Speech at the reception of the Medal "Friend of Vietnam"
Hanoi, 25th February 2019

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In the summer of the year 1974 I gave in Hanoi a seminar in Vietnamese to young research mathematicians. The subject was pure mathematics, namely probability theory but I was amazed to see also many people from other scientific fields approaching me after my lectures. They inquired about the role of mathematics in their domain. There were for instance agronomists and forestry scientists but most people came from the health sciences. I had long and interesting discussions with Tạ Quang Bửu and Tôn Thất Tùng.

However my meetings that had the most significant and lasting influence were those with Hoàng Thùy Nguyên. He was a virologist but he fully recognized and understood the importance of Mathematics in Medicine and Public Health. Above all, he did something concrete about it. He founded the so-called Mathematics Group, which consisted of four young graduates, three women and one man. I was to train them in theory and practice, which I did as well as I could. In particular on the practical side we assisted UNICEF in its CDD-programme. I continued to work in Vietnam in various ways until the year 2004 but then I decided to retire.

Therefore in the following year 2005 I travelled to Vietnam privately with my partner Helga in order to show her the country. Of course we also visited Hoàng Thùy Nguyên and that was the end of my retirement. In fact Nguyên told me that the Thái Bình University of Medicine and Pharmacy wanted some help in training people in Public Health. I nodded "all-right, why not" but before we left Vietnam there was already a delegation from Thái Bình in Hanoi. Together we drafted a plan for a future project. The first workshop of this project took place in 2006 in Thái Bình. There it was again Hoàng Thùy Nguyên who helped us to get the project definitely started against some opposition. He had come to Thái Bình in spite of his serious health problems.

After this initial workshop our project has been steadily evolving and expanding. It is now concerned with making the main components of the Public Health system more perfect and with organizing them in a coherent way. We have had hundreds of voluntary co-workers, especially lecturers of Public Health but also many others in Vietnam and abroad. Let me present three of them.
First, one of the members of the old Mathematics Group has been helping us from the beginning, namely Phan Vũ Diễm Hằng. She is a mathematician by training and then turned to Public Health. She has done an enormous work all the time. Whenever I stumbled over a problem which I could not solve I turned to her and she solved it.

Second, we also had a voluntary contributor of a very different kind, namely a German professional graphic artist who designed our logo, which you undoubtedly know:

Her name is Susanna, she belongs to our family in the wide sense.

Third, there is my partner Helga. She has always accompanied me and helped in many, many ways. She also contributed to our work on health education, in particular in schools; she is a former school teacher with a medical background from her family.

Let me conclude by saying something about the present ceremony. I have received several distinctions for my activities in Vietnam. In the year 2009 it was the Medal of the Ministry of Health for Contributions to the Health of the Population. Then, in 2014, the National University of Sciences of Ho Chi Minh-City bestowed on me its "Honorary Doctor" degree for my work in mathematics, and in 2015 the Thái Bình University of Medicine and Pharmacy made me its "Honorary Professor". Today I have received the Medal "Friend of Vietnam" of the President of Vietnam for,
as he wrote, "many positive essential contributions to the development of the Vietnamese health sector". This is indeed a great honour, for which I am immensely grateful.

There was, however, also a distinction that I received already in the early 1980s. At that time our "Mathematics Group" was located in a little house on the premises of the "National Institute of Hygiene and Epidemiology" (NIHE). Every morning I arrived for work by bicycle. At that time there were hardly any motorized vehicles on the streets of Hanoi except the big cars for the members of a few international organizations. Hoàng Thúy Nguyên as the Director of NIHE employed a man for various non-scientific tasks like bringing documents from one office in town to another one. One morning this man and I arrived at the same time by bicycle at the gate of NIHE. He said to me:

Kơ-rí-cơ-bè là một người Việt Nam
(Krickeberg is a Vietnamese man).

I think that was indeed a very high honour.