

IN MEMORY OF PROFESSOR BÙI TƯỜNG HUÂN



BURNING INCENSE IN MEMORY OF AN INDOMITABLE PRISONER, PROFESSOR BUI TUONG HUAN.

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This morning, on Memorial Day, I dropped by my office at the newspaper Thoi Luan. On a desk I saw a thank you note from a client about a memorial service for the Professor, Bùi Tường Huân. The thank you note caught my attention. “Did Professor Bùi pass away?” I wondered. I would find out that he passed away in the beginning of May in Saigon. My heart skipped a beat and my eyes welled up. Suddenly memories of Professor Bùi and the Re-Education camp overwhelmed me as if it was yesterday, with vivid details in images, colors and sounds.

In March 1978, the prisoners of the Communist Vietnamese regime were transferred from Yên Bái to Hà Tây. I was thrown into Cell F7. In that particular cell, four of us shared the small space: Captain Huỳnh Kim Bình (a Buddhist Military Chaplain), Colonel Nguyễn Văn Huân (Deputy Commander of the Quang Trung Military Training Center), and Colonel Nguyễn Văn Thi (Chief of Staff to the Commanding Office of the Artillery). Two days later, the cell door opened and another prisoner was brought in. It was Professor Bùi Tường Huân.

Colonel Nguyễn Văn Huân and Professor Bùi knew each other from before. They chatted. I listened. I learned that Professor Bùi was transferred from Thanh Hóa Re-Education Camp. After that, Colonel Nguyễn Văn Huân introduced Professor Bùi to us. Professor Bùi was so skinny. I did not know him until 1975. I had only heard of him previously. Looking at him at that moment, I could not believe someone such as him could have ever been in power. He looked very pale. His clothes were nothing more than rags covering a walking skeleton. According to him, his condition was due to sustained malnutrition and untreated hemorrhoids. His eyes, however, were still flashed with a bright intellect with a gaze that attracted people. His lips were dry and cracked, but maintained a kind smile. I began to respect him once I saw his simple and easy going way.

The room was surrounded by bars and walls, like a cage. It was like a tomb that was meant to bury all five of us. The five of us sat and slept in a 10-square-meter cell day and night. The only way we could pass the time was to comfort each other and share our happy memories of the past, as well as prepare each other for what was to lay ahead for us. We shared everything, including our personal thoughts and feelings, the ups and downs of life; everything that we experienced individually became our common past.

From that miserable situation we were in, I recognized Professor Bùi’s bright personality and brave character and soul which pushed me not to merely call him my friend, but to bow my head and refer to him as “Teacher”, even though I had never been his student, even just for one lecture.

One time Colonel Nguyễn Văn Huân asked Professor Bùi about his family. He responded that on the last day before the fall of the Republic of Viet Nam, he took his family to the Tân Sơn Nhất airport to seek refuge abroad. Only he remained. One person teasingly asked him if he stayed to become Vice Prime Minister.

Professor Bùi smiled and answered: “At the end of April 1975, any Vietnamese citizen knew that it was going to be very hard to change the entire political situation. I stayed behind with aspirations to exert all my effort to serve the country. This was the time that country needed us most”.

We then all started to reminisce over that April, in 1975. The ones in power did not think twice about escaping abroad with their money and families. Many government offices had no leaders. The military had no one to lead. The soldiers stay put while their leaders fled. Colonel Nguyễn Văn Huân had to lead rookies with no experience onto the battlefield to stop the invasion of the Việt Cộng into Sài Gòn.

All the leaders of Sài Gòn were looking for ways to escape. In the end, the old colonel had to surrender, following the orders given from the Presidential Palace. Colonel Nguyễn Văn Huân became a prisoner in our cage, Cell F7. Professor Bùì had stayed in Vietnam, and explained: “My goal was to bring my knowledge and experience to share with the youth and help my country in any way possible. I did not want to escape abroad; otherwise my life would be worthless.”

During the last days of the Republic of Vietnam, Professor Bùì accepted the positions of Vice Prime Minister and Minister of Defense. When the Communists took over the Presidential Palace, they let him go home after the procedure of declaration of identity. When he came home he found that the maid who lived in his house for the last few years, was there in the Communist military uniform. She confirmed she was a revolutionary cadre, staying at his house the whole time as an informant for the Communists. She advised him to present himself to the authority as soon as possible for registration and escorted him to the local security police station with an AK-47.

He would later regret that before 1975, he did not pay attention to the warning of the former government’s security agency about the maid being a Communist cadre. That government did not dare to arrest her for fear it would create a misunderstanding of government hostility toward the An Quang Buddhist group of which he was a member. At the same time, Professor Bùì had the impression of being under close surveillance of the security agency, and so, he did not care to pay attention to its warning. By the time the Republic of Vietnam fell, and the reality showed, it was too late. . .

