

## The Journey of a Thousand Autumns of Nguyễn Chí Thiện, poet

*Should anyone ask what I hope for in life*

*Knowing that I am in jail, you would say:*

*Release!*

*Knowing that I have been hungry, you would say:*

*Food and warmth!*

*No, no, you would be wrong, for in the communist land*

*All these things are chimera*

*Whoever would hope for them*

*Must kneel in front of the enemy.*

*In the long struggle against the prison*

*I have only poetry in my bosom,*

*And two paper-thin lungs*

*To fight the enemy, I cannot be a coward.*

*And to win him over, I must live a thousand autumns! <sup>1</sup>*

When a child is born to parents late in life, he and she are a gift. Such was the early life of the poet, Nguyễn Chí Thiên, born in Hanoi in 1939. Loved and cherished by sisters fifteen and seventeen years older, he learned French at six. His older brother was the studious one, shouldering the family male responsibility. Young Thiên could swim, and box, and pore endlessly over French novels—writing love poetry for his friends to woo and win wives by pretending it was theirs.

When a child is so gifted, he and she can easily sail through life holding onto others for oars. It is not known why the man or woman will become strong enough to resist subjugation. Perhaps it is

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<sup>1</sup> “Nếu Ai Hỏi” (“Should Anyone Ask”) was composed in 1976 while Nguyễn Chí Thiên was in the Phong Quang prison camp. In *Hoa Địa Ngục, The Flowers of Hell; a bilingual selection*. Original in Vietnamese by Nguyễn Chí Thiên, English translation by Nguyễn Ngọc Bích and Nguyễn Chí Thiên. Tổ Hợp Xuất Bản Miền Đông Hoa Kỳ, 1996: 415.

his destiny (seen in his horoscope), or perhaps the grounding of Vietnamese culture that caused Nguyễn Chí Thiện to refuse to kneel to the Communist regime that conquered his country.

In August, 1945, the Japanese military occupation retreated, using the Mekong Delta rice harvest to fuel locomotives. Even at age six the young poet remembers corpses on the streets of Hanoi during the induced famine. At nearly eight—December, 1946—he walked three days to his natal village with his family to escape the battles in Hanoi, which became a ghost city. Thiện was leading his dog, Lulu, with a string, while his parents and fifteen-year old brother Gian carried all they could on their backs. Returning in 1949—at the request of the French, who had prevailed for a time—he went to a succession of private schools in Hanoi, which was common for the middle class in that unsettled era. At age fifteen, in 1954, Chí Thiện remembers the soldier heroes of the battle of Điện Biên Phủ in the streets of his city, admiring them, inviting them home for dinner. That year the fateful Geneva Accords divided his “S-shaped land” into North Vietnam and South Vietnam, and his older brother went South with the national army. He would not see him again for forty-one years, until 1995, when the former ARVN lieutenant-colonel and fellow prisoner of the Communists greeted him at the Dulles Airport.

At age fifteen Nguyễn Chí Thiện determined that he would learn three foreign languages: French, English, and Chinese, so that he could become a writer. And so he became a poet who composed methodically in his memory—most of the time without paper, without pen, without light, and most often without food—for a total of twenty-seven years of political imprisonment in Communist labor camps and prisons. His first offense to be noticed by the regime was in December, 1960. He substituted for an older friend who was a high school history instructor. The program for the day was World War II, and the official textbook was *Cách Mạng Tháng Tám 1945*, (History of the August Revolution). Finding the passage:

**“the heroic Soviet Army defeated the Japanese fascists who had to lay down their arms and surrender unconditionally. This situation created a unique opportunity, which allowed the August Revolution to succeed rapidly and without much bloodshed”**

the twenty-two year old explained that it was the two atom bombs dropped by the United States in August, 1945, which caused the Japanese surrender, not Russia.<sup>2</sup>

Going before the tribunal in Haiphong where his father worked as a clerk, the magistrates gave him an easy sentence for “Anti-Propaganda”—two years. But when Hanoi learned of the light punishment, they extended the sentence, and the jaunty young writer, handsome and more than a little brash, began his life in prisons and reeducation camps that was relieved only briefly within thirty years. The magistrates were sent to other posts and his father, Nguyễn-Công PHUNG, was forced to retire at age 63. There was only a pittance of a pension, and the author’s mother began selling boiled potatoes outside the front door. This was illegal, too. Under communism, the government owns all the food and individual marketing was forbidden.

