

By FLORA LEWIS

Special to The New York Times

PARIS, Jan. 23 — When President Lyndon B. Johnson decided to halt the bombing above the 20th Parallel in Vietnam and renounced his candidacy for re-election in 1968, Hanoi decided to take up his offer of negotiations on a settlement.

The assignment of the chief negotiator was made quickly and never changed. "Le Duc Tho," says a Vietnamese exile who knew him in the early days, "was chosen as the diplomatic hero, as Nguyen Vo Giap had been chosen as the military hero. They picked Tho because he is cool, poised, a revolutionary romantic in a way, so he is more appealing, more attractive to deal with, than a Giap with his quick temper."

That is what Americans who, at one point or another in the intervening years, have come to deal with the 61-year-old Mr. Tho have found. They have also found him tough, secretive, sometimes exacerbating — "difficult to come to terms with," as Henry A. Kissinger has said. But whether Mr. Tho displayed the charm of a polished, urbane diplomat or the rigidity of a passionate ideologist, they all found in him a remarkable combination of authority and courtesy. He aroused deep respect.

At one point in 1971, when Mr. Tho returned to Hanoi and refused another trip to Paris, Mr. Kissinger broke off talks rather than return to the treadmill with Xuan Thuy, a former Foreign Minister who became Hanoi's permanent representative at the formal Paris conference on Vietnam.

'Decisions on the Spot'

W. Averell Harriman, who had long negotiating experience in Moscow and who began the protracted series of encounters, says of Mr. Tho: "Talking to him was like talking to the head of the Soviet Government, not to an ambassador or foreign minister. He could take decisions on the spot. As far as I could see he dealt squarely."

Unofficial Americans who met him said nearly the same,

remarking on his courtesy, cordiality and evident authority.

Few realized that he was a man of some mystery. French and American archives contain little about him, apparently not even the fact that Le Duc Tho—it is pronounced "lay-dook-toe"—is not his real name. His interlocutors knew he had been in French prisons, but he records seemed to have no trace.

His reluctance to speak of the post stems in part from the fact that, like other Vietnamese revolutionaries, he was long obliged to lead a double life and had to learn to protect his clandestine existence. In part, no doubt, it arose because, with the exception of Ho Chi Minh, the Vietnamese Communists have firm strictures against "the cult of personality."

"We do not judge a man by who he is but by what he does," Mr. Tho has said. "The personal details do not matter."

Official Sketch Supplied

For the first time North Vietnamese officials agreed to provide The New York Times some firm facts on Mr. Tho's background on the occasion of the successful completion of negotiations in which he played such a signal role.

The official biography has a different birthplace and date from those used by Western experts, and it is probably the correct one. But the sketch is skimpy, speaking only of his revolutionary activities. It was filled out here with the recollections of a friend who knew him in the years before World War II, and with those details from Western reports that appear reliable.

According to the official sketch, he was born on Oct. 14, 1911, in Dich Le Village, Nam Ha Province.

According to his friend, his name was Phan Dinh Khai and he came of a "good, educated family, an honest family." He has brothers and sisters, which meant the family was well enough off to educate several children.

Le Duc Tho joined the revolutionary youth movement

in 1928 and the newly founded Indochina Communist party in 1929. He trained as a radiotelegrapher, got a job with the post office and helped Communist friends organize riots.

The French pounced quickly. In 1930 Mr. Tho was sentenced to 10 years at forced labor at the infamous prison island of Poulo Condor (later called Con Son and infamous once again for its "tiger cages" installed by the South Vietnamese).

Released from Prison

In 1936 the Popular Front Government in Paris released many prisoners. Mr. Tho returned to Nam Dinh, the city in his home area, according to the official sketch, to engage in "semi-open activities." The sketch says "Le Duc Tho was in charge of the party press and propaganda organization."

When France went to war in 1939 Mr. Tho was jailed for a time in Nam Dinh and then sent to a prison camp at Son La, near the Chinese border.

Some people who knew him thought it was prison that transformed the patriotic youth into a Communist. But poems he wrote then speak of such "implacable hatred for the oppressor" as to reflect a long-confirmed revolutionary spirit.

Some Western reports have it that Mr. Tho escaped to China during the war and joined Ho Chi Minh there. The official sketch and other available information indicate otherwise. He was held at Son La until the French administrator released a number of prisoners in late 1944 for fear they would be massacred by the Japanese.

Mr. Tho was then elected to the Central Committee of the Indochina Communist party, the official sketch disclosed, and appointed to its Standing Committee when the uprisings against the French began in August, 1945.

Mr. Tho's years in prison had brought him into contact with many of the major figures of Vietnamese Communists, and they earned him the nickname "the Phonograph." Illegal pamphlets

brought to Poulo Condor, were quickly seized, so inmates with the best memories were given the task of becoming "talking libraries." Mr. Tho learned to recite long extracts from Marx, Engels and Lenin faultlessly.

In 1946 Mr. Tho was first observed on a Vietminh mission in the south, but he was passing through then. It was 1948, according to the official sketch, when he was first posted in southern Vietnam to fight the French. His title was deputy secretary of the Central Office of the party in South Vietnam.

