

Recently, I talked to my sister about the diary. Miraculously, she was able to contact the lawyer right away. And even more incredibly, he had retained all my documents in very good condition. I understand that he acted not just as a professional, but also as a warm-hearted person. He values all those who drift into his office seeking to be defended.

The diary is still in Vietnam. I just read it again through photographic images sent to me by my sister. Each biased, twisted word borne of exhaustion and anguish took me back to a bloody, unjust past, which I have tried so hard to forget for more than twenty years, given the serenity of the present. But it is still there, an open wound that needs to be sewn shut.

With all these pages full of hurtful truth, I do not want to say anything more. Let the pain itself speak up for a crime that was condoned, buried, euphemized for more than twenty years.

Say it once, to forget forever.

14. HÀM ANH (PHAN THANH THỦY)

Translated by Chu Thị Thúy Linh and Peter Beamish

The Story of Finding Phương's Diary

Originally posted on Facebook by Hàm Anh (Phan Thanh Thủy) on April 27, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/ham.anh.phan.thuy/posts/pfbidoQWLuwDXy3sERuAsDk7VULTLTeciwHEqnMcjCyxE6ASAoq7LML6PTbUKbQUo4WUcql>.

About a week ago, Phương told me about the diary that she kept during the miserable days when she was first raped, forced to abort the fetus of her first child, and subjected to continuing rapes. This was the diary that she took, along with her case file, to a lawyer's office in the early days of her quest for justice.

When I asked who had the diary, Phương gave me the lawyer's name and address immediately, as if the information was always on her mind. Lawyer Trần Hữu Nam, No. 1 Nguyễn Gia Thiều. But she also said that decades had passed, things had changed, and her hope was fragile.

I decided to go straight to the address she gave me without calling because Phương said that she had called many times and couldn't get through. My heart pounded when I saw the sign with the name of the law firm still at the old address after nearly twenty years! I entered and expressed my wish to meet lawyer Trần Hữu Nam for a special matter. How fortunate I was that he was at home, and how kind of him to agree to meet with me right away. He explained that if Phương had called from a foreign country and he didn't recognize her number, he would be unlikely to answer.

Trần Hữu Nam said that in recent days he had noticed the case was attracting public attention and he remembered that Dạ Thảo Phương had come to him many years before. He repeated almost verbatim what Phương had told me about that event. I knew I had found the right person! I was deeply moved, realizing that my sister's story must have left such an impression that the lawyer could still remember it after so many years. It was just another story of a small young woman who had once submitted a file to him but never became a client. But he still remembered. However, he said that he could not remember whether Phương had left such a notebook, and if so, if it was still in the archives. I called Phương so she could describe the book to the lawyer. Phương remembered the book very well and could even describe its approximate width and length in centimeters.

Getting out of the lawyer's office, I found myself trembling. I had to sit down for a while to calm down. Tears welled up in my eyes because my whole body felt the pain of my sister, who came to this house and met this lawyer in solitude nearly twenty years ago.

Unable to go home immediately, I tried to practice dynamic meditation, walking slowly along a small street with many typical characters of Old Hà Nội. Then, I suddenly saw Ngọc Liên temple on Trần Bình Trọng street. I went in, folded my hands and prayed for the lawyer to find the diary again to help verify my sister's tragic story.

The next morning, when I woke up, I looked at my phone, and I saw a picture of a plastic bag containing documents with code *k20* and a message: *The lawyer found it, sis!* I immediately called Tun,* then dialed Phương in as well, and we three sisters cried silently...

Trần Hữu Nam very enthusiastically accepted our invitation to meet the next day, even though it was a weekend. We video called Phương for him to

confirm that she was the girl who came to find him many years ago. When he asked Phương if she agreed to give me the file, Phương could only sob and nod. And when he allowed me to open the notebook, I couldn't contain my emotions as I recognized my sister's handwriting and read the first few lines...

The file that the lawyer gave me even contained precious documents that were not included in the file that Phương had hidden in our family's library drawer. It showed very clearly how people had purposely distorted a rape allegation into a case of "disturbance at the workplace." Regarding the incident on April 14, 2000, my parents were advised by the office leaders to only file a complaint of "being assaulted" so that their daughter would not be shamed, even though she confirmed that the nature of the incident was rape. With regard to my sister's continued grievance in 2003, office leaders advised Phương to withdraw her complaint or else she would be "slandered and defamed" by Lương Ngọc An, possibly endangering her life. From 2000 to early 2003, the perpetrator did not apologize, and the office did not officially announce the results of how Phương's complaint was handled. The decision to suspend Lương Ngọc An from work did not specify a length of time, and the reason for his suspension was given as "causing disturbance at the workplace." This decision was dated 2000 but was not publicly announced, and Phương did not know about it. Therefore, in the fourth complaint, as well as in the documents of the early 2003 meetings, Phương still demanded that her workplace make a public and clear announcement... And there were many other details in the dossier, which the lawyer could analyze specifically and convincingly.