The war in which the United States was an ally of South Vietnam commenced in earnest in 1966 and 1967, with American bombing of North Vietnam. While Outside (in society during periods of release), the poet refused to run to the trenches that were dug in front of people’s homes to shelter them—just as he refused to participate in monthly Socialist Work Days, when everyone in North Vietnam between the ages of sixteen and fifty (male and female) was required to work without pay on construction of roads and other public works. One night the prison he was in was accidentally bombed. The only casualties were the pigs raised by the prisoners that were sold by the cadres. As the pigs had better food and medicine than the inmates, there was much rejoicing.

After the fall of Saigon in 1975 the prisons began to fill with the jailed South Vietnamese. Nguyễn Chí Thiện was imprisoned with other writers and political prisoners at Phong Quang. There were not enough wardens to guard the huge number South Vietnamese officers and civilian officials who were placed in “reeducation” concentration camps. He was part of a small group of writers and intellectuals released in 1977, when his sister told him that his own brother was imprisoned, too.

The family heard from the older son twice: once in 1958, when he wrote that he was visiting a cousin, knowing they would understand that he was in the United States, because that is where she lived. Again, in 1972, Lieutenant Colonel Nguyễn Công Giân notified his family that he was alive, and a military advisor to the South Vietnamese government at the Paris Peace Accords. His father, who was immensely proud of both his sons (never blaming Thien for resisting and refusing to kneel to the regime), thought that surely Mr. Giân would be among the evacuated personnel in April, 1975. When

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<sup>2</sup> The Foreign Language Publishing House in Hanoi issued *History of the August Revolution*, the same text in English, in 1972. This quoted material is on page 147.

he learned that his elder son was also in Communist prison camps he had a stroke, and soon passed away. His wife had died in 1970, saving a new suit of clothes for her youngest, Thiệu—then over age thirty and still in concentration camps for fifteen years—with instructions to her younger daughter to visit him to tell him of her death.

Economic conditions in Haiphong were so bad in 1977 that Thiệu sold the clothes to obtain enough rice for his sustenance that winter, and wore the used clothes of his father. He did odd delivery jobs with a rickety bicycle. Living in an 8-meter square space, he was still unable to write the poems down that he had created in his memory in prison because most of the house was commandeered by cadres and their families. He could not take the chance of having them discovered.

When Red China invaded the six border provinces in February, 1979, security forces tormented Nguyễn Chí Thiệu ceaselessly. They were tracking “bad elements” and he knew they would find a pretext to arrest him. Afraid of being unable to survive if jailed a third time, he made up his mind to write down his poems, which had been carefully memorized while in prison, and send them abroad. Listen to the story of the man who is now forty years old:

**These poems were the first twenty years of my work. It was impossible to let them be buried with me! I went to Hanoi, deciding to run into the French or British Embassy. It took me three days to write four hundred poems from my memory on papers. So, on July 16<sup>th</sup>, 1979, I put my manuscript under my shirt and went to the British Embassy on Ly-Thuong-Kiet Street.**

**I found my way into the Embassy, passing the guard. One Vietnamese woman and three Vietnamese men were sitting around a table in a large room. They were civil servants hired by the British to be a local reception office for the Embassy. I told them that I came to see the Ambassador.**

