have contact with guards

Have contact with family outside visiting hours

Disobeying executives, cell head or managers

Refuse manual works

Having ideas or lubricated gestures

Keep, read the books of the corrupt regime

Talk about imperialism or a puppet regime

Sing love songs of old regime

Discuss politics

Criticizing the revolutionary spirit

Damage tools

Damage dwellings

Having thoughts of rebellion

Having fetishistic beliefs

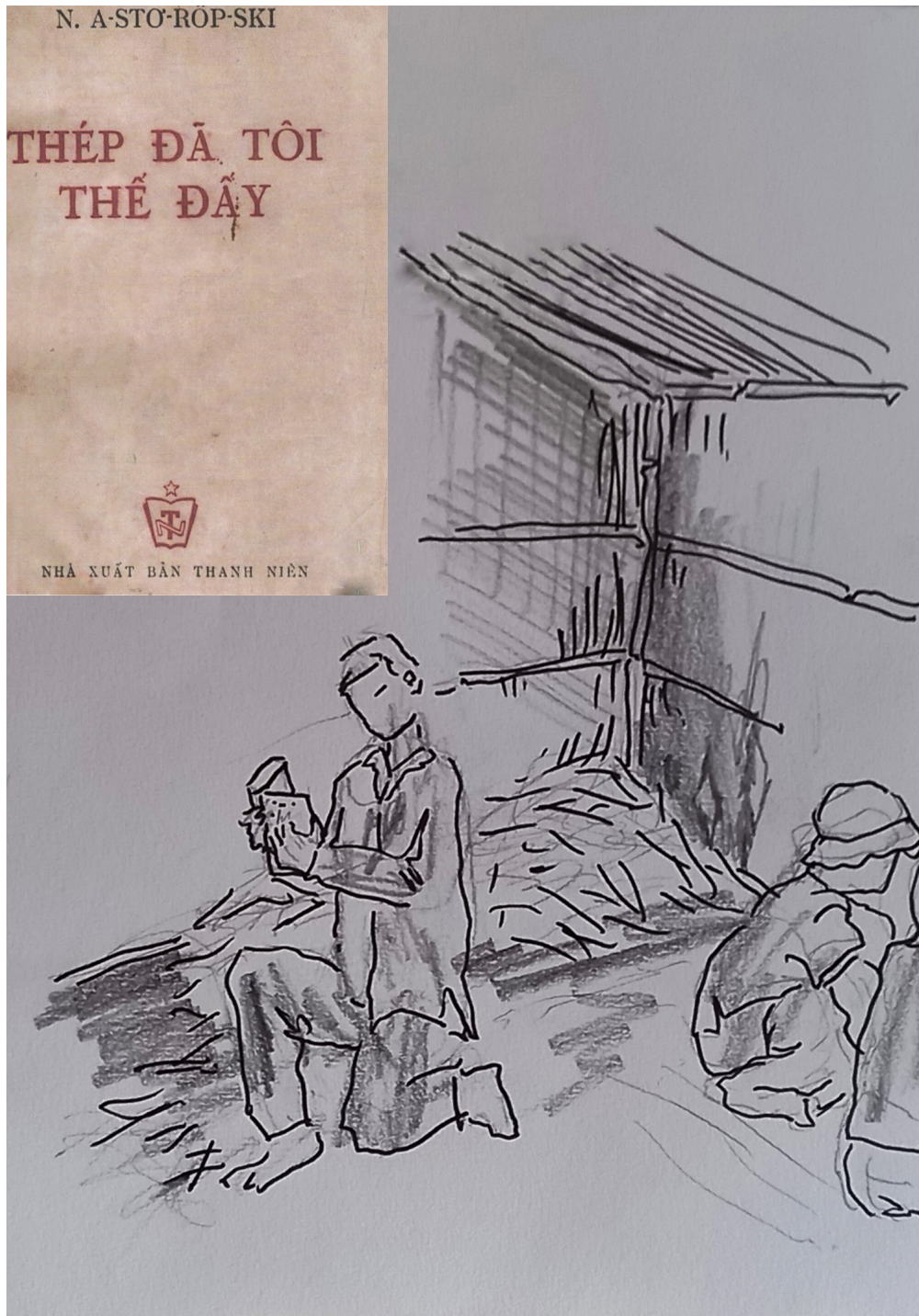
Spread reactionary propaganda

Be rude to executives and managers

Buy, sell, exchange clothes, groceries...

Argument or quarrel between prisoners

Nam Son, a stout man with coarse features and shifty eyes, showed me a small dark space at the end of the walk, just big enough to place Ông Sau's mat. I cleaned the corner and found an old, thick, worn-out book. I really liked reading, so I hid it. It was a Russian novel by Nikolai Ostrovsky. "How the steel was tempered", translated into Vietnamese which an officer probably threw away after reading. It allowed me to escape into dreams and survive confinement. An unexpected opportunity.



As my place occupied a corner, I was lucky enough to be able to isolate myself a little, to enjoy some peace and quiet in the middle of the constant hubbub. I smoothed the floor under my rug and turned my plastic raincoat into a tight pillow. Then I put in the corner the tin can of Guigoz baby milk powder that Ông Sau had given me. Unpleasant at first, he became a benefactor and provided me with the essential utensils for this camp: one can for water, one for rice, one for soup. From now on, everything became useful, recoverable. Salvaged materials often constituted the only tools, the only wealth of the prisoner. Back at my new place, I created a "window" two fingers wide by moving aside the partition straw. A small ray entered through the opening. I was almost happy. Death no longer tempted me. Since I was still alive, I had a firm resolve to fight for life, whatever the circumstances.

Despite this optimistic determination, I was very weary, thirsty, and hungry, and tired. Some of my roommates were eating something. A few mats away from me, a young man was eating a rice cake. He raised his head and met my hungry eyes. Red with shame, I turned my head away. He left his place, approached me, then sat down on my mat. I looked at him, surprised. He offered me a piece of the cake wrapped in a banana leaf (banh tet):

- You new? What's your name?
- Trong. Thanks for the cake.
- My name is Ly. Why are you here?
- I got lost near the coast.
- F.....

He laughed and got up, returned to his mat. He was about twenty or twenty-two years old. Tall, thick hair, slanted eyes. Bad boy manners, with sloppy clothes and rude words. I didn't find him very pleasant at the time. But I already owed him a piece of rice cake! The following days, as he had arrived in the camp a few weeks before me, he was able to explain its organization to me, in order to mentally prepare for this new life.

We had to get up at 4 a.m. at the first stroke of a bolt on an old wheel. Ten minutes later the rations were distributed: a scoop of rice, a scoop of soup or salted water with a few vegetables. There were two distributions

each day, one in the morning and one in the evening. We were obliged to keep part of the morning ration if we wanted to have lunch. No meat, only sometimes. Toilet, gymnastics, breakfast, in the weak light of dawn. At 4:30 a.m. gathering for counting like cattle. Departure for the workplace located several kilometers from the camp.



The walk itself was an ordeal: crossing rivers on bamboo bridges, lunch and tools on the head. Beware of those who lose their tool, they would be accused of "intentional destruction of the people's working instrument". Around 4:00 p.m., return to camp, via the same endless path. Gathering for count. Bath and free activities. At 6:00 p.m. dinner, same ration as in the morning. In tropical countries, dusk fell quickly, after 6 p.m. the sun would disappear. 8:00 p.m. curfew time. The self-assessment session took place at the end of the week, so no time to rest! "This is what you will understand well yourself!" Ly told me.

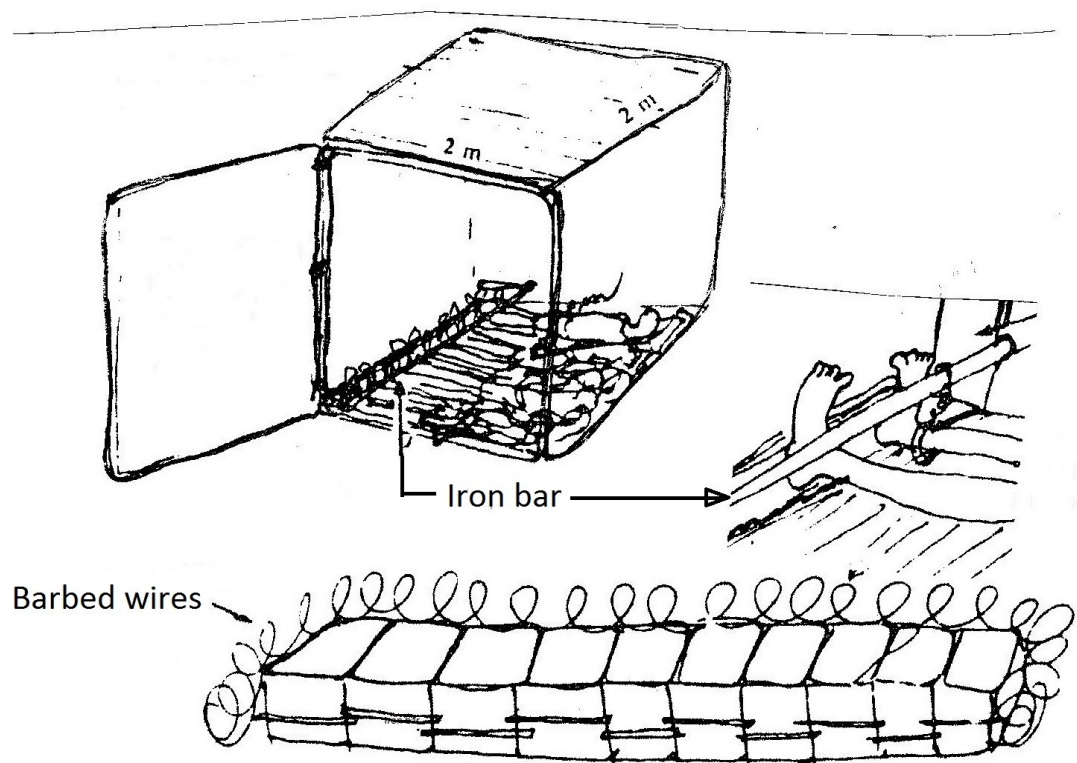
And I was able to see by myself. The My Phuoc Tây camp, in the center of which a red flag was hung, extended over approximately two acres in the middle of rice fields, on the banks of a small river. With a watch tower on each corner, the camp was surrounded with minefields between several rows of barbed wire. Bordered by a river, it was made up of three rows of straw houses in poor condition forming a Horseshoe. In the middle of which the camp Bureau, the central kitchen, the officers' house, a prison for women, a pigsty, an infirmary and a mysterious row of nine metal containers, the conex. The guard houses, next to the watchtowers, flanked each of the three long sheds.

The straw huts were divided into twenty cells measuring approximately twelve by seven meters. In front of each cell, overlooking the central ground, were tiny courtyards separated by barbed wire. A large vegetable garden enclosed the horseshoe, not far from a pond which served a latrine. The camp could almost live on the water from the river, and the vegetables that grew there. In the distance, we could see a few isolated huts among the rice fields. A bridge crossing the river was visible from the camp.

We were more than a thousand prisoners divided into groups of fifty. Each cell was monitored by a prisoner whom the camp management had designated to spy on us and to denounce us. We were more afraid of these cell supervisors than of the Camp leader itself. Those supervisors were themselves overseen by kapo, or secret informants responsible for reporting directly to the camp leader what was happening inside the cells. Everyone was afraid of them, including the cell supervisors who were also jealous of the advantages the super spy could enjoy.

Being divided and hierarchical, all this type of informants however had one thing in common: they were generally recruited among the former Viet Công who had formerly deserted the revolutionary army to join the army of Nguyễn van Thieu (chiêu hồi) during psychological campaigns. They competed among themselves in the hope of being forgiven for their betrayal by spying on each other and denouncing each other. Thus the camp authorities knew everything that was happening in the cells, without having to mingle with the prisoners.

The head of the camp at that time was a man with a hard and stern face. He was merciless towards all infractions of the rules which included thirty-six prohibitions. The most serious offense was obviously the attempted escape. Few people took risks, except to commit suicide. They would have had to cross rows of barbed wire, mines and avoid the vigilance of the Bô Dôi, (name of the soldiers of the current regime). No escape was possible, not even illness. Only those suffering from distressing, highly contagious illnesses such as tuberculosis, could be sent to the small huts next to the conex...



Group of CONEX

Conex cubes were old American munition containers in which anyone disobeying any of the 36 rules was held. The offenses involved being chained inside the cell, or chained in the conex, with suppression of visits and packages. Not far from the pigsty, a few low and small huts where contagious or dying prisoners stayed before reaching the cemetery. In this labor camp every thing was lacking: food, medicine and even tools. It was necessary to cut the ammunition cases to make tools like shovels, picks and sickles... Needless to say those tools were heavy and above all unsuitable! Was it in this universe of destitution and total misery, in this barren patch of mud, where I would spend the rest of my life?

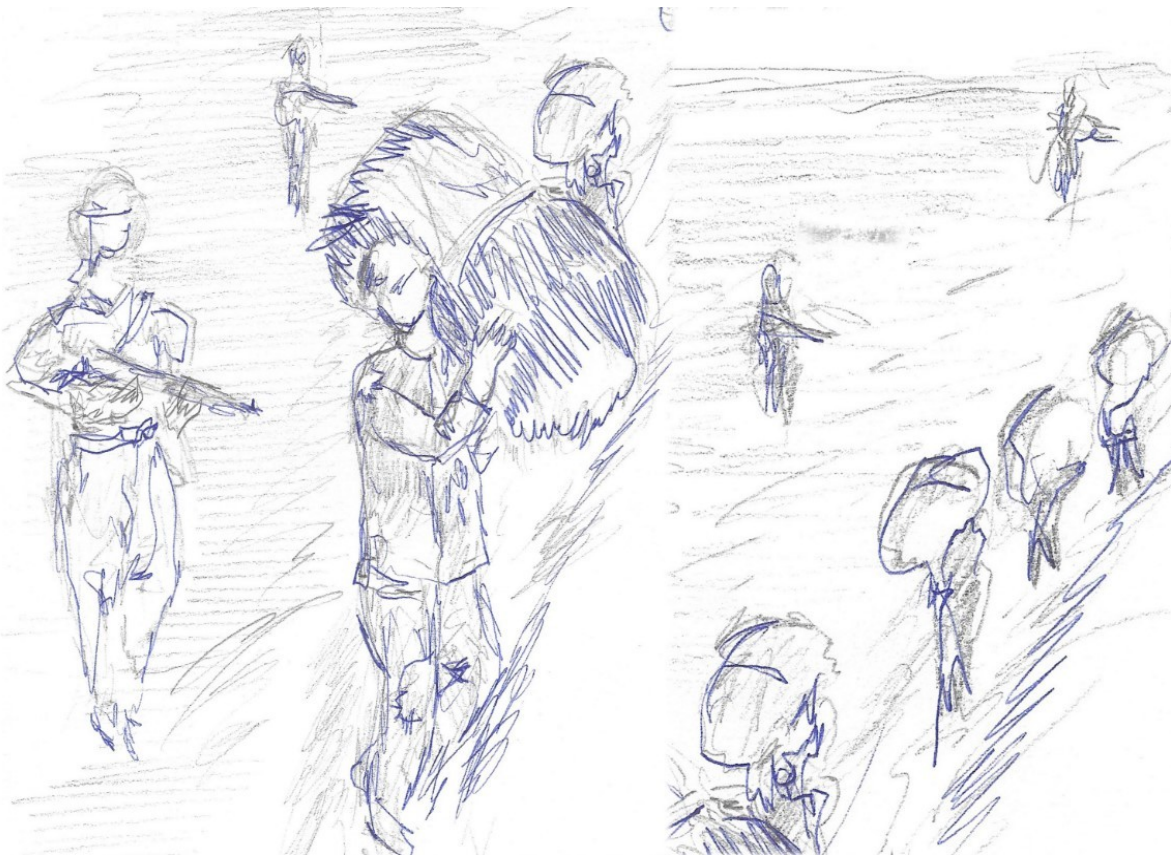
My companions covered a very broad social category and composed a wide range of possible and imaginable offenses: minor civil servants, non-commissioned officers, junior officers. High ranking officers like Hâu, my brother-in-law were sent to the North where no escape was possible. There were also people arrested during their attempt to escape, a category to which I belonged. Gamblers, whores, “phan đông” reactionaries, arrested in the very act of distributing leaflets, those who were suspected of terrorism and planting bombs in the public place. Some people were arrested randomly during raids: intellectuals, leaders of Buddhist sects like Hoa Hao, Cao Dai, or peasants denounced as CIA agents. In fact it was a convenient label that the current government stuck to all those against whom there were no concrete accusations.

And most of us were going to stay there, without judgment, to rot in this camp for an indefinite period of time. Our families would deploy treasures of ingenuity to demonstrate our innocence or plead our cause. Their letters would be used may be to roll cigarettes. The only recourse: money or personal intervention of an officer or both. While waiting for a hypothetical exit, we had to adapt to survive. In fact, compared to My Tho prison, the re-education camp looked less grim thanks to the tiny courtyard in front of each cell, despite its barbed wire surround. We could have a vague illusion of freedom.

