

## OBITUARY\*

### Professor Sukich Nimmanhaeminda

(1906-1976)

On 2 February 1976, word got round Bangkok that Professor Sukich Nimmanhaeminda had died suddenly. It was unanimously agreed that the age had lost one of its most important persons.

Looking back over the past 40 years or so, I remember meeting Professor Sukich for the first time at Chulalongkorn University, after he had just returned from abroad. He was going to teach mathematics in my place. Out of good intentions, I invited him to sit in on a class I was taking, in order to familiarise himself with the work. I have never ceased to regret this since I later found out how expert he was at the subject. To have asked him to watch me was like teaching a crocodile to swim.

As a matter of fact, Professor Sukich was expert in many subjects including history and literature. These days, the word "learned" is used rather loosely. Professor Sukich was "learned" in the true sense of the word. His knowledge was all-round. He knew everything. In this respect it is hard to find his equal. I cannot think of anyone who would be more learned than he was.

With this characteristic he was most suited to be a representative of the people. He was elected to Parliament, representing Chiang Mai, where he was born and bred. His political career was marked by ministerial posts on three different occasions, namely at the Ministry of Industry, Ministry of Economics, and the Ministry of Education. His highest position was that of Deputy Prime Minister, a position he held twice, in the Thanom and the Sanya Cabinets. His last political post was membership in the Senate. However, he resigned from this after a few days. I asked him, "Why did you resign?" His reply was that in the last stage of his life, he wanted to devote his time to his hometown. He was then Chairman of the Chiangmai University Council, and wanted to give of his best in that capacity. In this he deserved much praise.

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\* Translated from the Thai original by Charit Tingsabadh, Economics Faculty, Chulalongkorn University.

But in fact his last act was as a father. He felt ill on the morning of February 2nd, while getting into the car to take his son to school. He died soon afterward.

Having mentioned Chiangmai University, I may be permitted to observe that the valuable possessions of Professor Sukich were the "two B's," namely Books and Birds. He owned a vast number of books including the kind that are called "rare" books. It is a pleasure to learn that he ordered that all the books in his library be given to Chiangmai University. As for his birds, I do not know at the time of writing whether he ordered them to be freed or given to anyone.

Professor Sukich was quick: a quick reader, a quick thinker, a quick talker. This last was rather a defect. In his speeches, in order to talk as fast as he thought, he tended to run his words together, leaving his listeners behind, both in hearing and in following his ideas. His talks were out of the ordinary and interesting— "On Watching Birds", for example. His books had the same flavour, as "The Man Named Lee" exemplifies.

His quickness was clearly noticeable during meetings to consider some issue. Whether he was chairing the meeting or not, we would know of his summary views in no time at all. In conversation, friends were full of admiration and foes of trepidation because he was always ready with repartee which could sometimes be cutting.

I would like to tell a story. During the Second World War, while Professor Sukich was Director-General of the Department of Vocational Education, he was with a party of senior officials from the Ministry of Education headed by the Minister. We were travelling by car to Petchabun Province. The group could not reach the appointed place because the road was cut at many points. It was necessary to spend the night at a place where no preparation had been made for our coming. On opening our eyes in the morning, we doubted whether we could find anything to eat. But no sooner that than we saw Professor Sukich busy at work in the kitchen. He had become our emergency cook, and his cooking was not at all bad.

Twenty years after that incident, I had the opportunity to taste his *foi thong*. He was then Thailand's Ambassador in Washington. It is not to be forgotten that he had been Ambassador to India and the United States. Particularly while in India, he had the opportunity to do some research in language and culture as well.

Professor Sukich had also worked in some important international organisations. At the inception of the South-East Asian Ministers of Education Organisation, sometimes called SEAMEO, many countries wanted their own nationals to be the first Secretary-General. Some nominated men at ministerial level for the post. But when the Committee saw the name of Professor Sukich as Thailand's nominee, they had no trouble in making the decision. Professor Sukich was the first Secretary-General of that organisation.

Another important position which Professor Sukich held but regarding which there seemed to be little public knowledge was the Presidency of the Royal Institute in which position he was preceded by H.R.H. Prince Wan. It was a position he so admirably deserved. One reason why I say this is that at the start of the revision of the Royal Institute Act in 1932, Field Marshal P. Pibulsongkram naturally did not have time to do everything. The details were largely the work of Professor Sukich. It is perhaps for this reason that Professor Sukich was the only man to be Royal Scholar in two subjects, namely history and physical sciences.

It is not possible in this short note to mention all the positions held by Professor Sukich. Recalling from memory, he was the Chairman of the National Education Council, Chairman of the University of the Air Committee, and a Senior Vice-President of the Siam Society.

Two days after his death, I attended the funeral rites at Wat That Thong. Many were there, both Thais and foreigners. And there were so many wreaths one simply could not count them all. One thing Professor Sukich could not do was to calculate how many elementary schools could have been built with the total costs of the flowers.

That same evening I was asked what the most outstanding achievement of Professor Sukich was. For the questioner, it was his work as the Secretary of Chulalongkorn University. Formerly the

University did not appear to be very important in the eyes of the public. Hence the lack of staff, funds and facilities. Professor Sukich was the man who changed such views. The result was the visible growth of Chulalongkorn University. At the Teachers' Day ceremony held by the former students of the University on the lawn by the Arts Building on January 16th this year, it was still being remarked that Professor Sukich intended the University's flagpole to be the tallest in Thailand.

On February 1st, the start of the Fifth National Book Week, there was a Good Book Competition. Professor Sukich was the Chairman of the Committee of Judges. He finished the work on the evening. The next day, February 2nd, he did not stay to watch the prizewinners take their prizes.

We have irretrievably lost a man who was capable all-round, strong and quick. His character was incomparable with anybody on earth. The loss is deeply regretted.

*M.L. Pin Malakul*