**“Where are you from?” one of them asked. “From the foreign office,” I answered. They demanded the required paper. I told them I had forgotten to carry it. With that, I rushed to the door at the other side of the room. The woman stood up and grasped me. I pushed her down. Two men barred my way into the room. The third Vietnamese man went out to warn the police.**

There was a young English girl combing her hair in a boudoir without a door on my right side. I said to her quickly in English: “I need to meet the Ambassador. Don’t fear, I am an honest man.” But she was so frightened that she dropped her comb. The two men chased me. I ran to the table and lifted it up, making everything on the table fall to the floor. Hearing the noise, three English diplomats came out. One Vietnamese man said that I was a madman. I said to the three Englishmen that I was not crazy, and I had important documents to give them. I immediately ran in the back door. The Englishmen followed me, closing the door.

I handed them my manuscript and told them about my prison life and the sufferings of my oppressed people under the communist totalitarian yoke. I begged them to have my poems published in their free country. Finally, I asked whether I could stay in the Embassy. They replied that I could not because the police were waiting for me outside. They promised solemnly that they would arrange for my poems to be published. Satisfied, I gave them three photos. One was taken in 1958 with my parents and my niece and nephew; one was taken in the following year when I was twenty years old, and the third one was taken in 1978, when I was thirty-nine. I shook hands with them, said good-bye, and left the Embassy. The Security Forces of the Socialist government of Vietnam arrested me in front of the British Embassy, and drove me to Hoa-Lo prison, which had been ironically called the “Hanoi Hilton” by U.S. pilots who had been shot down by Russian SAM missiles when bombing or flying reconnaissance over North Vietnam from 1967 until 1972. The original handwritten manuscripts are in the protective custody of the British government. They will be returned when Vietnam is free. <sup>3</sup>

The internationally acclaimed *Hoa Địa Ngục/Flowers of Hell* was originally smuggled out of Vietnam when the author was still in jail and subsequently ascribed to an anonymous author; for a while there was much confusion as to even the name of this poetry collection. From England the manuscript was carefully photocopied by a journalist who sent it to Vietnamese people in Europe and

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<sup>3</sup> “Autobiography of Nguyen Chi Thien” was written in 2005, in English, for the Viet Nam Literature Project, directed by Dan Duffy at the University of North Carolina. [www.vietnamlit.org](http://www.vietnamlit.org)

America. The response was swift and loving. First published in Vietnamese language newspapers in the US, the poems began to appear around the world translated into several languages. *Ngục Ca/Prison Songs* were translated in French and English in Paris in 1982, set to music by the great musician Pham Duy.<sup>4</sup>

Everyone began to ask: “Who is the poet?” “Is there more than one?” “When was he born?” “Did he have a wife?” “Is he still alive?” The most accurate detective was Nguyễn Ngọc Bích, of Springfield, Virginia, in “A Voice From the Hanoi Underground” published in *AsiaWeek* on July 30, 1982. He correctly deduced from the anonymous poems that the author was born in 1938 or 1939, and mapped the death of his parents (in 1970 and 1976 respectively) as critical events of his life. He analyzed that the poet may have had a wife, or certainly a lover, who could not bear the waiting and left him. What NN Bích knew most, however, was the effect that the poems had on the Vietnamese who had left their country:

**Like a bombshell it struck the diaspora of Vietnamese communities spread across the globe. Within months of its discovery, public readings from the collection of poetry gathered hundreds and thousands of Vietnamese in the U.S., France, and other lands of asylum, exiles who came together in an effort to find their voice, their destiny, and the destiny of their nation through its verse.**<sup>5</sup>

In 1984 the Council of Southeast Asia Studies at Yale University published *Hoa Địa Ngục/Flowers From Hell*, the manuscript poems translated by Professor Huỳnh Sanh Thông, the translator of Nguyễn Du’s *Tale of Kieu*, the epic poem of Vietnamese history. “My Poetry’s Not Mere Poetry, No” is the favorite poem of the author (and many readers). Forbidden paper and pens, Nguyễn Chí Thiệu composed it in his memory in 1970 at Phong Quang Prison Camp, where he was in the

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<sup>4</sup> *Chants de Prison/Prison Songs/Ngục Ca*. Poems of Nguyen Chi Thien set to music by Pham Duy, translated to French by Phuong Anh and English by Penelope Faulkner, with an introduction by Vo Van Ai, and a preface by Pierre Emmanuel. Genevilliers, Que Me (Motherland), 1982.