I had witnessed life in the camp. It was worse than Ly's description. Especially for people like me. Although I practiced some sports like swimming etc., I didn't earn a living with my hands. The first days were terrible. We had simple, heavy tools. Sticky clay soil stuck to the shovel.

We had to make big effort. My hands quickly became covered in blisters which broke painfully. Even though it was impossible for me to stop working before I finished my part of the forced labor. After a few weeks, calluses formed and I had less pain. Things have become easier. The humiliation was that we were treated like cattle. It was under the communist regime that we experienced the exploitation of man by man of which the capitalist regime had been so accused. It was not the manual labor that was degrading in itself, but the subhuman conditions in which they made us live.

With our clothes torn, on the way to work, we walked in line like a bunch of beggars, a chain of slaves. On the slippery dikes, we went barefoot, in rags. Sometimes we walked next to villages and came across a few farmers. They lowered their straw hats. Maybe they were afraid of being involved. Or did they take pity on these men who, a few months before, had been respectable people? Perhaps they saw in them their own loved ones locked away somewhere.



Along the way, we sometimes had to cross rivers with tools on our heads. Watch out for whoever loses them because the Conex is waiting for him. One day in the middle of the river, I had a cramp. Off balance with only one arm free, I sank into the water. Without Ly, who was swimming behind me and holding me at that precise moment, what would have become of me...



I have heard that some prisoners' wives disguised themselves as merchants in the hope of crossing, or slipping something to their husbands, sons or brothers. The armed guards increased their vigilance each time we passed through the population. A French priest from the "Missions Etrangères" (Foreign Missions) of Dalat in Central Vietnam, told me later that he received one day a roast chicken wrapped in banana leaves, which a little girl had thrown to him while he was in the working yard. The catholic peasants around the camp knew there was a priest among the prisoners. It was the best roast chicken he had ever eaten in his life!

The present regime didn't need to poison or shoot prisoners. It wasn't necessary, at least in my camp. They just let them die of their natural death. From walking on mines, from hunger, from exhaustion, from beriberi, from tuberculosis, from dysentery, from anger, from despair. Only hope kept the prisoners alive. They hoped to see their family again one day. They were ready to wait for months, years. Hadn't the new regime promised clemency to the most disciplined? "Love will erase hatred and resentment" (Dem tinh thuong xoa bo hân thu).

Beautiful speech! What a lie! The prisoners waited patiently for six months, a year, two years, three years, and pushed back the limit of their resistance from week to week. Then one day, they no longer have confidence in the myth of their upcoming liberation. They stopped resisting and died. Their cellmates wrapped them in a nylon sheet and when evening came, buried them hurriedly in the vegetable field...

Although man adapt to many difficult circumstances, he cannot tolerate a lack of affection. Alas! The lack of privacy, constant hunger, and our miserable condition have made some of us mean, nasty and aggressive. We argued over trivial things. Most of us became venomous gossips, suspicious and inquisitive. Others hid in a sort of shell. As time passed, we were almost happy to learn that someone had died of tuberculosis or dysentery, that someone else had stepped on a mine.

Some rare friendships bore the sad mark of our frustrations: the best friend was the one who received a package from family. The feeling of camaraderie vanished along with the supplies. In the camp, most conversations revolved around food. They imagined tremendous parties, delicious dishes, designing the most exquisite recipes. After their feast, they tackled the dirty stories, obscene imaginations full of details. Then came the quiet time of solitude.

Solidarity sometimes united us. In prison, Ông Sau almost saved me, then took care of me, provided me with a mat and bowl. Like a father despite his initial bitter moods. In the camp the prisoners took care of each other, using primitive means. If one of us got the flu, we would scrape the skin on his back with a teaspoon. The "cold" or the "pain" seemed to disappear with the red marks. In case of headache, we massaged the

forehead with “Tiger Balm” and with our thumbs.

Each of us knew a lot of stuff. But the most famous doctor of the cell was the Buddhist monk Thien Tam, much more effective than the eminent Doctor That, arrested like me while fleeing. Since he lacked western medicine.

After the first days when I was able to exchange a few words with Ly, we did not say much, except the description of life in the camp. We were always suspicious and knew that what we said would be spied on or reported. So I couldn't talk to anyone about my anxieties for my family.

How did my parents manage to survive? Did the current regime annoy them because of my flight or Hâu's previous position? Did they receive my message that I left to Ông Sau? Have they heard from Hâu since he left for the re-education camp? How could my sister Lan endure such a separation and how could she change her lifestyle. Could my niece Ngoc go to public school, given that she came from a “Nguy” family, the old regime. Did misfortune bring my parents together? How have my colleges and university students fared during this time? Did they know about my escape?

By going over and over these questions in my head, they became an obsession. Even without the conex torture, the days were the same, boring and terrible. I survived it like a sleepwalker. There was nothing to say in this torpor. To try to escape from it was to give it the advantage of being hooked. To accept it was to act like a robot, to be anesthetized. My will to live was turned into a resignation not to die.

To complicate matters, a women' s jail was built inside this man' s world. We understand very well why some prisoners cling to imaginary relationships with the camp women prisoners. They were mostly young, and quite pretty. They lived in a wooden shed covered with straw in the center of the camp and not far from the Bureau and the executives' house. A small courtyard around the cabin surrounded by barbed wire delimited the territory on which they were allowed to go. In fact this large hut was located exactly in the middle of the three rows of the men's cells. We could not help but see it as soon as we walked out into the small courtyard in

front of our cells.

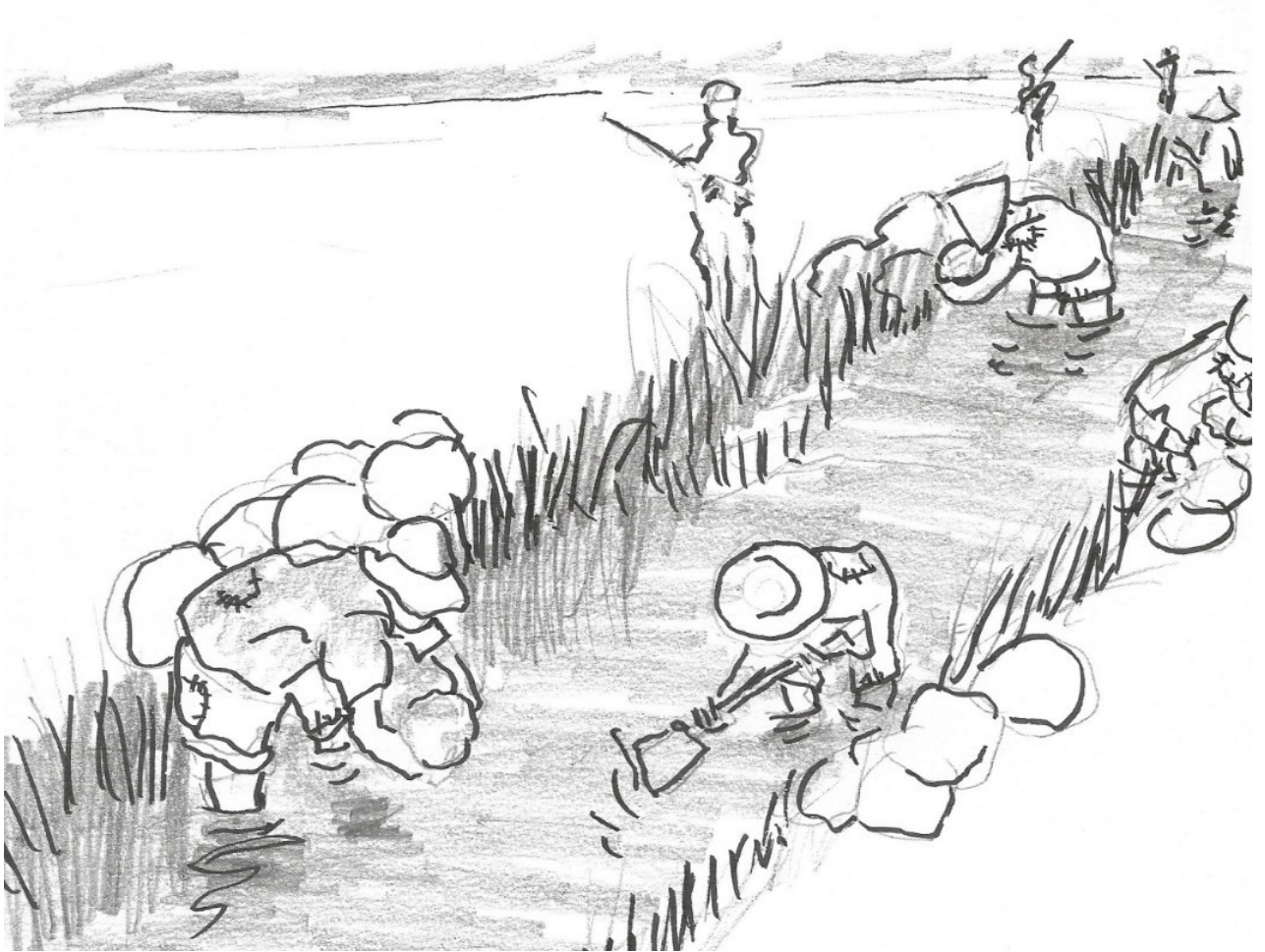


What a dangerous but forbidden temptation! It is called “Rehabilitation Camp” for former prostitutes. The new regime created numerous camps to lock up the Bar girls in order to teach them a skill. The goal was laudable, the reality was pitiful.

They were around a hundred of them, busy making mats for export. We sometimes saw them returning from the rush harvest, loaded with enormous sheaves which they carried on their heads, barefoot on the burning path. If they were deemed recoverable, they could hope to be released after three years. It was not sure they would find any sense of human dignity there. And it was a bad deal to make them pay for the handful of rice for which they had already sold their bodies, most of the

time to feed their families. Moreover, not all of them were prostitutes; some of them were the wives of prisoners, arrested together with their husbands, most of them while they were escaping by boat. Some were arrested for political reasons. "The lost women" were supervised by the head of the camp, but direct management falls to Mama Tam, a former girl seller, in the process of converting to more decent means of subsistence... She ruled her domain harshly, whip in hand. But the girls seemed to like her. Mama Tam, as she was familiarly called, was probably a "has-been beauty". Stout and short, with well-defined eyebrows, she strolled around with swaying steps, whipping here and there the girls who were weaving straw mats in the courtyard.

The girls' loneliness was undoubtedly greater than ours, because most of them were ashamed to keep contact with their families. They were, then deprived from all help and all moral comfort. Isolation, lack of space, food, privacy and freedom. All this reinforced the effects of the proverb: "Put two women together and add a duck, then you get a market". Mama Tam's role therefore consisted essentially of settling quarrels and calming down the frequent fights which we witnessed amusedly from afar. It was then, the only spectacle offered to us. Indeed we sometimes had the opportunity to cross the girls, when they were returning from fetching water. But it was strictly forbidden to speak to them. Any violation of the rules was punished from chain to conex. Many prisoners rotted in these metal boxes because of a word furtively exchanged. However, if all contact was banned, the rule did not foresee prohibiting glances: men and women managed to make love with their eyes. It seemed romantic, but so far away. This abstraction didn't suit to me! I need contact with someone, not exchanging glances!..



3

A few weeks after my arrival at the camp, one morning prisoners from Cell 9 were assigned to clean and expand an irrigation canal under the direction of Duc Rau (Duc beard). Everyone feared him, including Nam Son the cell 9 leader, because he was a very active informant. The canal was invaded by vegetation. We had to pull out the grass and the mud. As soon as we arrived at the Canal 1, Duc Râu began measuring with a stick to define the working length for each prisoner. I was desperate. I would never end up alone. Ly, who was working next to me, seeing my overwhelmed look tried to encourage me: "Go ahead, buddy. If I finish my part of the work on time, I will help you." On the bank, using his stick like an officer passing a review, Duc Rau jostled us. When I saw Ly coming out of the canal, I wanted to remind him that we could rest for a while, but only on site in the canal. As soon as he sat down at the border, Duc Rau shouted "Get up, you lazy. Who gave you permission to sit down?" Ly raised his head but didn't move. "It's forbidden to rest for a while?"

Duc Rau had a hiccup of surprise; he didn't expect such a reaction. With a bad grin, he said: "Come here, I must talk to you". Slowly, Ly stood up. His stubborn reaction worried but excited me. I wanted this incident to end, but I hoped he swings his punch in Duc Rau's jaw. The atmosphere was tense. The prisoners working next to Ly stopped digging. Their faces, until now exhausted and humiliated, expressed at least a kind of joy. Everyone could take revenge. If the skinny Duc Rau tried to hit Ly, the latter would retaliate. And the guards, who were quite far would not intervene in time. Duc Rau knew it too. To save face, he had the idea of postponing the battle. "Alright. Go back to your work, we'll see about it later". His threat seemed to compensate for his pride. To the frustrated

spectators that we were; he added: “- You too, you idiots, get back to work”. I was disappointed, but relieved. The day ended without further incident. Despite my protests, Ly helped me finish my share of forced labor. I felt worried for Ly. What will happen during the next self-assessment session in a few days?



Usually, in a circle around the cell leader, we would sit and listen to Nam Son chanting about the communist regime that we could appreciate all day long. He highlighted the crimes of the American imperialists and their puppet regime. We tried not to fall asleep. Only the last stroke of bolt on the wheel could stop his enthusiasm. The most important part of the session was reserved for self-assessment. After repeating the thirty-six prohibitions of the rule, we had to review our activities of the week. We had to examine our consciences and publicly admit our faults. Depending on our sincerity and the degree of our repentance, the community forgave us or condemned us after deliberation. But watch out for those who wanted to hide. They would be subjected to the merciless "fraternal criticism" of their "comrades". The success of this system was assured in this restricted

space occupied by frustrated men, whose only distraction was spying on their companions. This ridiculous activity maintained the only link with normal life. A pitiful compensation. We then held a sort of vote to designate "the hardworking popular hero" who could obtain "bonus" points. Each of us was rated from 0 to 10 based on compliance with rules, enthusiasm for performing forced labor and political attitude. The duration of internment would depend on this bonus! The debates were lively. Pitiful leisure! Poor us.

In that famous session which followed the canal incident, when Duc Rau began to speak, my heart began to beat wildly. "I would like to criticize Ly. When we were working at Kinh Mot canal on Thursday, he stopped before completing his task and refused to continue working. When I reminded him, Ly protested and wanted to beat me up". Nam Son was visibly surprised that someone dared to provoke Duc Rau. He turned to Ly: "What happened?" A heavy silence in the cell. Ly replied angrily "He's a liar!". Duc Rau cut him off and cleverly made him appear to be lazy and refusing manual labor. Duc Rau continued: "I propose to report to the Bureau". Whispers in the cell. Nam Son: "If no one has objections, I will announce the sentence."

The comrades looked up, then lowered their heads. Suddenly I heard my own trembling voice. "I have something to say." Nam Son was surprised. Duc Rau looked annoyed. All eyes were on me. I had difficulties articulating "That day, I was then working near Ly. Yes, he sat there for a while. But afterward he finished his work. Since he stayed far away while talking, he couldn't beat anyone!" At that moment, Lung, another informant, raised his hand. Silence fell immediately, Lung rarely spoke in session: "It's already late and it will be curfew soon. So far, Ly has never broken the rule. For this first time, I propose a written self-assessment and the promise not to do it again." After a short silence, Nam Son ended the session. Ly was given a piece of paper and a pen.

The next day, with an embarrassed look on his face, he came to ask me to help him write the self-assessment. I was surprised to learn that he could neither read nor write Vietnamese correctly. His parents had settled in Cambodia, long before he was born. He was the eldest of three children. Small traders, who got along well with their neighbors, his parents thought they could live peacefully on the shores of Tonle Sap Lake. Then hostilities between Cambodia, also called Kmer, and Vietnam took place

five or six years ago, leading to massacres of Vietnamese immigrants. His parents decided to flee Cambodia. His mother left first with the children, taking refuge in My Tho where she had a few relatives. His father tried to salvage something from the disaster. She never saw him again. A widow without resources, she did her best to raise her three children, Ly and his two younger sisters. He suffered greatly from the loss of his father. A good student in Pnom Penh, capital of Cambodia, he became a dunce in My Tho where he had to learn Vietnamese and adapt to a totally different school program. He then left school to sell balloons to children, to help his mother. He told me it was one of the happiest times of his life.

Ly's mother one day remarried. He therefore left his family and school around fifteen years old. He then led a disjointed life among “bui doi” or “dust of life”, young wandering thugs. He worked in several jobs such as shoeshine boy, then rickshaw driver, docker. Leaving one employer for another and ending up living on his fists, protecting prostitutes, taking drugs without enthusiasm. He was familiar with My Tho jail, serving a prison sentence from time to time for different offenses that he had obviously committed. His friendship was limited to business dealings with girls and drug sellers. The fall of Vietnam seemed to him like another sequence of an unimportant life. A few weeks after the arrival of the communist regime, he was arrested one night, I did not ask him why. He was sent to My Tho jail before being transferred to My Phuoc Tây camp. We could have crossed paths there because a few days later I would be sent from Go Công, the small village on the coast to the administrative capital, My Tho.

