

In Memoriam: Tran Van Tuyen

In May, a brief communication from a source close to my family in Saigon informed me that they have just learned that my father, Tran Van Tuyen, whom they had not seen since he was sent to "reeducation" detention in June, 1975, died in confinement "in the North" on October 28, 1976.

This sad message from Vietnam coincides with news just released by Hanoi's embassy in Paris to Amnesty International and the International Fellowship of Reconciliation, stating that my father died of a "cerebral hemorrhage." Curiously, when Pham Van Dong, prime minister of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, visited Paris in the spring of 1977, he told people making human rights inquiries about my father that he was still alive; and earlier this year Hanoi's propaganda machine released a barrage of attacks against my father.

"I have committed no crime against the Vietnamese fatherland or the Vietnamese people. If I have done anything wrong, it is only in the eyes of the Communist party of Vietnam."

This was my father's only response to prison authorities who ordered him to write a long self-criticism confession, according to messages I have received from Vietnam.

If my father died as reported, I want the world to know that he was murdered by the conditions of his imprisonment. Instead of an obvious bloodbath in Vietnam, Hanoi has devised a more invidiously sophisticated program to exterminate opponents: the "reeducation" death camps where prisoners are worked to death, or starved to death, or confined in hot, damp, dark solitary cells to death, in the most remote, unhealthiest regions of Vietnam, with medicinal care denied. My father was reportedly classified as "recalcitrant" and "obstinate" by prison authorities, who confined him to a tiny cell and permitted him only one small bowl of rice gruel a day.

Amnesty International, the International League for Human Rights, the Socialist International, among other organizations, and scores of prominent people in many countries had been working until this date on behalf of my father's release. Tran Van Tuyen, whom one American journalist called the "Solzhenitsyn of Vietnam's Gulag Archipelago," was an attorney who himself was always engaged in defending political prisoners jailed by the various Saigon dictatorships. He founded the International League for Human Rights' Saigon chapter. During the regime of General Nguyen Van Thieu, my father worked on behalf of Thieu's jailed political adversaries and imprisoned journalists. He attended street demonstrations at great personal risk to try to prevent Thieu's secret police from beating and maiming nonviolent demonstrators, all too often with scant success. Because of such actions he was persecuted by the Saigon regime.

When Saigon was ruled by Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky, and later by Thieu, my father called repeatedly for a new civilian government with freedom of expression. All his life he fought for the independence and unification of his country, for the freedom of his people, and for a democracy in which human rights are honored for all Vietnamese and in which there could be no political prisoners.

I remember well my father's early opposition to the introduction of American troops in Vietnam, and I can also remember pro-Saigon newspapers attacking him as a "pacifist" because of this. Until the day Saigon became Communist my father hoped to end the war and transform the fighting into a peaceful political contest for the support of the people.

In 1960 under dictator Ngo Dinh Diem my father was arrested and jailed on then-secret Con Son Island prison, which later became known for its "tiger cages." His crime: he helped organize a group of political leaders who issued a public statement in which they daringly criticized the regime for political arrests that "fill the prisons to the rafters." The widely circulated "Caravelle Manifesto" demanded social reforms, a free press, open political parties, a liberal form of government, civil rights, the recognized right of a functioning political opposition and "authentic democracy."

The day before Diem's secret police swarmed into our house with guns drawn to arrest my father, I asked him how he could meet together with more than twenty people when the government had banned all meetings of more than three Vietnamese. He smiled mischievously and said: "The government thought the opposition was tightly nailed down by that decree and had no meeting place. They forgot the Caravelle Hotel!" The Caravelle was a French-owned hotel, very exclusive and expensive, mostly a meeting place for foreign diplomats and dignitaries, and, my father concluded, probably the only place in Saigon not guarded by Diem's watchdogs.

In 1965, in a Vatican audience, my father pleaded with Pope Paul to appeal for peace in Vietnam. He visited countries in Northern Africa friendly with Hanoi and requested support in urging North Vietnam to accept a cease-fire. He advocated a truce under which each Vietnamese side could contest in peace for the peoples' support in free elections.

Le Nouvel Observateur commented editorially about my father in their February 6-13, 1978, issue: "All those who have met with Tran Van Tuyen in Saigon during the last 20 years appreciated and liked in this man that he was a very intelligent critic of various regimes in power and an invincible opponent of any dictator imposed or supported by foreign powers. Nowhere else could foreign journalists visiting South Vietnam receive arguments more pressing or criticism more forceful against neo-colonialist systems in Saigon than from this brilliant and courageous Tuyen who often defended adversaries of those dictatorships at the courts."

General Nguyen Van Thieu and a group of his army officers ousted the last civilian government of South Vietnam, of which my father was deputy prime minister and which had existed only three months. They considered my father a "neutralist," and "anti-American," for he did not agree with the Vietnam policy of the then U.S. administration. He often said "the Vietnamese people are grateful to the American people, but we need food, hospitals and fertilizer, not weapons and ammunition."

In a welcoming speech to visiting U.S. senators and representatives in Saigon in February, 1975, my father, then the chairman of the opposition bloc in the National Assembly (the equivalent of the U.S. House minority leader), warned: "Thieu must step down. As long as he stays in power, Vietnam shall have no peace and a Communist takeover shall be inevitable."

by Tran Thi Dam-Phuong

In the spring of 1975, just before Saigon fell, I telephoned my father from the U.S. and begged him to leave Vietnam. He refused to discuss it. "If everyone leaves the country, who will speak out for the weak and oppressed?" he asked.