<sup>5</sup> “A Voice From the Hanoi Underground” is reprinted in full in *Ngục Ca/Prison Songs* by Nguyễn Chí Thiệu, Pham Duy, and Nguyễn Ngọc Bích. Hoi Van-hoa VN tai Bac-My (Association for Vietnamese Culture in North America), 1995.

company of many other Vietnamese writers who were political prisoners. They recited their work to each other secretly, gathering in the dusk at different outdoor locations in the verdant setting:

*My poetry's not mere poetry, no,  
but it's the sound of sobbing from a life,  
the din of doors in a dark jail,  
the wheeze of two poor wasted lungs,  
the thud of earth tossed to bury dreams,  
the clash of teeth all chattering from cold,  
the cry of hunger from a stomach wrenching wild,  
the helpless voice before so many wrecks.  
All sounds of life half lived,  
of death half died—no poetry, no.*<sup>6</sup>

In 1985 NC Thiệu won the International Poetry Prize—all unknown to him, as he was still imprisoned at the “Hanoi Hilton” since arrested outside the gates to the British Embassy in Hanoi in 1979. He knew that his work had been published when interrogated by a cadre shaking a Vietnamese language newspaper published in America in his face in 1980. Gleeefully, he did not deny authorship.

The movement to bring pressure on the Hanoi government to release him took the form of publications of the poems translated into several languages in Europe and Asia. The first book-length English translation was *Will of a Vietnamese; the poetry of Nguyen Chi Thien* translated by Hang T. Nguyen, an ESL instructor (or counselor) in Utah, by Carlton Press in 1984. *Echo aus dem Abgrund* (in German and Vietnamese) was published by Bui Hanh Nghi and Erich Wolfgang Swara, with a foreword in English by the musician Peter Gabriel, in 1988. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch publicized his plight. Letters came to the Vietnamese government from heads of state: President Leopold Senghor of Senegal, King Hussein of Jordan, Prime Minister John Major of Britain.

Imprisonment conditions for Nguyễn Chí Thiệu got worse before the photograph in the Smithsonian exhibition on Vietnamese Americans was taken at Camp Nam Ha (Ba Sao) C, a transition

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<sup>6</sup> Nguyễn Chí Thiệu, *Flowers From Hell (Hoa Địa Ngục); a bilingual edition of poems selected and translated from the Vietnamese by Huỳnh Sanh Thông*. The Lac-Viet Series, No. 1. Council for Southeast Asia Studies, Yale University, 1984: 63.

camp for longtime prisoners, in 1991. When arrested outside the gates of the British Embassy in 1979, he was sent to Hanoi Central Prison (“Hanoi Hilton”)—where he mingled with the common criminals there and became a leader in speaking on their behalf instead of being killed by them, as expected by the authorities. Three years at Hỏa Lò had been in solitary confinement, but in cells where illicit interaction was possible. He was part of the prison network of rotating newspaper articles that wrapped food packages brought in by families. Prisoners also shared their rations and family provisions with him, at great personal risk. Thiện (known as “Zen Master”) credits their concern over his well-being in long confinement to his survival, for it is not possible to survive that long on prison rations alone. In 1985 he was moved to “numbered camps” which held only those considered the “most dangerous elements.” His confinement for five more years was entirely in solitary darkness. By 1988 he had lost the ability to compose poems in his mind and suffered from excruciating headaches. The starvation rations left him below eighty pounds, and every ounce of energy was centered on remembering the ones composed between 1979 and 1988 and his will to survive.