The first day I arrived, I did attract his sympathy probably because I seemed desperate. Now, he was hesitant to ask me for help. He had to present his self assessment very soon, otherwise he could be blamed for his disobedience. He hesitated to ask me for help, may be he was ashamed, but who else could help him? We grew closer from that day on. With Ly, things became easier. Familiar to the difficulties of life he was ingenious, and his example stimulated me. At the beginning, Ly helped me finish my forced labor, little by little I was able to continue on my own until the end, and together we gave a hand to those who were late. He also improved our ordinary life by collecting anything anywhere. In the conditions of total deprivation which we lived each of us developed unexpected skills. Intelligent and resourceful, Ly was not yet very good at sewing. I tried to

compensate my notorious inferiority in the field of “interior living” as a “mending stylist”, to mend our clothes and I deliberately emphasized the Harlequin side. Yes, our tramp side ended up having fun. We looked like tramps, but we were clean. Staying clean was a luxury that many prisoners valued very highly. Indeed the passing river provided us with water for cooking, cleaning and washing. What luck!

One morning, they gave us sickles to go harvest rice several kilometers from the camp. That was a new experience for me. These rice fields belonged to the cadres of the region. We were no longer prisoners in the service of the “people”, but of the lords who oppressed us. Flooded several times a year, the lower part of the delta was less favorable to the crops, with the exception of a type of wild rice. This wild variety was capable of reaching around two meters during periods of flooding where all other plants perished. It could rise by itself always higher than the water level. The growth of normal rice is much more particular: it must be sowed then, after a few weeks, uproot the young plants and put them back, at regular intervals in another rice field. Then the farmers carefully modulate irrigation. Wild rice, requiring less care, gives a mediocre yield. However the sight of a few palm leaf hats on the golden rice fields seemed very beautiful to me.

That day, it was very sunny and burning hot. The back constantly bent to cut the rice, we had to maneuver the sickle in a semi-circle in order to cut a handful of stems. It was very tiring. Less clever than the peasants, very quickly my left hand was cut by the fine and shredded rice leaves, almost as sharp as our sickles.

I then understood how hard a labor it was, reserved for women during the harvest. Ly worked very quickly, and secretly left a few bunches behind so I could finish my part of the work. The bunch of paddy seemed to me the most beautiful “bouquet” of flowers. At midday, we were allowed to stop there for a few minutes for lunch. Armed guards took positions around the field to watch us.

Since we worked next to each other, Ly and I tried to create a spot of shadow by setting up a kind of niche with the high stems which fell back in arch over our heads, sheltering us both from the sun and prying eyes.

We ate the rest of our bowl in this kind of Marsipulani nest. We could not see our comrades but their voices reached us vaguely. I enjoyed the feeling of playing cubby building.

I was happy also because in the cell we lived constantly in the middle of the noise and the crowds. In fact even though we were in the same cell, Ly and I were separated by several mats, and we could not change places. Anyway, too close friends were also spied on, to prevent a conspiracy or escape plan.

It was the first time we had any sort of privacy. Suddenly Ly saw my left hand bleeding from the cut caused by the rice leaves. «Let me see» he told me. «It's nothing» I hid my hand behind my back. Ly tried to grab that hand to open the palm. While struggling, we fell on the rice bales like a bird's nest. I did not have much time to appreciate this illusion of freedom, as armed guards called us back to work. I don't know which of us was more confused at that moment.

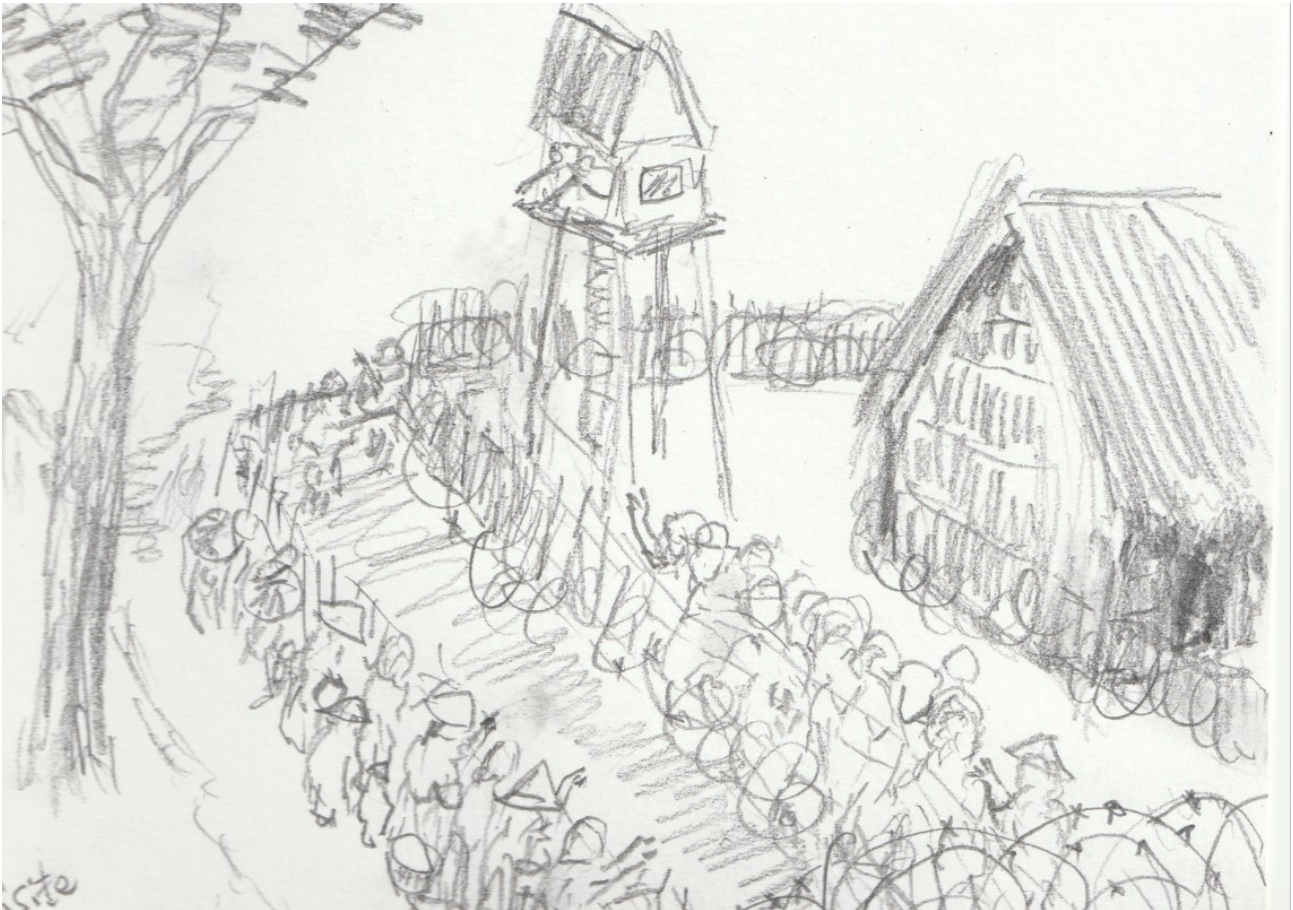


4

The new year or Tet was approaching. We thought about it with sadness because there was no doubt that we would never be released in time. We remembered the previous Tet spent with family, with the crackers and red watermelons, the dragon dance, the visits to temples on New Year's day and the tributes paid to the memory of ancestors. Against all expectations, to show the clemency of the new regime towards the deportees, the executives informed us that on the occasion of the holidays, we would exceptionally have permission to write to our parents. To tell them that they could come and visit us one day before Tet. This announcement filled us with joy: most of us had not even been able to tell their families of their arrest. The camp was in turmoil. They gave each of us a piece of paper and gave each cell leader a pen which we used one by one. Space and time were limited to us, it was not a question of writing a novel; after having outlined some news on a few lines, we invited our family to come see us on the date and address indicated specifying, as discreetly as possible, some gifts that the Bureau authorized us to receive. And that without forgetting to slip in a few sentences to praise the new regime in order to reconcile censorship.

Ly received the pen with indifference. I didn't pay attention to it and told him to hurry up and write his letter. "Who do you want me to write to?" "To your mom, of course". He smiled bitterly. "Does she still remember me. And what's more, I wasted my life". I tried hard to find a way to convince him. "Look, you're the one who left your family. They didn't kick you out. Why do you blame your mom? She had to remarry maybe for the sake of your sisters." He remained thoughtful. I added "You have nothing to blame for your past life. Your real life is now in front of you". I was frightened by the stupidity of my remark. But Ly didn't even pay attention to it. I put the pen on his hand. "Hurry up. They are going to collect the letters". He wrote his letter without showing it to me. The Bureau was in charge of stamping the letters and of sending them after having previously censored them one by one.

We were really happy that day. But the Bureau partly spoiled our joy by building two bamboo fences at the entrance to the camp separated by a passage of a few meters in order to prevent any contact. Very early in the morning, women and children carrying packages presented themselves at the camp gate. The camp was outside any village, lost in the middle of the rice fields. All visitors had to arrive the day before and spend the night in the nearest villages and wake up at dawn to get to the camp itself.



Most of the journey was done on foot, transport becoming rare since the "liberation": any trip from one town to another took a lot of time and hassle like an expedition to China. My mother told me later that, to come and see us, they had to go to the neighborhood committee to obtain a "certificate of address". Then to the local police to receive a "travel authorization", issued only with presentation of certificates of good conduct and attendance at meetings. Without these documents, they could be arrested and imprisoned. This was the situation in South Vietnam after being "liberated".

My mother and Lan were lucky enough to get two bus tickets, of course on the black market. And get on the bus full of people. Not to

mention a few breakdowns, and endless identity checks, especially for the "prohibited products" which could ruin the economy of the People's Republic. It was not as one might think, weapons, drugs or luxury products, but simply a certain quantity of coffee, sugar or rice! Needless to say, the confiscated items generally went to the police!

Why these mean worries if not to persuade the citizens of the omnipresence of popular government. Make them starve, instill in them fear and therefore obedience by controlling their stomach? After this terrible journey, having finally reached the nearest village, they had to take a sampan to cross the canals and reach the peasants' house who would welcome them at night. This traditional hospitality was shown more readily with the prisoners' families, since most of them more or less had a husband, son or brother in a camp at the time, or already dead or on the run.

At 8:00 am, a loud speaker called out one by one and in groups the names of prisoners receiving visits from their relatives. Standing in line, waiting for our turn, we reached the first inner fence. The visitors stood behind the second outer fence. Several guards slid across the space between us, watched us. I heard Lan calling me. I hadn't seen her in about eight months. Despite her peasant costume, black pants, collarless shirt and wooden sandals, she was still pretty but somewhat gloomy and worried. My mother looked slimmer, but still neat and elegant with a silk scarf on her head. Like my sister, she had cut the two flaps of her tunic, undoubtedly to submit to the new imperatives of the regime and its austerity policy. Looking at the crowd of visitors, I discovered that all the women were doing the same. This mutilation of the Vietnamese Ao Dài tunic appeared to me as the symbol of the attitude of an entire people.

I tried to smile, but could not speak. My mother had tears in her eyes. Everyone shouted more or less to hear their visitors. In the general hubbub, I heard Lan yell: "Take care of yourself. You look so thin! What do you need? Father is sick, but he's trying to get you out. Be confident.". I snatched a few bits of news: my brother-in-law was sent to the North of Vietnam but she did not know the name and location of the camp, so she could not visit him. Their wealth had been confiscated, their money had disappeared after the Bank closed and the currency had been changed. In September 1975 the value of 500 piastres fell to 1 piastre, and each family was only allowed to have 200. Lan was working in a cooperative producing crocheted sheets and tablecloths exported to the USSR. My

niece Ngoc could not attend public school, which was now reserved for the children of executives. My mother had sold most of the things in the house to buy food. My father, bitter and disappointed took refuge in illness, leaving my mother to go to meetings and wait in endless lines for food rations...

At the end of the day, they gave us our carefully checked packages, after the last families had left. We were allowed to receive 5 piasters, about half a dollar. Clothes and food, but no rice. To show that we were well fed. In fact, the few gifts received had already cost our families a lot of sacrifices. We touched each gift with intense curiosity and joy. It was the first time since we arrived at the camp that we were so happy. After his sisters' visit, Ly exulted as he unpacked his parcel. I received a black peasant clothing, and a mosquito net. With our 10 piasters, we felt very rich.



As an exceptional favor, we were allowed to dig a hole under our mats to make a small fire. As long as you didn't set the barracks on fire. We took the opportunity to engage in crickets fight on a banana leaf. The insects were kept in small match boxes, and fed with grass. In the dark, here and there, the under ground kitchen fires were like a little glimmer of hope. Ly found some Nhan long, a kind of herbal tea that we drank in half a coconut. Guigoz stainless steel milk boxes were reserved for meals. That's about all we had. Our clothing were worn and torn. We were happy to wear the new clothes...

That evening, we built a small wood fire in our underground kitchen. We prepared an infusion with a wild plant, "Nhan Long" which could replace tea. We drunk it in coconut halves. The Bureau allowed small underground kitchens, but warned us not to set fire to the huts. Some other of our roommates did the same. The cell was very dark with just our small fires burning here and there. Ly kept making fun of me: "Why are you dressing up like a peasant?". I just tried on my black clothes. "You look like a Viet Công" "Be careful what you say, dumb". We laughed and talked about our families, about Tet at home. When the bolt announced the curfew, he must return to his own place. Others did the same. The oil lamp was blown out. The cell was then plunged into darkness. The chatter became whispers and died down. We then could hear the melancholy murmur of the rain on the straw roof, the singing of the frogs in the rice fields, gurgling of my neighbor snoring and sometimes, noises emitted in a nightmare...

After a few days of relaxed discipline, we were quickly brought back to concrete concerns. The aftermath of Tet was bitter. They took Sundays away from us, the forced labors became heavier and heavier. It was rumored that throughout the country the harvests were in disaster due to lack of fertilizer and insecticides, but also due to the lack of enthusiasm of the peasants forced into cooperatives. They could only keep a small part of the harvest and the rest was sold to other production cooperatives at a ridiculous price. South Vietnam, one of the largest rice producers in Southeast Asia was literally empty.

People whispered that the export to the USSR was the main reason. How can you stop a hungry people from gossiping? The Bureau announced that rice rations would be reduced from 13 kg to 9 kg for one person in one month. To compensate for this restriction, we may receive

visitors and packages once a month. From now on, the arrangement is no longer humanitarian, but vital. It helped us survive. But for those who didn't have visitors, how could they survive? The Bureau then decided to give us the equivalent of one dollar per month to buy toothpaste. It was mainly used to buy half a leaf of low quality tobacco or sweets. With the restrictions, some of us have lost half our weight! Just look at these skeletons crawling along the garbage piles looking for a piece of rotten potato to assess the clemency of the current President Tôn Duc Thang!

During the first months following the fall, some rumors of fighting around the camp supported our moral. These would be officers and soldiers who had refused to surrender while many other high-ranking officers committed suicide in their headquarters. They withdrew their troops in the forest or the fields to organize resistance. But very quickly, control of the regime became so strict that they could no longer obtain supplies. Those who were near the border of Cambodia or Laos could then flee... In the camp, every time we heard gunshots in the distance in the rice fields, the guards threatened to shoot anyone who made a suspicious movement. Then the mortar fire receded, the crackling of the machine guns stopped and our hope faded.

We were strictly forbidden to comment on the events. Several prisoners had been sent to the conex because they talked about what had happened or rumors... In order to remind myself of the danger to distrust, I had modeled the three traditional monkeys in a piece of clay. One had his hands over his eyes, the second over his ears, the third over his mouth. My survival and that of my companions: see nothing, hear nothing, say nothing. In order not to break the rules, we simply talked about neutral and insignificant topics, or about our dreams. We were happy to "see" our project "realized" day after day and candidly ignored the fate reserved to chimeras.

One night, we were awakened by bangs, followed by stampedes and large explosions coming from a minefield near the river. Each of us has made a hypothesis. Nam Son ordered us to remain silent. The next morning, we learned that the prisoners of one of the conex had tried to escape. This was only possible with the complicity of an outside person, who removed the bar blocking the door and then the iron rod...The alarm had been raised by guards who opened fire on suspicious shadows, killing and wounding those running across the minefields.



The next morning, on the way to the work sites, we had to witness the horrible spectacle of several corpses exposed for several days near the entrance gate, in order to serve as an example to those who were considering fleeing. Camp officials attributed this escape attempt to a relaxation of discipline. Cell leaders were ordered to step up security. First, they would exchange parts of the prisoners in each cell, in order to separate the friends, and prevent them from mounting any reactionary plot. Nam Son, having barely returned from the meeting with the Bureau, hastily drawn up with Duc Rau and Lung the list of prisoners to be moved. I had the feeling that Duc Rau would not miss any opportunity to take revenge on Ly's "insolence" and the affront that Lung had inflicted on him by thwarting him with his revenge. Indeed, Ly was on the prisoner swapping list. He only had a few minutes to pack his belongings and join the new cell Number 12.