Phương in those days struggled to find ways to save herself but couldn't; the calamity that happened to Phương was so terrible that she was paralyzed, and the fear of gossip confused her. When being slandered and retaliated against, Phương wanted to use death to prove herself. Phương was like a baby bird that uses all its strength to slam into a glass door, its body broken and bleeding, signaling, "Everyone, Phương is being persecuted, please save Phương, who has suffered in silence!"

And that cry was buried in a small book that could only fit a small young woman's hand. Found today, it screams out on its own, and no one can stop it. Reading all of Phương's diary, I was surprised to see that it matched

perfectly what Phương had told us before. More than eight months of being controlled, abused, and humiliated; nearly three years alone denouncing and complaining—how deeply and silently she was haunted that after so many years, her memories remain fresh!

I recalled that when I read what Phương was going to post on her Facebook page, I advised her to think carefully because it could harm her; there would be suspicions, there would be ridicule or insults. Phương cried fiercely and said, “I have considered almost half of my life, now I have decided to tell the truth, the whole truth, and only the truth. Even if telling the truth makes me look stupid and irrational in the eyes of some people, I can’t avoid it.” For her, telling the truth is much more important than being accepted. She believes in the sobriety, kindness, and conscience of people.

I cried with her all the while reading the yellowed pages of the diary, especially the pages where Phương described being brutally beaten, humiliated, and intensely hurt. I felt like someone had ripped my heart out. And painful memories came flooding back, which made me unable to breathe. I remember once when my mother took Phương to have her stomach pumped. Phương was lying, pale and tiny, on the stretcher, water dripping on the floor because she had just had her stomach pumped... Those were the days when she struggled with the desire to die to end all her pain. Her life could have ended, ridding herself of the terrible days of being raped and then slandered, humiliated, retaliated against, and insulted.

A certain miracle kept my sister alive in the midst of those catastrophic tsunamis and kept her from being swept away by them.

Now, she is back in the arms of love and trust, can reopen the pages of painful memories, and can speak honestly about a buried crime in which she is a victim-who-refuses-to-die.

The truth was buried in a tiny, slightly worn-out notebook, which happened to be kept in oblivion for nearly twenty years in a lawyer’s office, and what we found is something very magical! Is there a supreme being who has heard my sister’s cry of injustice? The fact that nearly twenty years ago she went to find a lawyer to sue is a testament of her will to clear herself of this terrible injustice. That diary contains everything: the evil, the cowardice of the wicked, the extreme pain of my sister...

Now, all the sarcasm, malicious interrogation, fabrications, slander, evil plots...can no longer hurt us. We are willing to bear this tribulation together so that our Phương can be vindicated before the light of Truth and Conscience.

*Tun is the nickname of journalist Nguyễn Quỳnh Hương, who has been close to both me and my sister for decades and has become almost a sister to us.

Timeline:

- From July 1999 to April 14, 2000: Phương was raped. The fetus formed from the first rape was aborted. Phương continued to be manipulated, beaten, and humiliated.
- From April 2000 to 2003: Phương was unsuccessful in her denunciations and official complaints at the workplace. Phương was bullied, slandered, banned from publishing her work, and pressured to resign. She had many suicide attempts. She sought a lawyer but had to stop the lawsuit due to both physical and mental exhaustion.

15. ĐỖ BẠCH MAI

Translated by Nguyễn Nguyệt Cẩm and Peter Zinoman

Letter to Dạ Thảo Phương

Dear Dạ Thảo Phương,

I hear that you've been ill from thinking too much. I understand why you feel sick, but please try to overcome it.

In recent days, I've kept a close eye on your story, following nearly every opinion expressed about it.

At first, I was stunned at your sudden disclosure of the incident. I'm not sure what I would have advised had you consulted me about this matter in advance.

But now I realize that you have acted righteously, and I understand better why you were determined to expose the case.

Sadly, you are met with yet another silence.

More than twenty years ago, you also faced a great silence, even after the completion of all those official reports about the case. Back then, I wondered