But still he resisted. All he had to do was denounce his “reactionary ideas” and support the Communist dogma.. The authorities offered him a comfortable living space Outside, even a woman for care and companionship. His face and body language in the photograph taken at the office of the Chief of Security which is in the Smithsonian Institution exhibition shows his absolute answer—no.

The heart—the Red Heart, as the Vietnamese call it—of the international movement for his release had moved the Communist regime, but more accurately they were shaken by the collapse of the Soviet Union. The hand in the foreground of the photograph, taken July 13, 1991, is that of the Security Chief. NC Thiện was being questioned about the political situation in the U.S.S.R. He answered that the Soviet Union was in its death throes. Amazed that the poet could know current events so accurately (he was proved correct the following month when Communist Russia disbanded in August 1991) the Security Chief visited him again in the hospital. Then age fifty-two, the “Stubborn Old Man” asked to have a copy of the photograph as a keepsake.

Nguyễn Chí Thiện was released from Ba Sao prison in October, 1991. He lived in Hanoi with his younger sister, Nguyễn-thi-Hao, who had been a social service worker. His health did not improve or weight return from the starvation policy of the Vietnamese Gulag as it had in his youth. He continued to recite his poems that were composed in prison during his third and longest confinement,

twelve years, sometimes asking friends who were emigrating if they would carry some with them for publication. All were afraid to do so, as he was under close police surveillance.

Back in the United States, the poet's plight was noticed by a first-generation Vietnamese American television reporter in San Jose, Đo Mui, who contacted a retired U.S. Air Force officer who had helped emigration of South Vietnamese officers whose sons had been accepted to the Air Force Academy. Col. Norboru Masuoka had experienced political imprisonment himself in America as a youth in World War II, when all Japanese Americans on the West Coast were forcibly relocated to camps. Noboru Masuoka (who is on the Board of Directors of the Heart Mountain, Wyoming, internment camp historical association) went to Hanoi at his own expense to intercede for the NC Thiệu, who had never been in the military or a civilian official in either South or North Vietnam. On November 1, 1995, Nguyễn Chí Thiệu was allowed to immigrate to the USA to join his brother in Virginia. He was the only North Vietnamese citizen to be included in the HO (Humanitarian Operation) portion of the ODP (Orderly Departure Program) negotiated between the United States and Vietnam in the late 1980s.<sup>7</sup>

The author relates this story to students as he travels and lectures throughout the United States:

**During the last twelve-year period of detention I created about 300 poems. I had to keep them in my head. When arriving in the U.S.A. I hurried to write them on paper, fearing that the poems would leave my mind. I closed the curtains to furtively write them down and then realized that I was now in the USA. I opened the curtains.**<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Program for Former Re-education Camp Detainees: Under this program, popularly known as the "HO" program, eligible applicants must have been detained for at least three years in a re-education camp because of their association with the U.S. Government. A sub-group of the HO program consists of applicants covered by the "McCain Amendment," which includes eligible persons over the age of 21 who are the sons and daughters of former re-education camp detainees who were approved for admission to the United States as refugees after April 1, 1995. This program was renewed by joined agreement between the U.S. and Vietnam in 2005, limited again to persons associated with the U.S. government or companies who had been imprisoned by the Vietnamese government, their spouses or widows.

<sup>8</sup> "Autobiography" by Nguyễn Chí Thiệu. Viet Nam Literature Project, 2005. [www.vietnamlit.org](http://www.vietnamlit.org).

On November 8, 1995, he addressed a Congressional Committee on prison conditions in Vietnam—in English, translated by his new friend, the publisher-detective Nguyễn Ngọc Bích. Together, in 1996, they produced *Hoa Địa Ngục I and II/Flowers of Hell* bilingual edition and the smaller *Hoa Địa Ngục II/Blood Seeds Become Poetry*.