We were not able to see each other for several weeks. The Bureau reminded us of the ban on moving from one cell to another. From now on, I would have to eat alone, work alone, with no one to talk to. And forced labors became overwhelming. Returning to the cell tired and exhausted, I was horrified by the empty evening that awaited me.

I didn't want to get involved with my new neighbor transferred from cell number 3. Besides suspicion and fear of being spied on and denounced, he inspired no sympathy. His name was Hung, but we called him Hung titi, Hung the Least, because of his small size and his irascible character. I occasionally gave him a piece of cassava or other things from my package, but he annoyed me. I locked myself in silence. It was always the same cell, the same atmosphere, but nothing was the same. The prison reappeared to me as it really was. Early in the morning, when we all rushed to the latrine, for a while I tried to look for Ly in the crowd. We could then quickly exchange a word or a smile.

At that very moment, I remembered some inmates in the same position as me but with the girls in the women's jail. I used to say then that it was absolutely absurd to be satisfied with so little happiness. I was wrong: I measured that day the power of a smile, and the strength of a glance. At the same time, I also realized that nothing is ever completely black, nor completely white, nor completely negative. The camp deprived me of my freedom, but allowed me to have a friend. During my various activities, I was able to discover other aspects of my country, beyond the sophisticated cities and the good sides of life. In fact, the distressed beauty of these virgin lands brought me out of melancholy. The simple figure of a small sampan on the gray background of the river, evoked for me a whole universe of symbols: the Mekong fed at great flow into lake Tonle Sap near which Ly's family lived, then dissolved into the sea where the alluvium fertilized my grandfather's land in Bê n Tré, before providing water to the camp where we currently survived. Witness of our past prosperity and happiness, the Mekong was indifferent to our decrepitude. Its water brought life and death, its deposit had a fertilizing and sterilizing effect. These floods created fertile soil here and desolation there. However, from this desolation was born a kind of happiness as a memory of the previous days.



5

We were two months before Tet. One more Tet in prison. The camp was, however, less sinister since the former director had been transferred and replaced by a captain from the Liberation Front, native of the South. Rather friendly, he liked to chat with the prisoners who were allowed to call him Anh Hai or "Brother Hai". He realized that the camp lacked animation, and decided to form a football team and set up a theater troupe and a dragon dance group for the benefit of the executives and their families during the Tet celebration. Of course, the prisoners would also benefit from the shows. Traditional theater was very popular in South of the country, and Brother Hai must have been a supporter of it. He summoned all cell leaders to prepare the football field and the stage. After so many months without any distractions, we were very excited and for the first time, each of us worked with enthusiasm.

The stadium occupied half of the free space between the cells, in front of the executives' house and the bureau. The theater stage was located in the other half of the central courtyard next to the kitchen, between the infirmary and the women's jail. Some of us leveled the ground, and build the goals. Others erected a theater stage with clay, four poles topped by a straw roof. In the background, a few rush mats and bamboo panels. The curtains were made from old burlap sacks sewn together. Everything was finished in a few days. Brother Hai decided with the cell leaders that all inmates who received family visits would give up their toothpaste "subsidy". With the collection, Brother Hai bought an old generator, a microphone and two neon lights, which covered with transparent red and blue paper would allow the apprentice artists to face the spectators without too much shame!

In the meantime, candidates for the football and artists teams were able to present themselves for selection. As soon as we were informed that the selected ones would be able to return from work earlier for training and rehearsals, there were many candidates. The competition promised to be very tough. The following days, in the early morning, as the prisoners

rushed to the fish ponds, I watched for Ly and quickly suggested that he introduce himself as an artist. If selected, we might have the opportunity to see each other sometimes. Unfortunately, he played football well but sang like a frog, he said. I had never touched a ball in my life and I was crazy about theater. However we were both auditioned. I really liked «Cai Luong» Opera. As a child, I accompanied my mother and my sister to attend such shows. Not only did I know most of the “repertoire”, but I could also play a few traditional musical instruments. Nevertheless, I felt nervous on that decisive day.

Brother Hai had already chosen the director of the theater: Ba Ban was a former musician and manager of a provincial troupe. Recently he worked as a hair dresser to earn a living after his troupe’s disintegration, performing in small hamlets and attracting so few audiences. He was a middle aged man, discreet and quiet, passionate about this difficult art. Although Ba Ban could only hope to train a non-professional troop at the camp, he took the selection process very seriously. The audition day took place as soon as the stage was completed. We were excused from work that day.

Sitting on a chair, Brother Hai seemed delighted by the number of the candidates, around ten. At the Cai Luong theater, professional artists must be able to play and perform several tunes, sad or cheerful depending on the state of mind of the characters. Each candidate could choose to present the one they liked, or the one they remembered by heart. Ba Ban began the audition by accompanying himself on his “Dàn Kim” a two-stringed round-shaped guitar miraculously saved. When the magical melody rose, we had the strange feeling that there was no more jail, no more worry. We sat silently in a circle on the still-fresh clay stage that had just been set up. When it was my turn, in a trembling voice, I proposed “Nam Xuan” a rather difficult but famous tune, full of melancholy that I knew by heart. Even though we were ragged and barefoot, most of the contestants looked almost professional. Unfortunately, some guys were so impressed, that they could not even utter a single word!

Ba Ban said something to Brother Hai who agreed. He had chosen the actors, and could keep the eliminated candidates for technical assistance. From this request, not only did he not hurt anyone, but he was able to enjoy leading a large group! We then had to solve a big problem. Camp regulations prohibited any contact between men and women. There

is no question of rehearsing men and women together. Eventually it was agreed that the prisoners in the women's camp would perform separate special shows alternating with the men's performance. The difficulty was finding guys for the theater troupe capable of playing the roles of girls. There was then a moment of embarrassment among the actors. Most of us were afraid of being selected. Brother Hai asked the director of the new group: "So what do you think?"

The verdict came: "I think Trong can do it. Hà and Bui too. As for the actors, no problem, Châu and Kim are perfect". Stunned and ashamed, the "actresses" tried to protest weakly, pretending to be ugly, to have a low voice, to be clumsy. In fact, a stiff and voiceless group. Brother Hai, visibly amused, concluded: "This is an order. Try to play well. Tomorrow I'll bring you the play « Truong Chi - My Nuong" and you can start rehearsing. You will have about a month. It's short, but you can leave work earlier in the afternoon. I will inform the cell leaders. However, be careful: It's forbidden to talk about politics. Any violation of camp rules will be severely punished".

He left the stage to go and see how the football players selection was going. He walked away with a stiff leg, staggering a little. Probably an injury from previous fights, maybe against some of us! Brother Hai was a stern but fair leader. More fair than severe though. Those who, by their humanity in an inhuman place, have softened the unnecessary cruelty. I realized that on both sides of the ideologies, there was not only politics, there were also human beings with their own nature.

When the two football teams started training the next day on the center field, I saw that Ly was among them. I saw him running after the ball and I felt very happy. I was eager to tell Ly the results of the audition, but we didn't have a chance to meet. Back on stage, we copied our roles onto used wrapping paper. The play contained about fifteen songs that we rehearsed with the orchestra in the afternoon. Ba Ban could get, with the agreement of Brother Hai, two more musicians playing "Dàn Bau" a typical single-stringed Vietnamese instrument and the "Dàn co" Chinese violin or Erhu. We spent the evening studying the dialogues on our own. To make the costumes, Brother Hai provided us with some clothes, sheets and rags, probably confiscated from boat-people arrested during their escape, like me.

We started our work with joy and eagerness, helped by a former dressmaker. I designed simple but opera style costumes, and prepared them in the evening lit by a small oil lamp. We cut up shiny paper from cigarette packets to make inlays, jewelry and crowns. We used black and colored nylon bags to make wigs, and dress patterns. We rolled up old rags to simulate fake breasts. We cut papaya stalks to make swords. With the baby talc powder, baking coloring and the smoke black scraped from the bottom of the pans, we were ready for the make up.

To solve the decoration problems, with some cheap paints, I sketched a landscape in broad strokes on the background curtain, reinforcing the realism with branches mixed with some artificial flowers. The dragon dance required fewer props but more ingenuity. I built the head with a large bamboo vegetable basket, covered with paper-mache. We used colorful sheets sewn together to make the body. In the artistic fields, not only did I give ideas but I also executed some of them, my colleagues being rather clumsy.



I felt exhausted but glad that my contribution could help my pals live an evening with an almost normal life. With a real play and colorful costumes, they would have the illusion of being a real audience in a real theater. Time seemed to pass very quickly. The last rehearsals were reserved for the staging. The "actresses" appeared as martyrs, especially in romantic scenes.

Truong Chi and My Nuong, the fisherman and the Princess, is the story of a Princess who falls in love with the melody of a flute, going up the river near the imperial palace in the evening. My Nuong was so fascinated by the melancholy of the music, but desperate not to see the musician, that she fell seriously ill. The Queen, worried about her only daughter dying, obtained orders from the King search for the mysterious flute player. Alas! Truong Chi was a poor fisherman, hunchbacked and ugly. The wonderful sounds of music were not enough to make My Nuong forget about the fisherman's ugliness. Seeing Truong Chi, she was disappointed but healed. Looking at My Nuong, he fell in love.

Chased away, he died for not having been able to seduce her. At his death, his silent love was crystallized into a jade stone of rare perfection. According to his wish, the jade was presented to the Princess who ordered it to be carved into a tea bowl. After their meeting, the Princess recovered and completely forgot the flute player. But that evening, when My Nuong had tea, grabbing the marvelous jade bowl and raising it to her beautiful lips, she seemed to hear the sound of the flute again. Suspending her gesture, she looked at the bottom of the bowl and recognized the reflection of a small boat.

She thought of the poor fisherman, hunchbacked and ugly. The man she so longed to meet, and so promptly dismissed. She understood that Truong Chi had died of love for her. Overwhelmed with remorse, My Nuong sobbed and wept. A tear fell into the tea and the bowl shattered instantly. There was nothing left but jade dust remained, but Truong Chi could finally rest in peace. My Nuong had understood that he had died of love for her. This story I quickly told to Ly one morning when we had crossed paths at the fish pond, had made him smile. And I was ashamed to tell him that I had to play My Nuong. He seemed to be having a lot of fun. He asked me how to cry on command. I didn't know how to do either, but I promised to tell him if he could find an excuse to come back to his cell, right after the play.

The fateful day was coming. We, the actors were not really ready. We had to work, study, and all this in a very short time and remember what to do where to stand and when to go out or go on stage! Fortunately we had an excellent prompter, the skinny Tin who, behind the curtain, told us what to say or sing because we couldn't remember everything with stage fright! The main "actor" playing the leading role with me the main "actress", was Châu, a handsome guy who had a melodious voice especially on a Vong Cô tune. The problem was that when we had "romantic" scenes like in this play, he liked to make faces to tease me when I had to "act" women's attitude. He imitated me and almost made me laugh when I was supposed to be sad. I was angry, but I had to overcome my bad mood to appear sorrowful. I could have strangled Châu, my scene partner on stage, in a rage.

Tết was coming. There was a football match in the morning. In the evening, Brother Hai and the executives had invited their families to watch the show: several children, many women and grandmothers, a truly exceptional audience. After the play, a recital of revolutionary songs was planned. A ballet prepared by the women prisoners, would close the celebration. The dragon dance was planned for the next day and performed by the Chinese prisoners, great masters of this particular art. I still remembered the days of Tet, during my childhood when, hidden behind the crowd, I watched, frightened and fascinated, the circular movements of this fabulous animal to the shrill sound of drums and firecrackers.

It was just getting dark when Brother Hai gave the order to start the generator. Red and blue light spread across the stage like an unreal hallucinatory halo in the darkness. Under this artificial light, the scene became vivid, magical; the crowns and jewels, the old rags pinned with silver paper and pieces of brightly colored nylon became museum pieces, with some imagination! At the appropriate time, the cell leaders brought the prisoners in. They sat on the ground, duly surrounded by the guards. A wide space separated them from Mama Tam and the group of women who were placed next to the stage. Brother Hai and his guests sat solemnly on the chairs that were arranged along the kitchen wall. Chi Tu, the nurse responsible for the infirmary, with golden earrings, had taken place just behind with relatives who were all stiff in their new shirts.

As the audience took seats, I put the finishing touches to my makeup, surprised by the image reflected in my pocket mirror: a Chinese doll face with fake jewelry and long hair. In the dim light, my red dress made of sheets, plastic bags and cigarette paper seemed quite delicate. A little nervous I went to help the other actresses who were completely transformed. The King and Queen were also spectacular and impressive. Only Châu, who was to play Truong Chi, had the same appearance. With his camp rags and torn straw hat, he already looked like a poor fisherman. All he had to do was put on his humpbacked cushion and cover his face with scars. Since Châu didn't play the flute, another one played the flute in the backstage. Once the preparation was complete, the actresses appeared to the whistles of the actors and technicians. Laughing, some rushed towards us to touch us here and there while others called us "darling" in rude voices.

The audience was buzzing like a grand opening day at the Saigon National Theater! Backstage, Ba Ban said a few words to thank Brother Hai, without forgetting to sing the praises of the new regime. He motioned me to take my place on stage. The curtains were drawn aside by two technicians. There was no time to turn back, the Princess appeared melancholy in the imperial garden, while the sound of the flute rose as if by magic in the silence of the night. The spectators taken aback for a moment, began to comment more and more distinctly to make themselves heard. "Who's this girl?" "Tremendous" "An actress from Saigon" "Not at all, you bunch of idiots, the thin guy from cell 9" "No?" "Where did they find these costumes?"

The women seemed to be chattering much louder than the men, and they were sitting right in front of the stage! Most of them were surprised, probably expecting a propaganda sketch. Mama Tam had a hard time keeping them quiet. I was overcome with stage fright but I had to make up my mind. "This isn't the time to give up", I told myself. These compliments, which were as much insults, which flattered me as they humiliated me, could not make me forget that the joy of the camp was suspended at that moment. After all, Japanese Kabuki theater was honored by the talent of actors in female roles. There was no camp, no me. Just art and freedom.



I took My Nuong's place and became her, a frivolous girl with a changeable mood; proud princess, melancholy lover. Desperate, then mocking and cruel towards the person she had dreamed of beauty, but who was only an ugly man. She was unaware of the misfortune she was causing by her frivolity. Touched, and ultimately pathetic in the face of Truong Chi's tragic fate. The mute lover who finally revealed himself to her like a reflection in a jade cup, his own heart.

The play was in a hypnotized atmosphere, except for a few minor technical problems. The curtains did not close or open exactly on time. The microphone suspended above our heads activated by a technician sometimes became mute or too loud! But everyone seemed to be a very good audience. When the sound of the flute was heard for the last time, I raised the cup to my lips. I thought of my life in the camp, of the people I loved, so near and so far, and I stifled a sob. However I remembered that

the bowl was bound to break. So I exaggerated the trembling and dropped it. The curtains closed with cheerful applause. From that day on, I had a new name: the Princess.

Coming to my senses, I remembered the meeting with Ly. I hurriedly asked Ba Ban, apparently satisfied, for permission to return to my cell to change and remove my make-up. In my long, embarrassing dress, I headed to cell No 12. I found myself walking alone in the night. All the prisoners were listening to the spectacle that followed. The sky was dotted with stars, the air was so mild that it made me forget that I was a prisoner in a camp. I vaguely saw Ly emerge from the darkness, next to the huge water containers. At that moment, when I arrived at the door of cell N° 12, I distinctly heard the sharp sound of a rifle being loaded. I just had time to push Ly back into the cell.

“Get out or I’ll shoot”. I stepped out, holding my skirt with both hands as not to fall into the dust. This feminine gesture seemed so ridiculous to me now. Like my fake breasts, my fake hair bun, my fake jewelry... I was facing real death. At night the guards didn't hesitate to shoot. However, I was calm, ready for anything that could happen. “Where are you going? Why are you leaving the show?” I didn't have time to answer before he pointed the gun at my chest. “Come explain yourself to the bureau”. There was hostility in his voice. Why? Most guards were quite nice and enjoyed watching the show. This guard was not. He excluded himself from the fun. He was one of those who didn't like to see prisoners having a little fun. He pushed me in front of him with the point of the rifle. What a sight: a princess escorted by a soldier! I arrived at the dimly lit bureau. Another guard came out to warn Brother Hai. The echo of patriotic songs by the girls reached me distinctly.

Brother Hai entered to the sound of “Your name is the most beautiful Ho chi Minh” accompanied by guitar and drums. He looked angry: “Did you try to escape?” I didn't expect this accusation. Cold sweat broke out on my back. I saw myself already chained in the conex. “No! I had to pee. I swear I had no intention of escaping. Anyway, where could I go dressed like this?”. Brother Hai stared at me from behind his desk. A prisoner disguised as a woman, crudely made up, wearing a bad sheet of bright colors, holding a fan made of duck feathers. A curious prisoner. A pitiful princess!.. He must be thinking of the actress on stage a few minutes ago. I guessed he had enjoyed the play as much as his family. He stood up and

called the guard: "Take him back to his cell". And pointing at me: "From now on, you stay on stage until the end of the whole show...I whispered a few inaudible words of thanks. He wanted to say something more but left, back returning to the show.