In 1978, almost all of the prisoners who were moved to northern Vietnam were suffering from starvation. I lost contact with my family, and so, I did not receive any food. Because of his transfer from Quảng Ninh Re-Education Camp to Thanh Hóa, then to Hà Tây, Professor Bùì also lost contact with his relatives. Of the five of us in Cell F7, Professor Bùì and I became

proletarians. One time he confided in me, “When I was in the Thanh Hóa Re-Education Camp, I was in the same cell with some students who resisted the Communist after the fall of the Republic of Vietnam. Even though we had to go through hard labor, spending time next to these young students was a happy time. All helped me with the heavy lifting, so that together we could complete the tasks assigned on time in order to avoid being reprimanded by the Communists. They even look for hemorrhoid medication for me. Here in Cell F7, I don’t have to do hard labor, but it’s boring.”

I was aware that professor regularly went hungry. He tried to hide his hunger from us but I could tell since whenever he got his one bowl of stale rice or a piece of manioc, he would eat it so voraciously that I could not hold back my tears. I was hungry like him, so I had pity for him like I had for myself, but I could not share what little I had. In the Re-Education Camp, hunger was common and that led to rowdy behavior of some prisoners. Watching his calm and serene attitude during these times of empty stomach made me admire him more. One day, in order to forget the hunger I asked him, “In order to succeed in politics, one needs a dispassionate mind and impassioned heart. One also needs to resort to chicanery. You, Teacher, have both an impassioned heart and mind. Why did you decide to go into politics?.”

The Professor gazed at me with nostalgia and love. He murmured like the whispering wind:

“Being Vietnamese citizens, who do not want their country to be prosperous and beautiful? If I just thought about myself I would have escaped with my family before the fall of Sài Gòn. This is just karma.”

Another time I asked Professor Bùì about the Buddhist Group Ân Quang and their responsibility, if any, for the fall of the Republic of Vietnam. He replied “I do not deny that the Ân Quang Buddhist Group, symbolized by the Reverend Trí Quang, had

influenced my political career. In other words, I am a member that group. There was indeed regrettable misunderstanding caused by that group,. But I strongly deny the rumors that this group consisted of clandestine Communists. The Ân Quang group had nothing to do with the Communists. We are just citizens of the nation of Vietnam.”

To prove his point he noted that he and Reverend Trí Quang and most of the leadership of the Ân Quang Group were detained by the Communists. Professor Bùì was disappointed with acting President Dương Văn Minh’s order towards unconditional surrender without arrangement for handing over the government. But the reality was that in the Independence Palace on that day, even as Deputy Prime Minister and defense Minister, he was ordered to stick up his hands to surrender without any ceremony of turning over the government.

Life in prisons was full of sadness, but did not change his character. That was why from the beginning, I was very surprised by his positive and jovial attitude. One time as the five of us were trying to forget our intense hunger, professor Bùì told a joke. He calmly recited, as if in rhymes, the story of the Conference of Yalta in 1945 which started on February 4, 1945, During a week-end, the four leaders of four nations, President Roosevelt of the United State, Prime Minister Winston Churchill of the United Kingdom, Secretary General Joseph Stalin of Russia, and General Charles de Gaulle of France (though France was not actually part of the Conference) were riding together in a Jeep down the suburban road when they came across a cow that stood in the middle of the way, holding up traffic. The four stopped and made a bet as to who could be the first to make the cow move.

Charles de Gaulle disembarked and approached the cow. He told the cow, “If you move, I will get you the best milk and butter in France.” The cow remained stationary. De Gaulle gave up and went back to the car.

Next Winston Churchill approached the cow and caressed it from head to tail and spoke kindly to the cow, treating her the way a capitalist would treat a customer, and said: “Move away and I will ask the Queen to confer you a noble title.” The cow lied still. Churchill mumbled some more words without result and then gave up and went back to the car.

Next Roosevelt aggressively disembarked, approached the cow and barked at the cow in loud voice as if from a wealthy man: “If you move out quickly, I will give you one million dollars!” The cow stayed put. Roosevelt, feeling like it was an auction, offered five million dollars. The cow was still stupid like a cow. She still did not move. The President of the United States gave up and went back to the car.

Only then did Stalin slowly disembarked and approached the cow and whispered something into her ear. Suddenly the cow sprang up and ran off up the hill. Seeing what had just happened, the other three complimented Stalin profusely : “We don’t know what you said to the cow, but she was so frightened and ran away immediately with such a haste!” Stalin replied, “It was easy. All I told her was that ‘If you stay here for another second, I will send you to a Re-Education camp’ .”

In 1979 Professor Bùì was released. I congratulated him that he would one day be joining his family soon. A few months later we heard from visitors a rumor that Professor was flown on an aircraft from

Saigon to France. But with this thank you note left on my desk, I realized that he died in Sài Gòn and was therefore in Vietnam until his death.

Professor Bui, my Teacher from Cell F7, had never left Vietnam. Now that he was gone, his body was cremated and his ashes remain in Vietnam. I do not have any proof, but from my heart, I believe that Professor Bui's choice was always his Nation, Pride and Responsibility

* Originally written in Vietnamese by Mr. Nguyễn Văn Hùng – in Thời Luận newspaper, San Diego, 1988. Translater : Bùi Tường Việt.