By 1998 the author's health had returned enough to live abroad with an International PEN Fellowship to write the prose stories of *Hỏa Lò*, true incidents and persons he knew at the Hanoi Central Prison, called “Hỏa Lò” (the furnace) by Vietnamese. The French villagers brought their Vietnamese guest jars of goat milk, which renewed his vigor. The Hỏa Lò stories were published in 2001, again well-received by the Vietnamese diaspora and reprinted several times, most recently (2006) -by the Vietnamese community in Australia, where 1,000 copies sold in the space of three weeks. The English translations, *Hoa Lo/Hanoi Hilton Stories* are waiting for publication by the Southeast Asia Studies at Yale University.<sup>9</sup> In France, Nguyễn Chí Thiện met with President Jacques Chirac and addressed the French Parliament. His poems were translated and published (*Fleurs de l'Enfer*).<sup>10</sup> He traveled to Australia and addressed the Parliament there. “Nguyen Chi Thien” by NN (Nguyen Ngoc Bich), an entry in *Who's Who in Twentieth Century World Poetry*, edited by Mark Willhardt and Alan Michael Parker (New York, Routledge, 2000) provides many details of his life. In April, 2005, his work inaugurated the Viet Nam Literature Project at the University of North Carolina by Dan Duffy, the former editor of *Vietnam Studies* at Yale. His entire body of 700 poems, in Vietnamese, are published by the East Coast USA Vietnamese Publishing Consortium in April, 2006.<sup>11</sup>

Wherever the “Prison Poet” travels in the Free World, he is invited to stay and become part of the Vietnamese community in the diaspora. For many reasons, Nguyen Chi Thien chose to become a citizen of the United States, which he accomplished in October, 2004. He lives in Garden Grove, California, where the climate is warm and the Vietnamese population numerous. He travels and

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<sup>9</sup> Translators include historian/publisher Nguyen Ngoc Bich of Virginia, journalist and former teacher Vann Saroyan Phan of Garden Grove, Tran Van Dien, educator and father of the first elected Vietnamese American legislator in the US, Van Tran, and Nguyen Kiem Phong, who is an educator and community development organizer of Vietnamese Canadians. The translations were edited for the author's submission to Yale University by historian/author Jean Libby.

<sup>10</sup> *Fleurs de l'Enfer*. Translated by Nguyen Ngoc Quy and Dominique Delaunay. Paris, Institute de l'Asia du Sud-Est, 2000.

<sup>11</sup> *Hoa Địa Ngục* by Nguyen Chi Thien. 520 pages, ISBN 0-9772129-5-5. Tổ Hợp Xuất Bản Miền Đông Hoa Kỳ, 2006

lectures regularly to many parts of the world—all except his homeland, Vietnam, where his work is banned and his presence forbidden.

*Near six feet tall, he weighs less than eighty pounds  
Qualified, I guess, to fly into space!<sup>12</sup>. . . .  
Seeing his white hair and beard, they call him Old Man,  
A forty-six year old fellow, with a twenty-year record in jail!  
The fuel: thousands of laments  
The launch pad: millions of dreams  
The cosmonaut driving this Poetry space ship  
Is the indestructible Goddess of Liberty.*

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“The Journey of a Thousand Autumns of Nguyễn Chí Thiệu, poet” was written by Jean Libby, historian, in March, 2006. Permission is granted for publication; notification and credit appreciated.

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<sup>12</sup> When the poet was imprisoned at the Central Hanoi (“Hanoi Hilton”) prison from 1979 to 1985, he heard an announcement on the loudspeakers of a success of the Russian space program and composed “On the Poet,” which is published in *Hoa Dia Nguc II; Blood Seeds Become Poetry*. Xuat Ban Mien Dong Hoa Ky, 1996: 87. It is an Asian cultural expression to refer to death as flying into space.