Camp life was now suspended by increasingly frequent shows. Our performance was enriched with new plays and librettos of patriotic songs. I could no longer see Ly but my life at camp was distracted by studying my new roles and sewing new stage costumes. My talent as an actress has earned me flattering compliments as well as litany of mockery of dubious taste; and above all a strange affair. One of our plays featured a scene in which I played the role of a fairy. The piece was followed by a dance performed by the women prisoners. According to Brother Hai's orders, the actors were to stay behind the scenes while waiting for the program to end. The ballet was entitled "The victory of the people".

Mama Tam, out of breath, escorted her troop of ravishing dancers wearing conical hats and simple black peasant costumes. When the dance ended to enthusiastic applause, we squeezed ourselves to make way for the triumphant cavalcade of giggling dancers. In the crowded backstage, one of the girls took my hand and quickly slipped a folded piece of paper into it. I was speechless with surprise: Imagine a real young peasant girl grabbing the hand of a fake young girl disguised as a fairy, but who was in fact a man. Mama Tam didn't give me time to appreciate this situation. Out of nowhere, she snatched the paper from my hands, and angrily pushed toward the troupe of dancers, the reckless girl whose face I had barely seen.

I learned the next day that Nguyêt, the reckless dancer, had been chained to a post in the women's jail for trying to pass me a love letter! I would have been sent to conex if Mama Tam hadn't specified in her report to Brother Hai that Nguyêt was entirely responsible. It seemed that with these few words she wanted to declare her fervor to the actress without ever having spoken to her (me) before. My fellow prisoners were very excited by this adventure. My neighbor told me that Nguyêt was a fairly well-known bar girl in town. I was perplexed, shamefully flattered but particularly touched. How could this prostitute who had seen and experienced so much have fallen in love with a young man she had only seen on stage, playing princesses and fairies.

Had she crossed paths with me on the way to the work place?



I could do nothing for her, except crack a smile every time I had the opportunity to pass by the little window behind which I knew she was looking, while pulling on her chain.

Ly was one of the few who didn't comment on this story. Did he know Nguyệt? As a protector of girls, he lived in the same environment and in the same world. He knew who a prostitute was. One who could understand about the impossible and tragic feeling of the person who can never reach their loved one. It appeared that Nguyệt refused to write a self-assessment. It was for this reason that she was always chained, hanging on her chain to protect a love story that, in ordinary times, in the free world would die a natural death. Ly probably secretly envied this silent torture which was the visible proof of a tremendous passion.

The rumor had it that she was dying. Each new performance celebrated the anniversary of her misfortune. I didn't have much more feeling for Nguyệt than a kind of tenderness reserved for a defenseless sister. But I admired her courage. Her loneliness, her sorrow were mine.

One evening, while I was removing my make up after the play, a guard came to pick me up and take me to the Bureau. I quickly took off my stage costume and put on a shirt to follow him. What offense had I committed? What happened? I was very anxious. Arriving at the Bureau, I saw the heavy figure of Mama Tam gesticulating. Bad sign.

Brother Hai behind his desk looked perplexed. He interrupted her and explained to me that an incident had just happened this evening at the women's jail, during the show. Already very weak, Nguyệt had just fallen off a stool and now found herself in a coma. Mama Tam launched into a voluble story: "During the show, I had a headache and went back to the cell to get "Tiger balm". Everyone was present at the show. From the door I saw Nguyệt perched on a stool trying to watch the play from the window, pulling her chain. I then saw her fall to the ground, perhaps because of dizziness. She was crying. Everybody cried seeing you so unhappy, sorry, I mean you on stage with your role. I heard Nguyệt calling your name! Since then, nothing has happened, it's as if she was dead. I heard a story like this: The sick girl only woke up when her lover called her name. So, there you go, I thought it might be the case if you just came....".



This story was incredible. Mama Tam had lost her mind. But Brother Hai? He didn't believe in this kind of nonsense I hope! This could be a trap to make me confess I don't know what. I had to be very careful. I told him that I wasn't a doctor. Besides, I didn't know Nguyệt before that day. Brother Hai cut short my protest: "This is all your fault: how did you sing to make her mad. Do something. If she dies, you will sleep in the conex tonight". My God! I then understood that they didn't want to have death on their conscience. They had tried everything to save Nguyệt' s life. All that remained was an irrational procedure. After all, who could blame them for the death of a prostitute, when so many prisoners died of dysentery, tuberculosis, walking on mines or after a certain time spent in the conex. If they could pity a girl who was nothing to them, could I refuse to help the one who made so many sacrifices for so few feelings? Could I abandon my little sister in misfortune. I followed them like a sleepwalker.



NGUYET enchaînée

When I arrived at the women's camp, Brother Hai cleared away the curious girls who jostled out of the cell. The large cell in the shed, seemed tidier than the men's, but as destitute and desperate, lit by a flickering oil lamp.

We approached a mat and then I saw a motionless figure, dressed in mended rags, one ankle attached to a long chain fixed to the nearest post. Not far from the mat, a stool under a window from which you could see the stage by climbing on it. The girls were milling about now, spying through that window to see what was going on inside. Long, disheveled hair hid part of a pretty pale face. Eyes closed, lips pursed, Nguyêt looked dead.

Brother Hai urged me: “Finally, do something. Feel her pulse”. Awkwardly, I gingerly took her wrist, then let go. I didn't know how to handle it, nor what the normal speed of a pulse was! What if it was a trap?

I thought maybe she would breathe better if her head was raised. I asked Mama Tam, who was watching my every move as if I were a magician, to help me. I grabbed a folded sheet nearby and slipped it under the pillow, while Mama Tam tried to raise her head. It was then that a stream of blood gushed from her mouth. The girls screamed in fear. Brother Hai was stunned. Mama Tam, horrified, dropped Nguyêt' s head. I was upset but trying to understand. I took a rag and pressed it to her mouth. I told Brother Hai: “She probably bit herself when she fell and the blood stayed in her mouth”.



I asked Mama Tam to apply the “tiger balm” on Nguyêt' s forehead. And I finally decided to call her by her name, while Mama Tam gently pulled the hair at her temples. But Nguyêt showed no reaction. I was tired and discouraged. Since it was getting cold, I took off my shirt to lay it on her. As disappointed as the audience I guess, Brother Hai told me to go back to my cell. I walked towards the door, with a heavy heart. The girls followed me with their eyes, in silence.

When I was out in the yard with Brother Hai, I heard Mama Tam screaming out loud as the girls rushed to the cell. “Look! She opens her eyes”. Since that day, my fellow prisoners went on teasing me by calling me “Doctor of Heart ”.

The story which circulated around the camp filled up the conversations for a few weeks, entertaining the camp for a while!

The chain was probably removed that night, and Nguyệt gradually recovered from her illness. About a month later, on my way back from work, I saw her among the girls carrying palm leaves to the camp. Catching my eye, she lowered her head slightly, giving a shy smile.

Was she really sick that day? Or had she pretended to bring me to her own cell, solemnly accompanied by the camp leader? I will never know.

The last time I saw her was during the evacuation of the Women's Camp before the flooding got worse. Just a glimpse.



Mysterious Nguyet. Who was this girl? A woman living near the Laotian border, performing a Lamthong dance on the occasion of Tet? or a Viet Cong fighter? or a bar regular, spying on Americans or working for them? If so, why was she in jail? I still wonder if she was an unfortunate woman ready to die for love, or a courageous woman who pretended she was dying, so that she could see the person she loved?



Four months after Tet, our rice ration was reduced again. The football teams were disbanded. Anyway, players became too weak to play matches. As for the Cai Luong theater, Brother Hai introduced new propaganda pieces extolling the glory of the communist regime, written after the collapse of Saigon. These were generally grotesque caricatures of the American and Thieu governments, with excessive praise of communism. A parody which discredited the winners rather than the losers. In libraries, after several campaigns against "corrupt literature", people found only works and exegeses of Ho Chi Minh and his masters. Among the plays, "Restart her life" with some current intrigues, had won the favor of the public. I had great success playing "en province" the main role of Thanh Nga a famous actress from Saigon.

But in the camp the compliment was accompanied on the first show by an unusual and unforeseen incident. I played the role of the heroine Huong, later called Jacqueline Huong. Married to a South Vietnamese officer, her husband was wounded in combat and reported "missing in action". She had to work in a bar to earn a living. There she met an American officer and married. The Vietnamese husband reappeared, one-legged but alive. He surprises her in the arms of his rival, tries to kill the American, but dies under the bullets of the bodyguards. The young woman full of remorse, decided to avenge her Vietnamese husband. She joined the "Liberation Front" as an informant in order to "Restart her life".

That evening, for the contemporary play I dropped my princess dress for a tight glittery green dress. My appearance on stage in western skirt with excessive make up, "seductive and suggestive" was greeted with a burst of whistles. The warm welcome was quickly drowned out by an unusual agitation: the guards were controlling a spectator who rushed onto the stage screaming hysterically. I was surprised to learn that the madman was doctor Thât. He was arrested while fleeing with his wife and friends. Among the confiscated clothes that Brother Hai attributed to the artists, there was this unexpected dress I wore!.. Doctor Thât was seized by a fit of jealousy when he saw me appear in the dress of.. his wife.

Of course, in the camp after their arrest, they were separated. He could not communicate with his wife who was then living in the women's jail. They could sometime see each other when going out into the central courtyard, but each stayed inside their own small courtyard. They couldn't talk because of the distance, and the rules. I don't know if this situation

was luck or torture. Over time he might go crazy. Dr Thât may have been a very jealous husband before he came to camp, since his wife, whom we saw from our yard, looked much younger than him. Was he jealous or just disconnected? Or had he suspected his wife of having an “affair” with some of us, just with glances? Maybe he was jealous of me, ever since the Nguyễn story?

I really couldn't know. The scandal would bring him directly to the conex, if he hadn't already taken care of the executives. On the run with Dr That and his wife, there were many friends, all intellectuals, researchers... I don't understand why the government was deploying so much energy and subtlety to stop the brain exodus, to put them in jail. While Saigon and the entire country were seriously lacking in technicians, experts and especially doctors. The profit was zero and the damage was considerable.

Beyond deprivation and exhaustion, most of the prisoners suffered from behavioral disorders, generalized psychological troubles of varying severity. Some let themselves die, others became apathetic, talking alone in a corner. But, how could we have overcome anxiety, frustration, suspicion and jealousy? Far from his family, the deportee imagined the worst. The fewer visits and news he received, the more his pessimism was confirmed.

He saw his house confiscated, his wife and children without refuge. He saw them starving, women pushed into prostitution to meet his needs and bring him the few provisions each month, in order to prolong his life a little longer. While most of the women remained good wives and mothers, patiently awaiting release, many remarried, abandoning their husbands and children to "Restart their lives" with some executives from the North!

Several months passed, without any noticeable change. Just that the camp was filled with more and more prisoners. We were in a state of severe malnutrition and the camp became too small. It was at this time that the Bureau sent the first groups of prisoners to build huts for a farming camp deep in the swamps. The most unhealthy region of the delta, infested with mosquitoes, sterilized by alum salts. If the agricultural camp was considered an “Experimental Farm”, it was because until now, no one had ventured there, especially not for agricultural reasons! Where no plant, no animal could resist. The "experiment" was probably to test if human

beings could survive there! So, it was considered a different kind of conex!

One morning, to our great surprise, as we were ready to leave for work, brother Hai came out of the office with the loudspeaker. Bad sign. My fear was confirmed when he called out the names of those who were to go to the "Experimental Farm". I heard the name of Ly.

Later, Ba Ban the theater director told me that at the beginning, my name appeared on the departure list proposed by the cell leaders. But Brother Hai wanted to keep the actress for the show, and had my name removed. I suppose Ba Ban too appreciated having me as first actress, even though the other "girls" had done their best. I realize now that even if people were in the same situation, their fate would be different. Fate or Karma? Sometimes having some skill could help! I don't think I would have survived long on this Experimental Farm. Playing Princess role could save someone's life!

That morning, prisoners selected for the Farm were urged to immediately gather in the central courtyard with their belongings. Taking the risk of breaking the rules, I took advantage of the disorder to rush into the central courtyard. I had just enough time to put my soft cotton hat on Ly's head when they started leaving the Camp.



6

I've always wondered how people survived after losing a loved one. Now, alone, I thought with bitterness that after three years, I was still detained without trial, without hope of one day being released. I wanted justice. Shoot me, or let me go. It's no longer important to me. I wanted to be judged, I refused this haunting and terrible uncertainty. Although, I said nothing, I never rebelled, I carried my forced labor without saying a word. But I no longer smiled, I no longer laughed. I didn't cry either. Laughing, smiling, crying would remind me too much of the days before. I would have preferred to lose my memory, to forget. I envied the prisoners who became apathetic, or crazy in the camp, spending most of their days talking to themselves in a corner.

Another Tet, the most sorrowful of my life, and six months had passed without the slightest news from Ly. Was he dead or still alive? In June 1978, in the early hours of a Sunday, word spread that a boat was returning from the farming camp. This involved bringing back very sick prisoners that the Bureau had decided to evacuate, due to the high mortality rate. I volunteered to fetch water for the cell and walked past the central kitchen. It was considered a favor, being an artist, to be able to leave your cell for a while. It was in the central kitchen where the sick were gathered before being dispatched to the cells or sent to the "small hut" before joining the cemetery.

I cannot describe the horror that seized me at the sight of these wavering skeletons passing by me. Real human wrecks draped in torn filthy rags that floated around their bony legs, not thicker than a child's wrist. Their walk was so slow that it was like a slackened moving picture. They leaned on each other for support. They were all the same in their terrible decrepitude: they were going to die. Two guards escorted the procession, grudgingly carrying a corpse rolled up in a rotten mat, on an improvised gurney from which two skinny yellow legs dangled. A prisoner

who collapsed during the trip, no doubt, otherwise they would have buried him on site at the farming camp, so as not to weigh down the boat. Was it the corpse of my friend Ly?

I learned that it was Minh, the sturdy goalkeeper of Ly's team. He used to call me Cam Loan, from the heroine in his favorite play. When he went on stage to perform a patriotic song, especially “The post-man” (Anh linh quân buu), he never missed an opportunity to look for me behind the stage, pinch me and laugh. If strong and smart Minh was now reduced to a corpse, how could Ly survive?

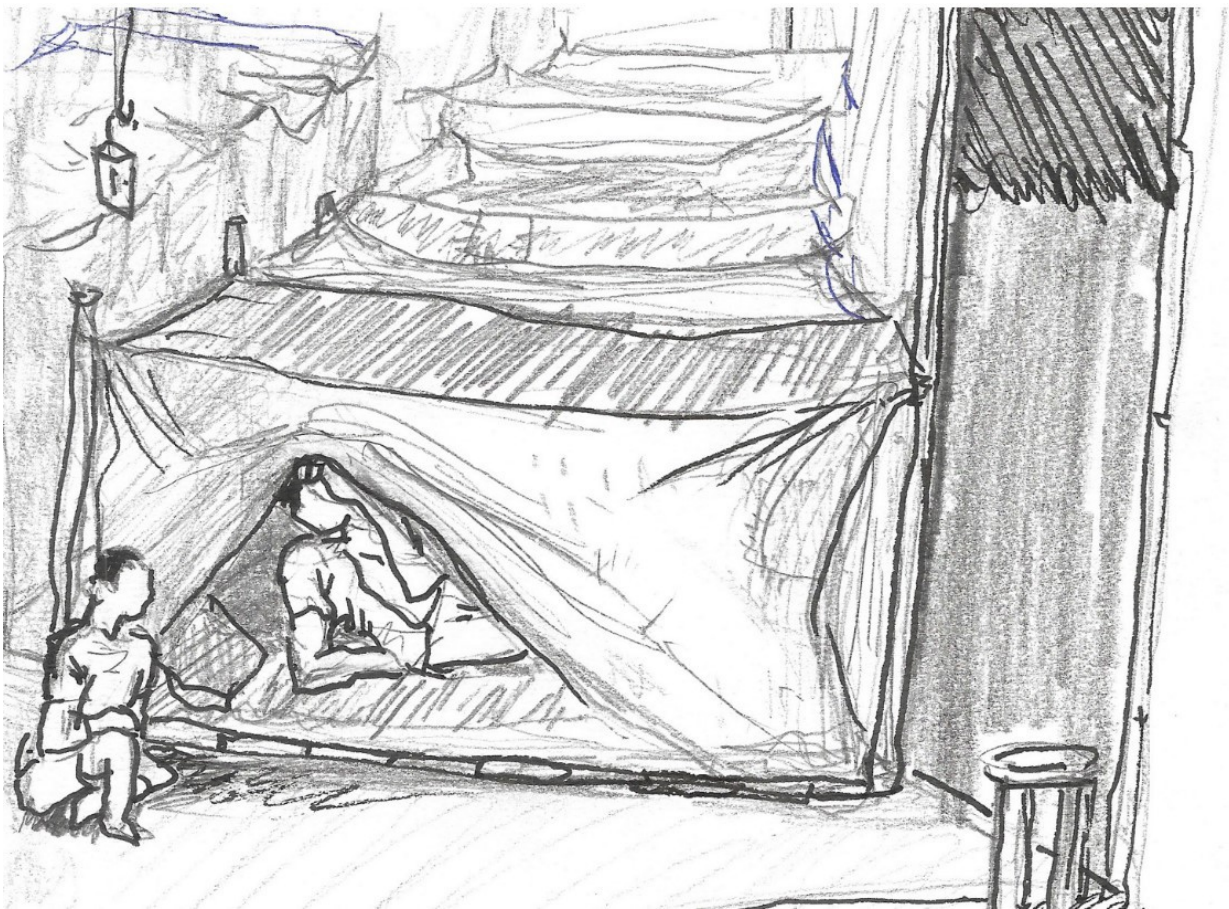
I approached but I didn't recognize anyone among these faces which were shrinking and withering into tiny old men. Bay Que, manager of the central kitchen and supervisor of the reception, seemed to tolerate my presence. One of the skeletons took a few hesitant steps towards me. Was it Ly? I was chilled with fear. The mummy grimaced a grin: “Don't you remember me? I'm Hung titi the Least, your neighbor in the cell No. 9”. I felt anger in my throat. Oh my God! Hung the Least, my rude and loud roommate! What did they do to you? With remorse, and late tenderness, I took his bony hands. I wanted so much to tell him that I'm sorry for not being friendlier to him before. But I didn't say anything.