By then he was considered a member of the "old guard," a friend of Truong Chinh, then Secretary General of Giap, its military mastermind. Both were from Nam Dinh.

Mr. Tho's first known party conflict was in the South, with Le Duan, now head of the party, who had been leading the fight in the South. With Mr. Tho's arrival, they began a long dispute over how to continue. It was so severe that at times, French sources say, the Vietminh almost seemed divided into opposing camps.

The official sketch makes no mention of the quarrel, and there are several contradictory Western versions. One ascribed a tough, doctrinaire policy to Mr. Tho and a more flexible, more humane strategy to Mr. Duan. Another said that Mr. Duan wanted to expand military forces and undertake large-scale battles while Mr. Tho considered it essential to rely on guerrilla action and avoid a war of position.

'Gentleness and Patience'

The British scholar P. J. Honey, saw in Hanoi a charred fragment the French had found in an abandoned Vietminh command post. It spoke of the "persistence and severity" of Mr. Duan's policy as contrasted with the "gentleness and patience" of Mr. Tho.

Mr. Tho won out and Mr. Duan returned to the North, taking a number of leading figures with him. Eventually he became First Secretary and with the death of Ho Chi

Minh, the chief in Hanoi. In the shorter term Mr. Tho got the upper hand and took over administrative power for the revolutionary movement in all of South Vietnam.

The dispute was later papered over to prevent trouble in the Politburo, but it is believed to rankle still.

The official sketch says that Mr. Tho returned to the North in 1955, after the end of the French Indochina war. "Since then," it says, "he has been a member of the Political Bureau and Secretary of the Central Committee of the Vietnam Workers party. At present he is also a member of the Military Commission of the Central Committee.

Western sources, who rank him fourth or fifth in the hierarchy, view him as a leading contender for the top post.

He was high in the leadership in 1956, when he was sent to Moscow as North Vietnamese delegate to the 20th Congress of the Soviet Communist party. As far as is known, it was his first trip abroad.

Limited Grasp of French

After many visits to Paris, Mr. Tho seems to understand some French but is not confident of his comprehension and does not speak the language. It is unusual for a Vietnamese of his age and background not to have learned French in childhood.

According to a non-Communist Vietnamese nationalist in exile, Mr. Tho, in a conversation in 1965, reacted "very energetically" against the idea of negotiating with the United States. He was quoted as saying: "The Americans are bandits. They are in our home. There is no point in talking to them? We have to chase them away."

The exile demurred, speaking of the sacrifice and suffering that policy would mean for the Vietnamese. Mr. Tho told him, he related, that "the people are there to make sacrifices."

A similar combative attitude was attributed to Mr. Tho by the friend who knew him in the thirties. The friend suggested that they appeal to



The New York Times/Marc Riboud—Magnum

Mr. Tho, photographed last week at the North Vietnamese villa in a suburb of Paris

French "generosity" to give Indochina independence. The otherwise lyrical, sentimental, even courtly Mr. Tho always responded fiercely, the friend recalled, denouncing him for using such words as "give" and "generosity" and insisting that the people must fight for their freedom.

He Writes It Himself

His poems reflect his views. The erstwhile friend said, "He is a good poet, better than Xuan Thuy, and unlike many of the Hanoi leadership, he really writes the poetry himself."

According to Mr. Honey, Mr. Tho apparently took his nom de guerre during the World War II underground period. Le is a common family name, Duc means "virtue" or "goodness" and Tho means a "happy and prosperous old age."

Mr. Tho, who apparently lives with the austerity and strict morality demanded by the Vietnamese revolutionary ethos, is believed to have

been married twice, but nothing is known about his family life. On the few occasions when foreigners have seen him at receptions in Hanoi. He has been unaccompanied.

Tall for a Vietnamese—about 5 feet 8 or 9—he has a trim but sturdy figure. His health is said to be fragile and he has been reported to have insomnia, but when he breaks into one of his broad, easy smiles, his eyes are bright and merry, his face glows and he looks quite fit.

Quick to Laughter

Unlike many Vietnamese he does not have an angular bone structure and his skin seems pale beside that of many of his compatriots. His facial expressions are lively, shifting quickly in spontaneous reflection of his feelings.

He does not seem, at least in private conversation, to make any effort to mask his thoughts with stiffened facial muscles or a controlled emptiness in his eyes. He

uses his hands freely to add emotion or point to his words.

His large, slightly protuberant teeth gleam intensely white when he breaks into laughter, as he often does in relaxed conversation. They add to the impression of a basically amiable man, easy to talk with. His hair, trimmed fairly short, looks gray but is actually a fine mixture of pepper and salt, plastered down neatly on the sides of a part.

In Paris he habitually appears in a well-cut black Mao suit of rather heavy wool and sometimes wears a fedora against the cold.

Mr. Kissinger, who has said that he feels "deep respect" for his difficult negotiating partner, was pleased to tell the Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci that at times he had managed to get Mr. Tho to join him in joking repartee. "We said that one day I might go to lecture at Hanoi University and that he would come to Harvard to lecture on Marxism-Leninism."