PROFESSOR LE VAN THIEM (1918-1991)

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When we celebrated in 1988 the 70th birthday of Le Van Thiem in this same room, I could not suspect that I saw him for the last time. Although we knew that for many years he was suffering from hypertension coupled with diabetes, little suggested that disaster was already around the corner and he would leave us forever in three years.

So, like most of those who were lucky enough to be close to him, I am attending this conference with mixed feelings. While the loss of a senior colleague and dear friend who has done so much for us is still acute after seven years, it's a great comfort to see in this conference many distinguished guests from various countries and regions: France, USA, Japan, Malaysia, Taiwan, Hong Kong, China, Germany, England gathered to honour his memory together with Vietnamese colleagues, whose roster spreads through several generations around the country.

Le Van Thiem was born in 1918 in Ha Tinh. After brilliant performances at secondary school, where he was able to skip two grades, he obtained a scholarship to study in France. In 1941 he was admitted to the celebrated Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris. In 1942 under Valliron he began his research on the theory of meromorphic functions. It was in this period that he made important contributions to the solution of the inverse problem of Nevanlinna theory that constituted the core of his doctoral thesis in 1949 and placed him among the best young researchers in the field at that time.

Meanwhile, in Vietnam, the resistance war against French colonialists was at its heights. Despite his great passion for mathematics and the bright prospect of his scientific career, in 1949 Le Van Thiem took a dramatic decision which was going to change his life and to exert a profound influence on many generations of students in this country: abandoning his academic position at the prestigious Zurich Polytechnicum he returned to Vietnam to actively take part in the struggle for independence. He first flew to Bangkok, then headed for the free region in the far south of Vietnam and a few months later he made the long trek to Viet Bac, the far north of Vietnam which used to be the headquarters of the resistance. At that time, there was only one way to go to the north: on foot through the mountains, following a narrow footpath which later, during the American war, became the famous Ho Chi Minh trail.

It was in Viet Bac that Le Van Thiem met Ta Quang Buu, Tran Dai Nghia and other intellectuals, most of whom educated in France but now determined to join the fight against foreign domination. Convinced of the importance of

education and science in this fight, he founded in the liberated region a teacher training college and a college of fundamental sciences with the aim to provide the country with qualified teachers and technicians which the resistance was in dire need of. These colleges functioned until the end of the French war in 1954. Later developments in Vietnam highlighted the essential contribution of these colleges to upgrading and keeping the education system at a satisfactory level, even in complete isolation from the outside world during the French, then American, war. Furthermore, these colleges served as a basis for the immediate reopening in 1955 of Hanoi University with a strictly Vietnamese teaching staff, which at that time was a remarkable performance in this region of Asia. As dean of the Faculty of Sciences and head of the Mathematical-Physical Section of the State Committee for Sciences, then founder and first chairman of the Vietnamese Mathematical Society, founder and first director of the Hanoi Institute of Mathematics, founder and first editor-in-chief of the journal Acta Mathematica Vietnamica, and the Vietnam Journal of Mathematics, Le Van Thiem was, together with Ta Quang Buu and Tran Dai Nghia, one of the three most prominent figures of science in Vietnam for a long period of time. Especially, Le Van Thiem played a decisive role in the development of mathematical sciences in Vietnam. Without him mathematics might not have existed in this country or at least would have been far behind its present level.

Most of the best Vietnamese mathematicians are his former students in one way or another. For several people like me who did not have the chance to be his students, he was like an idol when we were young. It was decidely our admiration for him that pushed many of us to mathematical research.

Of course, had Le Van Thiem continued his research career in France or the United States, he would have personally contributed much more to mathematics, with his outstanding research talent. He preferred, however, to associate himself with the fate of his country, and he has done so much for Vietnam and the Vietnamese mathematical community that really we can only be proud of his invaluable achievements.

After his return to Vietnam, Le Van Thiem entirely devoted himself to education and training. Working tirelessly he made every effort to link mathematics with development. To have a just assessment of this tremendous activity one should not forget the extremely hard material conditions in which he had to carry it out during the forty years from his return to Vietnam to his death, including the time during, between and after the two wars. Not to mention all kinds of social, psychological difficutlies which had to be overcome in a poor country where mathematical sciences are often considered luxuries.

From the human point of view, Le Van Thiem was a soft, modest and extremely benevolent person, with a good sense of humour. At the same time he was a man of principle and uncompromising in defending the scientific truth. These somewhat contradictory features of his character gave him sometimes troublesome problems. Since 1981 Le Van Thiem lived with his family in Ho Chi Minh City. Once in 1989 he narrowly escaped from falling victim of his fatal disease. Then

his health was steadily improving for two years when suddenly, after only two days in hospital, he passed away.

In recognition of his outstanding scientific, public and educational achievements Le Van Thiem was posthumously awarded the Ho Chi Minh Prize and the Order of Independence, the highest honours in Vietnam.

This is in brief the life and work of this remarkable man whose blessed memory we are gathering to honour today. On behalf of the Vietnamese mathematical community I warmly welcome all our distinguished guests and very much hope that, besides contributing to the success of the conference, you will have an enjoyable stay in our country.