Big dark circles around feverish eyes, Hung the Least told me: “I coughed and spit blood. For this reason I can come back” I felt like a folded paper in my palm. “Ly sent you this. Be careful”. I returned to my cell, upset. Lying on my mat, turned against the wall as if I were sleeping, I read Ly's letter:”Trong. I give Hung this letter because I know he's on the list. I hope you're well. I am very ill but Duc Rau won't let me come back. I make a lot of mistakes, don't pay attention to them I feel sad. Take care. Good bye. Ly”. I've made up my mind. Ly seemed so desperate, I had to go to the Experimental Camp and see him.

A few days later, one evening just before curfew, to avoid attracting the attention of my roommates, I decided to talk to the leader of my cell about it. I chose the night when I was in charge of security, as someone had to guard the entrance to the cell, taking turns. Usually Nam Son wasn't friendly to any one in the cell, including me. With his suspicious look, he didn't trust anyone. But since I was playing female roles on stage, he seemed nicer to me. Until now he hadn't abused his power, but he never missed an opportunity to joke out loud, which embarrassed me terribly. Once I returned from the show, still in my dress and passing past his couch

near the entrance to the cell, he pulled up my skirt and whispered to me: "Stay in your princess dress and come sleep with me". I smiled but didn't say anything.

Nam Son enjoyed twice the space of the other prisoners. At that time, late in the evening, around his couch, most of the mosquito nets were installed and drawn to prevent the terrible bites. I wanted to make sure no one noticed my presence. When Nam Son saw me, he lifted a corner of the net to let me in, and moved inside to let me a place next to the passage. "Princess, what can I do for you?" Around us, the closest neighbors were already snoring under their mosquito nets.

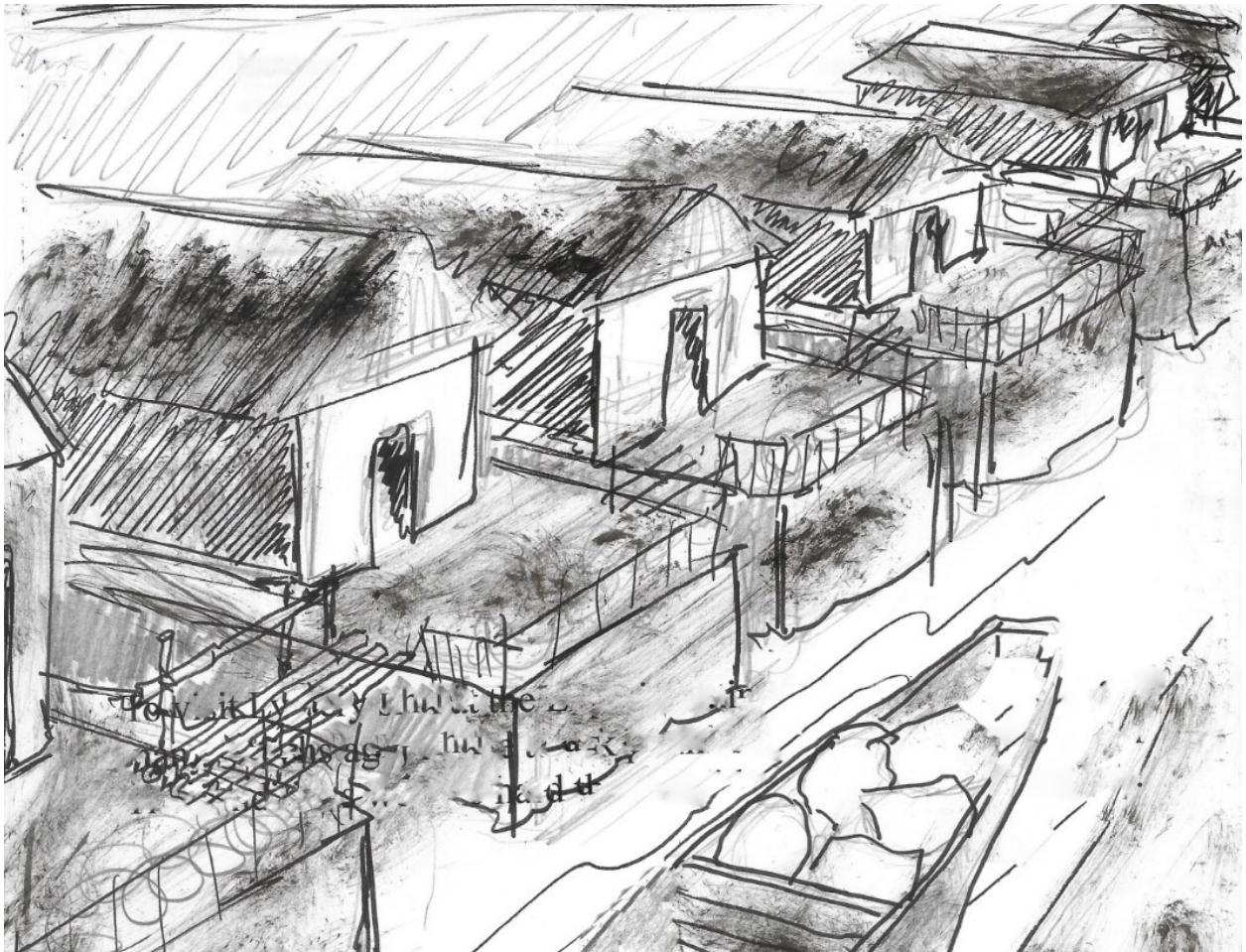


So as not to be heard by the neighbors, I whispered: "You have a comfortable sleeping space". "You want to try?" He said laughing. I launched myself: "Please let me volunteer one day to unload the food for the farm, and return with the convoy in the same day. I would like to see a friend there". Of course I had already researched this information. Nam Son seemed angry. But it was his turn to whisper: «You are kidding? Have you forgotten that we are in prison? Who's to say you wouldn't try to escape along the way?»

I decided to change tactics and remained silent. He lifted his heavy body on one elbow, and his nearest hand as if by chance, rested on my knee: “Look, I might send you there. I just have to ask Bay Que, but...”. At that moment, the metal curfew signal sounded. I was tempted to get up and go back to my place. But I didn't move. There was a brief hubbub, then everything went silent. Nam Son stood up to blow the lamp hanging above his head. The cell was now plunged into darkness. In the middle of the silence, mixed with the snoring, arose the song of the crickets, a monotonous and shrilled melody.

One morning, I boarded the motor boat loaded with food in the company of two guards and Bay Que, a thin old man probably most trusted by the Bureau. Maybe a former executive rallied to the South Vietnam army (chiêu hồi): he always wore a black and white scarf symbolic of the Viet Cong. He was not only in charge for the central kitchen but also for many other special tasks. Perhaps forced to accept me because recommended by Nam Son, he got used to my company. He asked me about the theater play we would be performing in the next show. He seemed a fan and expert of “Cai Luong” theater. I already knew he would become an ally. Unfortunately our conversation was disturbed by a whirlwind of mosquitoes harassing us in a vibrational nightmare. The guards, all very young, machine guns in their left fists, tried to chase away the insects with their right but without much success.

The trip was endless. We had to go down the river for hours, then take increasingly narrow channels. At a fork, the landscape became suddenly flat and dull. The red, viscous and brackish water carried shoals of leeches between the banks covered with poor and faded vegetation. We had been sailing for a good hour without seeing any human being, when we approached the working place. In freshly dug canals, I saw several skinny men in rags wading in the mud. To dig useless canals in a sterile plain. Among the prisoners, I didn't recognize any one. Some of them waved at me, but I saw no smile on their bloodless faces. Their eyes no longer expressed anything. There was only a silent despair, probably the ultimate desire to die and escape forever the exhaustion, and the screams of the guards. I hadn't yet recovered from this awful vision when suddenly, the Farm stood before us like an immense cemetery.



The new Camp was made up of several rows of parallel sheds, separated by canals crossed by fragile bamboo bridges. I unloaded the food bags under the stern but interested eyes of the guards from the watchtowers who surrounded the camp. A rare distraction in this spectral universe. When I had finished my work, Bay Que, who knew the camp well, guided me across the muddy dykes. He asked someone who showed him Ly's cell. It was noon. Everyone was working on the nearby canals. Bay Que dropped me off at the door of a low hut, asking me to wait for him without going anywhere. The cell was dark. I was suffocated by the smell of moisture, mold and nauseating air. I leaned against a bamboo frame, unable to pierce the darkness. Little by little, I caught a vague noise in the back of the hut. I moved cautiously among the empty rows of mats. The human form lying in the back of the cell wore a floppy hat. My hat. This thing hidden in the shadows was Ly.

Ly weakly tried to get up. I hurried to my knees and put an arm behind his back, mostly to hide my fear “Oh, God, help me, please don't let

me cry. He must not know in what state I found him”. I remained for a long moment without speaking, pulling on his mat, arranging his straw pillow. I barely recognized him. How can someone change so much? Like images of starving children from Biafra. A head with too big bulging eyes. I remember this scene without hatred but with weariness. What could be justified during the war was no longer justified now, many years after the “Liberation”. Useless suffering, torture that goes without saying. A strong regime should not count on such revenge.

“You received my letter”. “Yes”. I didn't understand why my hat, which suited him so well, seemed so big now. I took the hat off. His head was shaved. More than anything, this mutilation was the very expression of his despair.



What have you done to suffer like this? Those who deserved such torture had long since left, far away from here, their pockets full of money stolen from the people. Why don't you, the new lords of this country, the current heroic regime, go and find them. Lock them up instead of these insignificant people, too poor, too innocent. Or too stupid to dream of running away. These people have always been victims of any regime, this one or another. Free them and you will be more human and stronger. The

world will look at you as true and generous heroes. Free them and each of us will forget our mistakes. We are so tired, so sad, so exhausted that there is no room left for resentment and revenge.

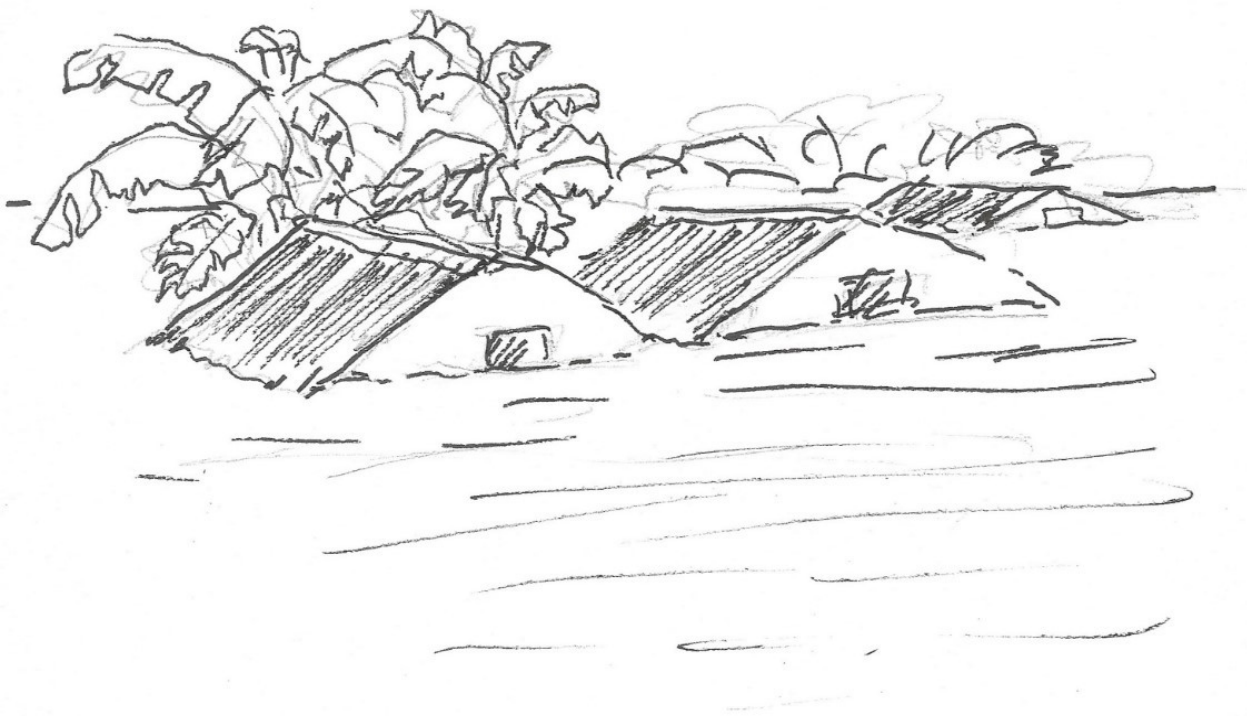
I looked at Ly, leaning against the partition where he had pushed aside the straw like tiny windows to see outside. To see what? I busied myself with him to hide my pain, unwrapping the poor quality sweets that I had hidden in an old bag since his letter. “Tell me, how could you come here?” I was ashamed: “Nam Son.. Well, I came to unload the food..”. This was partly true. I directed the conversation else where: “Can you eat normally?” “Yes, but there is nothing to eat. Besides, I got sick”. We were so absorbed by our conversation that we didn't see Bay Que who from the door, told me to leave. Ly seemed panicked. “Stay. Stay a while” I was very sad but I couldn't keep them waiting. “Take care of yourself. I'll try to send you news through Bay Que” He sounded calmer. “Okay, I’m going now”. But I stood still, a lump in my throat.

On my return, I felt depressed but somewhat satisfied. Bay Que, no doubt touched by our friendship, kept me regularly updated on Ly. Since my visit, he had recovered from his illness, thanks to his youth and a glimmer of hope. He could work again. A few months after our meeting, I received a gift from Ly that Bay Que had brought back from the experimental Farm, after the food delivery. Two tiny chickens in a small bamboo basket. It probably came from his sister, since Ly knew of my passion for little fighting cocks. I thanked the Bay Que for taking a great risk in acting as the messenger, and even more so in carrying such an embarrassing gift. Anyway, he wouldn't be allowed to keep the chickens.

I immediately started building a tiny bamboo box in a corner of the small yard. Nam Son didn't say anything. I raised the two chickens with some cereals from my ration and worms from the garbage near the fish pond. The chickens soon had tiny, frail feathers growing from their wings and tails. The hen was gray, her legs were not thicker than wires, her head was delicate like a quail's. The rooster was more colored and tried to sing. Time passing, the redder his small crest became. Over time, the chickens became adults, without getting much bigger. Every morning, the little cocorico filled me with joy.

This year, during the rainy season, there was a rumor of flooding of the Mekong. This would overflow and ruin the fields in the low-level southern provinces. We lived in fear of another poor rice harvest which would once again reduce our rice rations. The threat was so imminent that the Bureau decided to evacuate the women's camp to the city when water began to fill the courtyard. The girls only had a few minutes to pack. It was probably enough to wrap some clothes in a piece of paper and collect their straw hats. But that was not enough time to say a silent farewell to those they left behind, no doubt for ever.

Among them, many men and women who silently promised eternal passion, who made plans, argued and reconciled with looks. All those for whom the simple presence of women prisoners was a consolation in itself, lost in an instant the only hope that made them get up every morning. Standing in our little barbed yard, we silently watched the girls get into the military trucks, half the wheels under water. I saw Nguyễn climbing in the truck glancing towards cell 9, my cell, probably to say farewell. I felt my heart tighten slightly. That was the last time I saw Nguyễn.