My father was a "workaholic" who knew no recess, no weekend, no holiday. At home, he was constantly reading, writing, or taking notes of ideas and thoughts. In the evening, while he worked at his desk, I used to do my own little child's activities at his feet until late at night, protesting when I had to go to bed before him. Sometimes he would comment on a book or talk to me about philosophy—Confucianism was his favorite; he had translated it from Chinese to Vietnamese—or other topics of politics or economics that I was too young to understand. He would pretend to be disappointed with me but then would pat my head and say: "You will understand when you grow older. I hope you will also understand what I am doing and why I am doing it."

Tran Van Tuyen fought against the French colonialists as one of the youngest members of Vietnam's Nationalist party, inspired by Sun Yat Sen's similarly named political party in China. Like Sun, my father was committed to an independent republic, democratic socialism, and welfare for the people. He was jailed by the French Sûreté for his activities against French colonial rule, including publicly demanding immediate independence. My father became the second-ranking foreign ministry official in Ho Chi Minh's first coalition government, but was driven into exile after the Communists began assassinating non-Communist leaders or betraying them to the French.

When we were finally reunited after my father accepted what he thought was a legitimate French offer of independence and agreed to serve in a provisional government, he took us to Saigon. My father refused a government offer to give him a house and insisted on paying rent to the landlord. I was a child and asked my father why he refused a free house. My father responded: "How could I deprive the owner of his due? I will buy myself a house when I can afford it."

Twenty-three years later, married and the mother of two, I was home from abroad for a visit when the lawyer representing my father's landlord telephoned to ask whether my father was interested in buying that same house. He said no, he could not afford it. I could not believe my ears. "Daddy, in all these years what have you done with the money you earned as a lawyer?" I asked. He said he had to help many people, which meant cases without fees, and when he earned fees, he had to help many people financially, too.

When my husband and I offered to buy it for him, my father smiled and said: "Thanks, but no. I can't afford to pay the property taxes anyway!"

Incidentally, my father was lucky it was a rented house, not a government-supplied one, because the landlord let us keep living there after my father lost his cabinet post as a result of angrily instructing the French governor-general to leave a Vietnamese cabinet meeting. The French governor-general then ordered my father into exile. In response, my father issued a now-celebrated letter proclaiming that no Frenchman could order a Vietnamese to leave Vietnam, and escaped to the Cao Dai Buddhists in Tay Ninh, whom he persuaded to fight against the French and the Communists.

That was my father. If he is dead, I want the Government of Vietnam to explain officially and in detail how he died.

I want to know where he died.

I want to know when he died.

I want to know where he is buried and when my family and I will be permitted to visit his grave.

I want to know why he was not released from prison when the authorities knew he was ill as a result of their prison treatment and as a result of illnesses suffered during imprisonments by previous regimes.

If he died on October 28, 1976, I want to know why Hanoi kept his death a secret until the spring of 1978, and why they did not return his body to his family for burial.

And I want permission for my desperate family—stepmother, brothers, sisters, and their children—to leave Vietnam and join our family in France and the U.S.

As his daughter, I know that my father would have died in defense of his convictions. I know he would have wanted his death to serve the political ideals and the human rights causes he had fought for all his life.

Among the hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese still detained by Hanoi is my brother Tran Tu Thanh, whose only crime is that he is Tran Van Tuyen's son; and there are scores of other political and religious leaders, writers, artists, and scholars guilty of no crime but nonviolent thought, from which they must break or be "reeducated" to death. Does this not violate the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to which Hanoi, as a member of the U.N., presumably subscribes?

Past American administrations bear no small responsibility for my father's fate and that of countless other "Third Force" advocates of democracy, ignored and ridiculed by responsible U.S. officials all through the war, who saw "no alternative" to Communist dictators but quasi-fascist or military dictators. "Your people should consider who we are," my father once told an American journalist. "We, the 'third segment,' represent what would be the democratic majority in your country—the people who want freedom, (the right) to vote, social justice. Where would Americans be if their country was torn by a battlefield of contesting Communists, with a massive army supported by mighty foreign powers; opposed by a corrupt, ruthless military dictatorship, also armed and supplied by a mighty outside power? What could the majority do, what could democratic leaders do, unarmed, empty-handed?"

My father would wish that his death might cause people in the democracies who share his convictions to tell Hanoi that all political prisoners jailed for their views must be released, before one more soul is terminally "reeducated."

People who escape from Vietnam say that international radio broadcasts, hungrily followed in secret by our people, have made Jimmy Carter and human rights popular topics of clandestine conversations in today's Vietnam. But the administration has never raised the case of a single individual Vietnamese political prisoner by name in conversations with Vietnamese officials in Paris or Hanoi, according to U.S. State Department officials. Only Vietnamese family members of American citizens are discussed as individuals, for purposes of family reunification.

I hope President Carter and members of Congress will ask Hanoi for an official account of my father's death and express, repeatedly and regularly, the strongest humanitarian concern for the release of political prisoners in Vietnam, including appealing for prisoners by name. My father devoted his life to freeing political prisoners. If Americans were in cells as Vietnamese are now, my father would have done at least that much for them.