To protect the camp from flooding, the Bureau decided to have us build a dike around the entire camp, like a fortress. We had to work day and night in the storm because the water was rising quickly. We were lost in an ocean, and felt like we were at the bottom of an empty bowl surrounded by water. Corpses of dead animals were floating here and there. About a week after the women left the camp, one stormy night, the roof of the women's pavilion collapsed. The next day, the camp was like a pond. Despite our efforts to drain the water, the rain and infiltration drowned everything. We saw the time coming when the water level would be the same outside as inside the camp. In the cells, we had to build rudimentary bamboo platforms for shelter and to try to stay dry. We stayed inside most of the time, except to repair the dike. I wondered why the government did not release us now, instead of letting us die of hunger, cold and sick from the flood!

Since the beginning of the flood, we had no news from the Farm. Located on the sterile lands of the delta, the disaster would be a calamity. I was very worried about Ly. How could they fight the flood there? What did they have to eat since the Bureau had stopped all the food convoys. Short of rice (exported to Russia?), the management fed us cereals used as animal feed. Chickens fed with this no longer laid eggs. Most of us had diarrhea. One day, a cyclone tore off the roof of the theater, miraculously preserved until now, and caused great damages to our cells.

Water below, water above, we were wet most of the time. Cold and humidity made our stomach aches even worse. Only my chickens distracted me somewhat from my pain. At the first rumor of the floods, I evacuated them from their little hen house, put them in the basket hung above my head, and fed them with some of my cereal. They seemed bored, losing a little of their energy every day. One morning, as I looked through the basket, I saw two little spiky balls, the crests purple. Dead. I could not even cry. I wrapped them in the rags before placing them in a small boat made of wrapping paper. I let the boat sail along with the water. With this tiny raft, my last dream was gone.

That day another funeral boat sailed away, even more pathetic. Hung the Least, back from the Experimental Farm, had died of hemorrhagic tuberculosis. Nobody could do anything for him. There was no more medicine, not a single quinine tablet. Nothing. We could no longer find

any medicinal herbs. The flood had covered all the fields. Death, which usually occurred so unnoticed in the camp, became a problem for the Bureau. The cemetery was submerged. Hung the Least my pitiful messenger, was sent away in a boat; we didn't know where. Hung and my chickens had taken the same journey on the water. In the confusion I found myself, their deaths had the same symbolic meaning.

My stomach aches worsened. But there was nothing else to eat. There had been no visits, no packages since the flood. Anyway, public transportation was reduced. I was losing weight and getting weaker day by day. I stayed curled up in a corner, listening to time passing, rain falling, my life slipping away. The higher the water rose in the camp, the deeper I fell into despair. I saw death approaching like a deliverance. I just thought it was stupid to have waited more than three years in this hell, finally dying without seeing Ly and my family again.

It was in this depressing atmosphere that the first liberation took place. One morning, a motorboat stopped in front of the Bureau house. The water level was perhaps half the height of the door. After a few minutes, Brother Hai, with a loudspeaker called out the names of a dozen of prisoners who hurriedly left the camp on the boat, escorted by armed guards. Very excited, each of us calculated his own chance, looking for a reason to hope.

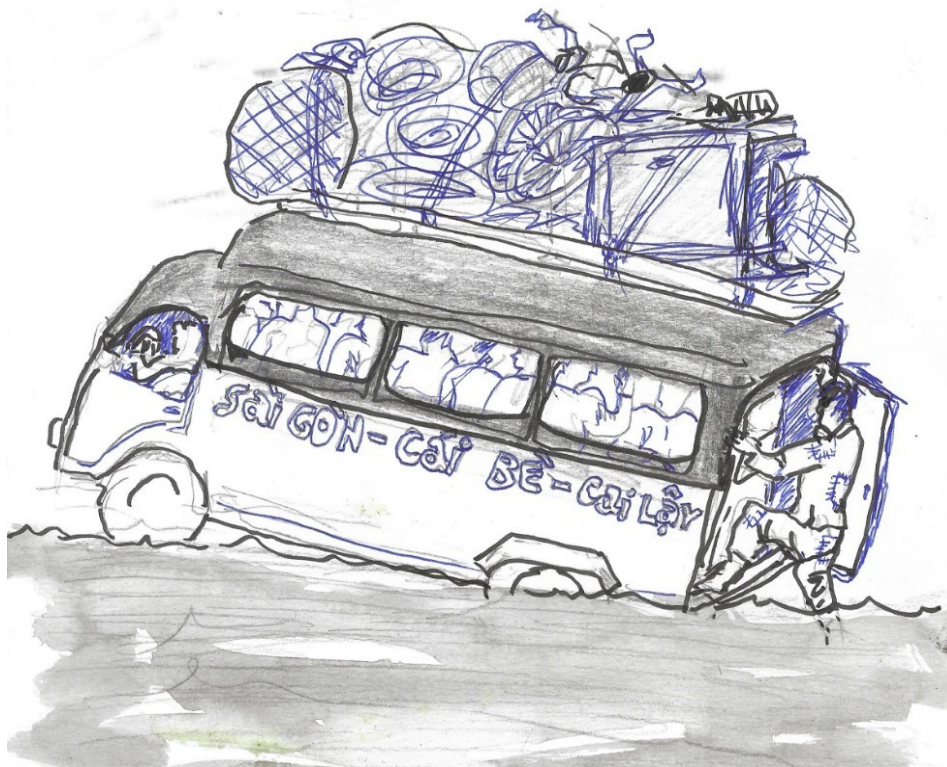
But we eventually noticed that the released prisoners were all Chinese Boat people candidates. Many of them tried to flee Vietnam after the government confiscated their businesses and wealth, pushing them into the "Economic Zones" kind of «Experimental Farm». In November 1978, Lê Duân, Communist Party general Secretary found another way to extort more gold from Chinese prisoners by releasing them. There was no small profit and freedom was for sale. I felt relieved for my Chinese companions, but I had no illusions for myself. But then something incredible happened.

On November 28, 1978, when I was drowsy in a corner, my roommates woke me up loudly: "Trong, go to the Bureau. Your name is on the list, you are free". At the time, I didn't believe them. It took me a while to realize that there was another list this morning, and that the boat was there. Why me? Why now? Where did my parents get the money? But I didn't have time to say anything that my fellow prisoners helped me up to the Bureau. The water reached our knee level. It was very confusing in my head, but a strange energy pushed me forward. With about a dozen prisoners, all Chinese, I received a paper from the Bureau attesting that we

had been released from the My Phuoc Tay camp. Just like in a dream, trembling and shocked, I boarded the boat with the other liberated fellows which reached the province of Cai Lậy about an hour later. How could I inform Ly?

The town was flooded, but cars were still driving, with only half of the wheels underwater. The camp was located in a lower part of the province. I had to take a bus to Saigon. But I left the camp with nothing, just my old clothes on me. No shoes, no money. The other prisoners were Chinese and came from cells other than mine. Their families were waiting for them when the boat arrived in town. Soon they all disappeared. I didn't know why I was released, but I knew for sure that I had to leave this place, and quickly. Anyhow. As far as possible.

Bare foot and dressed in rags, I almost ran to the bus station. I saw a bus full and ready to leave, the sound of the engine seemed impatient. I approached the bus driver's door. I said to the driver, a rough middle aged man "I have just been released from My Phuoc Tây camp. I want to go to Saigon but I don't have money". I was about to faint, leaning on the door of the bus. My weakness was from anemia. It also came from the dizziness that seized me when in contact with this dense crowd of free men, of whom I thought I had no longer been a part for an eternity, and forever. The driver looked at me, and said: "Get in". I realized at that moment why I loved my people despite many bad sides. They are hard working, loud talking but never leave anyone in distress.



Many years had passed, I thought my parents were already discouraged and had stopped any attempt to get me released. But all the time I was in the “Re-education camp”, they never lost hope of getting me out. My mother tried to get help from her sister Aunt Di who had married a Viet Cong school teacher. Because of their political activities she had been once arrested. Aunt Di was imprisoned in Saigon Central jail. During this period all suspects were brutally tortured and quickly sent to Pulau Condor Island Prison, with little chance of returning. At the time my parents had rescued her. My mother begged my father to intervene to save her sister.

My father had a friend he knew when he was a student in France, who was at the time head of «Deuxième Bureau» kind of Vietnamese F.B.I. My aunt was immediately released and later on she disappeared. We haven't heard from her again. In fact, around 1954, date of partition of Viet Nam, we heard that her husband and her son Bui had joined the North. Twenty years later, after the fall of Saigon, Aunt Di returned to Bê n Tré with her son Bui, my cousin. Her husband must have died sometime ago. Bui now held an important position in his hometown. One day, my mother went to visit her sister and nephew.

She just saw my cousin and asked him if he could do something for me. With contempt, Bui treated my mother like a stranger. Did he know that if my parents hadn't intervened, his mother would have been sent to Pulau Condor a long time ago? Bui told my mother: “Let him stay there to be re-educated. It is a chance for crooks like him» My mother swallowed her tears and left. Two or three months passed. One evening, Bui, completely drunk, was found dead, falling from a bamboo bridge. People from his village who passed by, saw him struggling in the river. But they let the beloved «executive» drown, re-educated.

My father had better luck with his family. He later told me this incredible story. My paternal grandfather was called "Thây (master) Tam Lai" because he practiced traditional medicine often free of charge for poor families. He was native of Tan An, Nhut Tao village (Nhự t = Japan. Tao = Battle). The name of the village comes from an ambush of guerillas sinking a Japanese army ship whose rotting wreckage was visible for a long time. On his sampan, he went in remote hamlets and had the opportunity to heal Sanh, a smart little boy. He took a liking to him and

proposed to sponsor him. Sanh lived with his family, Viet Minh resistance fighters...



After many failures to free me, my father remembered Uncle Sanh, my grandfather's "adopted" child. Uncle Sanh always remained in touch with our family, mainly with my father, whom he admired very much. After April 1975, many of his family members who had secretly joined the communist army of North Vietnam, returned to South Vietnam. Some of them had obtained important positions in the current government. Recently, on the memory day of my grand father's death, while he was on duty in Saigon, Uncle Sanh came to my parents' house to participate in Grandfather's "Giô" ceremony.

That day, not seeing me, Uncle Sanh asked about me. My father told him that I was imprisoned in a camp. He asked my father the name and location of the camp. My father said that I was in My Phuoc Tây camp, in the province of Cai Lậy. Uncle Sanh was surprised of the coincidence: the chief of this camp, Anh Hai, was the husband of one of his nieces. From there, things moved very quickly. Taking advantage of the liberation of the Chinese, and the fact that myself was like them, a Boat-people candidate, my name was probably added to the list for the following release of Chinese prisoners.



7

I barely recognized our house. It looked sad and empty, as if it were uninhabited. My mother had to sell most of the furniture to buy food, and to make us look poor, so as not to be noticed and called bourgeois. The more miserable you looked, the more you could hope to continue living. For the same reason, they wore old dull clothes. The South Vietnamese so neat and particular about their appearance, so proud of their home, neglected themselves to live a false peace.

My mother seemed anxious but she did her best to hide her worries. To keep the family out of trouble, she resigned herself to endless political meetings and endless hours waiting in line for food. My father took definitely shelter in illness. That permitted him to escape from meetings and to avoid contact with a depressing reality. He became alive and dynamic only by imagining how to get me out. So sophisticated Lan, resigned herself to crocheting sweaters and embroidering scarves for export to Russia. Ngoc couldn't go to public school because she was the daughter of an officer. Everything was now under the supervision of the block leader

Our family just relieved by my return, was informed of the death of my brother-in-law on September 23, 1979. The information came from a camp located in Nghệ Tĩnh, in North Vietnam. How did he live? How did he die? He hadn't seen Lan and Ngoc since the day he left home with two shirts for a re-education session. For only a few days, the current government declared at the time. You study well and you will come back so that we can “build” the country “Together”. “Lây tình thương xóa bỏ hận thù”. “We favor love and erase hatred”.

I wanted to go to a Church or a Pagoda to burn a candle or an incense for Hâu. But that was no longer possible. Most temples were closed. Many religious leaders had been arrested. The government replaced them with “cadres of the party” who took on the role of patriotic Catholic and

Buddhist priests. If you entered a Temple, you could feel eyes behind your neck. Catholic soutanes and Buddhist saffron outfits were banned from the streets. It seemed that mass was still celebrated. Curious coincidence, the popular forced labor took place at the time of the mass. The young monks and nuns were sent back to secular life. There would be no one left to take over. In January, we celebrated, still clandestinely, the hundred-day ceremony in memory of Hâu' s death. With a piece of white cloth around their heads, Lan and Ngoc said good bye to Hâu, who was nowhere.

Oddly enough, I recovered my strength quite quickly. Some other prisoners returned home disabled or depressed. Thanks to my health, I regained my optimistic character. I needed that to face the reality. I was more determined than ever to stay in Vietnam, no matter what. Paradoxically, my time in the camp had made me understand that with good will, I could perhaps accommodate myself to living in Vietnam. I was convinced that exile was the worst thing, the most mutilating. I was without hatred or resentment, ready to adapt to anything to stay in my country. I naively imagined that after more than three years in power, the communist government would play the role of liberator that it claimed to play and would improve daily life. My scientific training, however, encouraged me to see things objectively.

Saigon after a few years had changed its face while changing its name: Ho Chi Minh town was on bicycles. Those who didn't pedal were crammed in crowded buses that broke down at every street corner. A memory of the old days, one would sometimes see a car pass by with an executive in a not very ironed shirt, his stern face imbued with the high mission of communism. The markets were cleaner for the good reason that there was nothing left to buy or sell. The shop signs had disappeared along with the trade. The Vietnamese tunic " ao dai" that had survived the century and tyranny was considered by the new regime as an outward mark of wealth, of luxury, a symbol of capitalism that had to disappear.

Cholon, the Chinese town became a ghost town. Boat-people's houses were confiscated for the benefit of public administration, or of senior executives. The number of emigrants by sea was so high that the block leaders limited themselves to sticking the confiscation notice on closed doors. I saw one day, on the doorstep of a recently confiscated house, fruits and incense offered by the neighbors to an entire family drowned at sea.



The multiplication of public buildings so easily acquired, led to the multiplication of administrative procedures. To obtain even the slightest document, people went back and forth from one office to another all day

long. In the end, I understood that the problem came more from the ignorance of the managers than from deliberate policy! Despite their intensive training, which often didn't exceed the level of an elementary class, they were not capable of solving the simplest problems, and hid their incompetence in throwing the ball endlessly until it fell into the net. Their idiotic attitude and arrogance tried to mask ignorance. Corruption, a wound of the former regime, far from being healed, had become infected. People could not get anything without paying, Everything had to be sold. Public services had their official rate. Set by the senior leader.

An economist, very favorable to communism, perhaps disenchanted after some painful experiences said: “Before we were governed by corrupt intellectuals. Today we are governed by people who are not only corrupt, but also stupid”. Life became a real nightmare for housewives, desperate or not. The nationalization of all businesses naturally involved the black market. After several hours waiting one could obtain meaner rations, while the cooperatives were rarely open. Never had the economic situation been so disastrous, never had the black market "to compensate" with incredible prices. The communist had in fact only managed to keep one promise: “Everyone is indeed equal, because everyone is poor”. Except that there were classes of “New rich”, executives and families, and shameless people who took advantage of the chaos, by flattering and serving the new masters. We called them “mister thirty” for April 30th.

According to the government, in two years a million people had left Saigon for the countryside with the “New Economic Zones” plan. It was a pitiful failure. To those who agreed to settle in the countryside, the promise was a house, land and the distribution of 12 Kg of rice per person the first six months. Tired of the difficulties of life in the city center, the volunteers were numerous, and their departure was announced loud and clear. Alas! Journalist were invited to visit some models of Economic Zones to mislead international opinion. The reality was very different. The candidates were sent in deprived, sterilized, unsanitary and eroded lands, far from any amenities, hospitals, schools or markets.

They got a tiny square house, actually four posts and a straw roof. No walls, no tools, no water. Exiled, without any training. Their only security, was their monthly 12 Kg of rice. There were delays in deliveries and one day, there was no more rice distributed without explanation. No return was possible since they no longer had homes. Some of them returned to Saigon

and lived on the streets, completely illegally. They did not have the Hô Khâu, a kind of legal family card, allowing them to receive food rations. No wonder there were so many people sleeping on the sidewalks.



Foreign journalists saw what the government let them see. And they reported that everything was fine with the new regime. The problem was that words could kill just as well as weapons. We would like to invite journalists and some people who supported communism without knowing what they were talking about, the “Association of Vietnamese Patriots” from Paris or New York, to spend a few weeks in a re-education camp, or in a “New Economic Zone”. They would very quickly change their mind about the regime!

Since the day I was released and sent back home, I was in a constant state of fear. Once a week, I had to come and report to the local police chief of the block. The only official paper I had with me was a “temporary release paper” which stipulated that I had report to a police station if requested. This meant that I could be arrested, deported without explanation, without trial. Now that I was “Liberated”, I still lived like in

the camp. A bigger camp. I had to fill out a self-declaration on all my activities from waking up to sleeping. For this purpose, I received a school notebook entitled “Reeducation Notebook”. Like all deportees, I was deprived of my rights as a citizen: I could neither work nor obtain a food ration card. I then had to live at the expense of my family, or volunteer for the New Economic Zone, or join the army. Rumor had it that there would be raids to “liberate” Cambodia.

Since my return, I had not heard from Ly. A week after Tet, I received a letter from him. The short note announcing that he had been released and was about to join the army. I had to take a decision very quickly, now that Ly had made his own resolution. Despite my good will, I was caught by neurasthenia. I was haunted by the fear of being taken back to the camp, this time forever. I hadn't contacted any of my colleagues at the University since my return home. Everyone became suspicious and secretive. Even at home, children were taught to denounce their parents. Since they were «Uncle Hô's Grand children» «Cha'u Bac Hô» and could wear a red scarf around their necks, they were directly subordinate to the Party.

After the declaration of war on China, it was rumored that, for security reasons, the police would very soon arrest the newly released prisoners. I was spied on daily, pointed out weekly, without work, without papers, driven to the wall, to parasitism, forced to live at my parents' expense. What was the point of staying where you no longer had room? I decided to leave Vietnam. This time I told my parents about my desire to escape once again. They gathered their last savings and some of the jewelry that my sister was miraculously able to hide. We made contact with an underground organization of Chinese candidates. I decided a few days before departure to go to My Tho. I had to say farewell to Ly.

During that trip of a hundred miles, I took a risk. I knew that the police were checking passengers mainly to confiscate food. Control would only be more severe near the coast. I bought a ticket for My Tho on the black market and finally got on a crowded bus. We passed Phu Lâm then An Lac. But at the Bê Luc bridge, we were slowed down by a traffic jam: a checkpoint. The bus stopped in front of the post. My heart was pounding. Two or three policemen ordered the passengers to get off. It was a big rush. The bus was surrounded by fruit sellers. With a basket on their heads, they noisily offered the fruits. The guards inspected the bus, looking for

prohibited items and let us go. As I expected, the control mainly focused on the quantity of rice, coffee, foreign cigarettes. Nothing happened for the rest of the trip. I arrived at My Tho late in the afternoon.



Ly's house was among huts on stilts on the banks of the river, among boats covered with palm leaves. He was repairing a rusty bicycle when I appeared at the door. He had regained his strength since his release. "Ah! There you are" and whispered: "The police are nearby. Let's go to town. We will come back in the evening to avoid them". We slid out quickly. On the street, I made a joke: "You look good." He laughed: "And you elegant as a Lord". Since my release, I wore gray, beige and brown. "You see, I'm very lonely here. My family left for the new economic zones before my return". We went out crossing a bamboo bridge and then walked along the small, dark and silent streets.

I felt a peaceful sensation while walking with Ly in this melancholic atmosphere. My Tho, the town where my mother took refuge with us a long time ago. My Tho the town where Ly had lived with his mother and sisters. It was the first time we could walk freely, talk freely and be together.

We stopped at a small restaurant and each had a bowl of soup. He didn't talk about his future. I didn't mention mine either. Secretly, we knew what each of us expected.

I left My Tho very early the next morning. Ly stayed until the bus started moving. From the window I saw him running nearby and shouting: "Don't forget me. Bye".

A big storm broke out with thunder and lightning. Raindrops fell loudly. I also felt raindrops in my eyes. The bus passed through the check point without being stopped. Even the storm was my ally.



raining in my heart

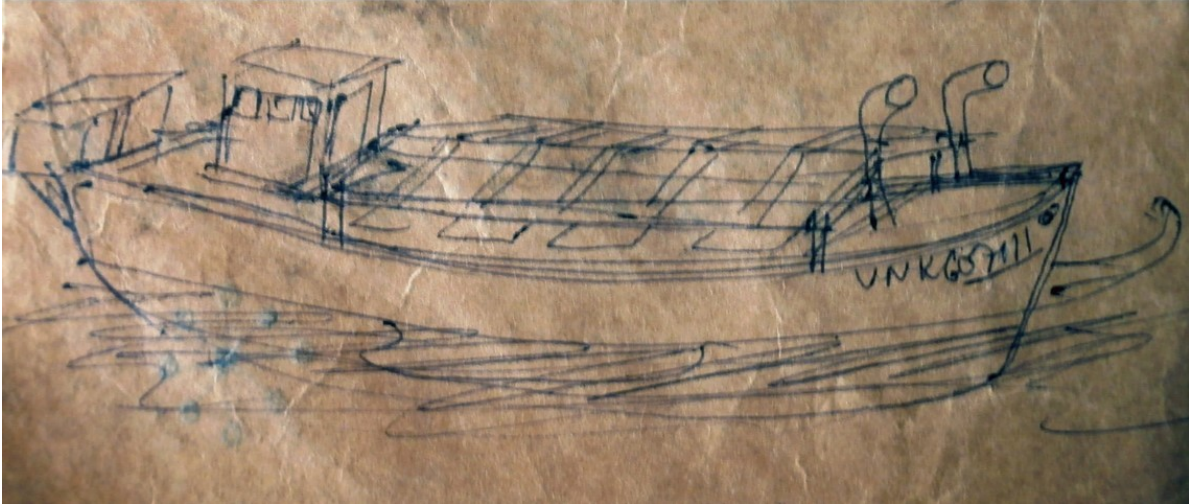
Through the bus window

My mother and my sister seemed worried. They quickly closed the door behind me. They whispered to me that there was a rumor that the government would soon stop the “official ” departure. That was because Malaysia and Indonesia had started to vigorously protest against the growing number of refugees. The departure was advanced. On the other hand the head of security came to ask me several times. I must leave the house immediately. There was no time for farewells, I took a rickshaw to Cholon the China town to Binh Tây Market, next to the canal. A dozen Chinese people were already waiting in a cozy house.

The secretary of the “organizer”, a young Chinese girl gave me an identity card with a false Chinese name. She asked me to remember the name. I exchanged a few words in Cantonese with my “new” family. We spent the night on a Turkish carpet in a luxurious air conditioned waiting room. I was surprised that despite the hostility between China and Vietnam, the Chinese in Saigon still got along so well with the Vietnamese authorities. In fact, the calculation was simple: this solution made it possible to best resolve public and private interest. Chinese traders residing in Vietnam gave up their wealth and businesses, and the government “officially” allowed them to leave the country.

The next morning, we discreetly boarded a refrigerated van. It seemed strange to be traveling in a truck used for transporting meat, but it was the only vehicle, along with an ambulance, that was not subject to police control. It took about half a day to reach Rach Gia, about three hundred miles south of Saigon, the port city where we were to embark. The children began to weep and cry since the door was shut on us. The small space left between the door and the chassis gave little air and light. But after a few minutes, we started sweating and breathing with difficulty. Our clothes were soaked with sweat. No one dared turn on the freezing air conditioned for fear of being turned into ice cubes.

The van seemed to stop at some checkpoints, but no one bothered us. Of course, the driver had envelopes full of cash ready for use. After several hours of nightmare, we arrived at Rach Gia, and reached the coast. When the car stopped, and the door just opened, we rushed outside for air. We were exhausted, but happy that we were able to overcome all the obstacles. We gathered at the dock to be checked by the coast guard. We then boarded several sampans, small boats made of three planks, to reach the fishing boat anchored off the coast.

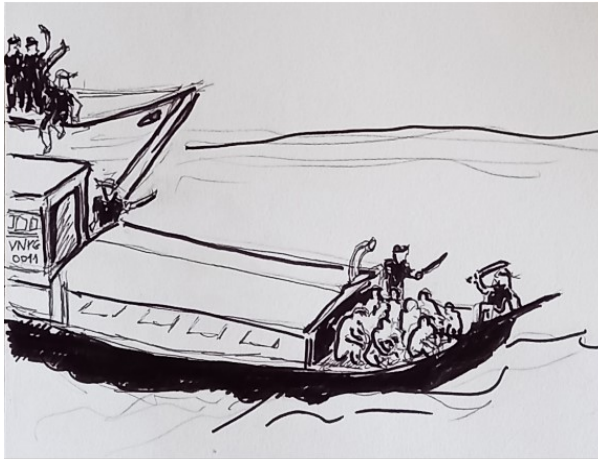


The fishing boat Number VNKG 0711 (Vietnam Kiên Giang) was escorted to the limit of the territorial waters by the coastal police. Just before leaving us, late in the evening, an executive came on board to collect all the Vietnamese money. The fishing boat was of medium size, about thirty feet long, but there were more than three hundred of us. The men on deck, the women and children in the hold. We were so crowded that we quickly got cramps from the lack of space to stretch our legs. But we felt relieved when the engine started.

We sailed for one night and one day. The crew gave us each a spoonful of boiled rice, but we really were not hungry. Then came a big storm. The boat shook like an eggshell. The women were praying, the children were crying. We were thrown on top of each other. The boat looked like it was about to be dismantled under the huge waves. The storm abandoned its little toy as it had taken it.

The next day was peaceful, and we began to hope. But on the third day, we were attacked by a pirate ship. A dozen tough and determined men armed with long knives came on deck. They gathered the terrified crew

and boat-people on deck and began searching for gold and jewels, shouting and hitting. They seemed to have just visited other boats and were already satisfied, so they didn't abuse the women this time. They just stripped some young ones naked while checking for hidden jewelry. They left us at dusk, after throwing us some water containers. The sea presented a sumptuous spectacle. The magnificent crimson and purple sun slowly disappeared into the deep indigo blue dark water. The little violet waves seemed gilded with gold leaf. In order to avoid further attacks, we had to navigate in the dark.



On the fourth day, we saw a large ship approaching us. The coast guard quickly threw us a rope and towed us ... away, probably out of the territorial waters, so speedy that our relatively small boat almost drowned on several occasions. Although they told the crew that they would take the boat to Singapore, they took us away and left our boat in the middle of nowhere. Under the sun, thirst appeared the worst torture. The crew said they no longer had supplies of water or food to distribute like the first days. My throat was on fire, my saliva seemed a viscous and elastic material. A child fell into a coma. A young girl became hysterical and wanted to throw herself into the sea. The women prayed or lamented while

the men argued over a yes or a no. The crew decided to turn back at 180°, a perilous decision.

Our distress did not yet seem sufficient, since a typhoon arrived on the fifth day. The boat shook violently and there was water everywhere. At least now we wouldn't die of thirst! The storm lasted only a few hours. We no longer knew exactly where we were. Suddenly we "heard" the silence of the engine about to expire. The broken engine slowed down with hiccups. The sea became calm. The oil was spreading mixed with water all over the deck. The silence then seemed more frightening than the storm. we searched the sky, we probed the sea. In vain: no sea gull, no fishing net to give us a sign, an indication of a nearby land.



That night, the sixth day, we were wandering on the sea like a ghost ship when a big storm pushed us closer to shore. When we saw at dusk the first rocks against which our boat almost broke, around thirty people threw themselves into the sea and tried to reach the coast. I was among them. I would have drowned if I hadn't found an empty jerrycan to hold on to. And maybe I wouldn't have jumped, if I'd known the area was infested with sharks, as we learned later. We took refuge in a cave, shivering from the cold, but happy to reach land. The next day we went out to look for food

on this seemingly deserted island. We discovered many coconut trees and a water source. We were pretty sure that we had already left Vietnam. The few straw huts probably used by fishermen for shelter when on the island, were built on stilts, although the huts were on the ground but not on the water. This type of housing was not Vietnamese style. We guessed that this island could belong to Malaysia or Indonesia.



I had the curious feeling of returning to the land of my ancestors. One hypothesis about the origins of the Vietnamese people was Malaysian sailors mixing with the local people during memorial time. I was visiting the land of my ancestors, how romantic! My joy was short-lived. The next day, the Malaysian police came to take us to where our boat landed, to join the rest of the crew. We were parked inside a small space surrounded by ropes salvaged from the boat, constantly monitored closely by the local police, probably sent from the nearest town on the coast. Pulau Tioman, a

beautiful island with white sand and idyllic coconut palms, located off the southern coast of Malaysia, had opened a new refugee camp.

Our camp was organized from scratch. We had to quickly bury an elderly woman, probably dead in the boat but hidden from the crew by the family. We found many trees on the hill which we cut down to build shelter, and for fuel. From the broken boat we found tools and some rice left in the boat's hold, which we boiled and shared for several days. We weaved grass, sticks and planks to build huts. With some waste washed up by the sea we made tables, chairs, and even toys for children.



My life then seemed much more bearable and pleasant than the time I spent in the re-education camp. I was able to share family life with a charming couple and their three children. So I enjoyed building a hut with whatever I found on the beach, behind their shed. The small island was uninhabited I suppose, but some Malay fishermen came and tried to contact us to exchange food. The police monitored them but didn't stop them. They could be close friends or family that members of the police had informed. Some of us still had hidden gold, like me, which allowed them to trade with the local population, gold for food.

I extracted a thin gold ring from the little pocket my mother had sewn inside my underwear. So that I could survive a little longer. Life was

getting organized. If you had nothing left, you had to work hard for the “rich”, cutting down trees and trading firewood. There were a few instances of solidarity, but each of us had to be careful because we didn't know how long we would stay there. After about three weeks, we had to bury two more elderly people who could not resist the illness and the hard life. I felt sorry for those people who had made most of the journey in such difficult conditions and could not enjoy it now that they were so close to freedom.

A month after our arrival on this island, one day the Red Cross located us. From helicopters, we began to receive food packages from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, called U.N.H.C.R. We discovered canned goods, soft drinks, medicine and even powdered milk for children. We had tears in our eyes. One day, we were told to clean up the place, because the next day we were going to move onto the land. We tore down our huts, and with the wood we made a huge fire that night on the beach. We were sure now to say Good bye to Vietnam. This sparkling fire was truly an enchanting spectacle. But instead of being happy, I felt like something was tickling in my eyes.



They quickly transferred us to Cherating Camp in Kuantan, Malaysia. This camp was the second largest camp after the famous Pulau Bidong. It was the same hangar construction, the same restricted space, all surrounded by barbed wire. With humility and gratitude, we tried to make ourselves invisible. The slightest manifestation of sympathy filled us with joy. Press, radio and Television reports gave us back our dignity. But what a waste. How many human lives had been swallowed up by the sea? We then understood that we were the lucky ones. In Cherating camp, there were around tens of thousands of us. Strangely enough we had no electricity and water was strictly rationed. The Red Cross continued to feed us canned food. We had to deal with this diet.

Most residents were very young. The elderly could have feared and avoided the dangerous sea voyage, or simply died during the trip. From early morning, the crowd was constantly moving, perhaps in search of good news or of loved ones. In the infirmary, we saw lines of women victims of pirates, waiting to have an abortion. At night, we heard people screaming in their nightmares. In order to be useful, I requested the opportunity to teach English to children. I was allowed to use the meeting room when it was free, as a classroom. I had around thirty official pupils. But I'm sure there were more, mostly adults, who stayed near the bamboo panels to listen. I tried to remember and pass onto the children a few words that they would need in the country that welcomed them. One of the fondest memories was when I taught them to sing. It was amazing to hear "Sealed with a kiss" in this transit camp.

As I spoke French and a little English, I volunteered to join the team of translators. We must assist Boat-People when they were interviewed by journalists, or by Commissions selecting and allocating residents. These Commissions came from Australia, Canada, France, the United States... We listened to all kinds of terrible or touching stories, and tried to find the appropriate words. Usually, people who already had family in a third country could leave the camp within a short time. Australia generally accepted all women, The United States and Canada were the most generous. In the camp, the rules were very strict, even for us Translators. At the office, the police monitored the interviews, to prevent any exchange of letters.

One day, while I was translating for a French journalist of R.T.L, I decided to ask her for help. The French journalist seemed very touched by the stories of the girls she interviewed with my translation. The girls were raped and left on the islands so the pirates could come and pick up like fish when they needed them! When we finished the translation and the journalist got up to leave, I quickly told her without changing my tone: “Madame, pouvez vous transmettre un message à mon parrain à Paris?” I asked her if she could inform my relatives living in Paris. She was a little surprised at first, but quickly she let me know that she got the message. I slowly told her my name, the name and address of a friend of my father who lived in Paris. She tried to memorize and quickly copy it down probably, when she got out of the office. From now on, I’ve been counting the days. After three weeks in Cherating camp, perhaps one of the shortest stays in this transit camp, I took a flight from Kuala Lumpur to Paris. Three months had passed since I left Saigon, when I landed in Paris.

On August 1, 1979 Paris seemed to me the most beautiful town in the world. My French sponsor, a very good friend of my father took good care of me. From Paris, I sent a letter to my parents to reassure them, thanking Uncle Sanh. I sent another letter to Ly with the sender's address on the back of the envelope, because I wasn’t sure he hadn't already been drafted in the army. The letter was returned to me, with an explanation: “Unknown at address”. My former classmates when I was a student in France congratulated me for my courage, for daring to undertake such a crossing. But I discovered that the brave people were those who knew how to deal with staying in the country.

I had no difficulty enjoying and adapting to my new life, but something was missing. Was it muddy fields with the brave peasants working, was it a friendly smile after such hard work, or was it the shadow of a mother carrying heavy burden to take care of her family? Good bye Vietnam.

Red hell, My love.



REQUIEM