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What price freedom: the story of a Vietnamese political refugee

Stephaney A. Jones-Vo

Iowa State University

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What price freedom: The story of a Vietnamese political refugee

by

Stephaney Ann Jones-Vo

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Stephaney Ann Jones-Vo
has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Signature redacted for privacy
Resulting from the fall of Saigon in 1975 and the enthusiastic response of then-governor Robert D. Ray to help resettle displaced Southeast Asian refugees, the state of Iowa established the only state-funded Bureau of Refugee Services in the United States which still continues to operate in Iowa in 1997. It is through this agency that I, in the heartland of America, first became involved in an endeavor which would forever alter the course of my life. Through this agency, I began to casually assist in the resettlement of refugees in the metropolitan Des Moines area. After that, a close friend for 25 years, Diane Weissman, suggested that I should undertake a more personal and formalized sponsorship role.

Somewhat reluctantly, I applied to the Bureau to become a sponsor for four Southeast Asians. This contract with the Bureau of Refugee Services was not a financial obligation on my part, but rather a moral agreement to arrange housing, facilitate registration with Human Services for initial food stamps, medical care, and other entitlements, etc. It was an agreement that meant I would meet my "charges" at the airport, collect furniture for their new apartment, provide warm clothing for them since they were arriving in Iowa in the middle of December, and orient them to their new home.
Perhaps that would mean registering someone for English classes, or finding employment, or maybe taking care of a sick newcomer who contracted the chicken-pox or who broke an arm. It was all uncharted territory for me, yet I felt very excited and eagerly anticipated the arrival of my first sponsorees at Des Moines International Airport.

I had been cautioned by the Bureau that my "leadership role" with four young Vietnamese men, aged 19-27, might not be an easy role to fulfill due to the different cultural perceptions of the appropriate roles of women. Nevertheless, I proceeded blindly and was met by their uniform acceptance. I awoke each morning and planned the days to include all of my agreed-to responsibilities as well as what became personal visits to check on their well-being. This sponsorship was one of the most rewarding activities that I had ever undertaken.

It was not surprising, then, that after this group of gentlemen was sufficiently acclimated, employed, enrolled, and living independently, I agreed to sponsor a second group of four young men who had been awaiting sponsorship in a Philippine refugee camp. Some had a short wait; others had lived in their private limbo for seven years. Becoming aware of these figures only led me to feel that refugee sponsorship was all the more compelling. I could not reconcile my lovely life in Iowa with all its bounty with the deprivation, inequity, injustice, and hopelessness
experienced by the thousands of inhabitants who lived in the refugee camps in Thailand and the Philippines.

I recall looking over the roster of prospective sponsorees. There was a brief description of each "candidate" which included a birth date, religion, English level, work experience, and little else. I still remember feeling the bizarre obscenity of it, as though I were shopping in some sort of catalog for the suitable person. Still, I made use of these thumb-nail sketches for several reasons. First, I knew that since I had three small children of my own, I could not manage a newcomer family in addition to my own children. I had had enough of my own bouts with childhood diseases and immunizations to have the sense to rule out refugee youngsters. Also, I knew I must limit the number of people who could legally and practically travel in my car. That number was four, besides me. Finally, I reasoned that a group of four could initially cooperate, share housing, perhaps buy a car together, etc., until they got on their feet and could choose to go their separate ways.

"My" second group of four Vietnamese escapees also arrived from the Philippines in December 1990. This time I was much more prepared in many ways, but I was not prepared for the question that would be posed by this group of younger newcomers: "Can we call you 'Mom'"? Not having rehearsed this scenario, I instantaneously responded,
"Sure." That was a response that would determine the course of events for many years to come.

During these sponsoring years, I had experienced the need to increase my own employment. Though certified as a secondary French teacher, I found that role to be unfulfilling. Generally attractive to more highly motivated students, French was not an area that gave me the feeling of being genuinely needed or of making a difference. However, when the role of long-term substitute English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher was offered to me at Hoover High School in Des Moines, I enthusiastically accepted. This meant that many of my sponsorees were now also my own ESL students. This added a new dimension to our dynamics and interaction. This new expanded role also increased my visibility and ease of movement within the Des Moines Vietnamese community.

The years that followed saw an increase in my activities related to refugee resettlement in the Des Moines area. I agreed to be a foster mother for a Vietnamese Hoover High School student who had been expelled. I sponsored others who came to Iowa by "secondary sponsorship" from other states. I organized school sponsorship of whole families at Roosevelt High School in Des Moines, Iowa, and Urbandale High School in Urbandale, Iowa. I became a job contact, placing people in employment, and worked with churches and corporations such as Pioneer International,
which gave me access to their electronic bulletin board to posting furniture needs for newly arriving refugees. As a result, it was necessary to rent trucks to pick up the collections and to deliver them to the needy destinations.

It was during this flurry of activity that I was asked by a young acquaintance, Binh, if I could check on a new arrival from the Philippine camp who had been sponsored by a local agency and placed in an apartment on the city's near north side, which was the usual location to house the Vietnamese. Unfortunately, the resettling agency seemed to have forgotten him. After three weeks in the United States, this newcomer had neither a bed to sleep on nor any concrete hope of school registration. It must have been quite discouraging to have finally arrived at the third country for resettlement, having spent two and a half years in refugee camps in varying conditions, only to be left alone without a clear direction.

It was a clear day on May 22, 1991, when I finally knocked on the door at 1631 9th Street, Apartment #4. When the door opened, I saw a man of short stature, but not slight, with a neatly trimmed moustache over his smile. I greeted him and told him that Binh had asked me to come to see him. He invited me inside where I could see that he kept his very sparsely furnished surroundings in immaculate condition. A quick glance around the room revealed that there was no bed and I took some mental notes, as was my
habit. His accent was halting, but I came to know that he had studied English in the past and had, in fact, studied Aviation Electronics for 15 months at Keesler Air Force Base in Biloxi, Mississippi, with the United States Air Force in 1969-1970. As with all the others, I knew my goal: discover the need for furniture, medical or dental treatment, English class or school registration, job, and then progress from there.

Having registered him at Proteus Employment Opportunities for intensive English classes which also paid a stipend to enrollees for attendance, made dental appointments to replace an obviously ill-fitting bridge, and procured the first job as night maintenance worker at Mercy Hospital, I felt satisfied that he now had the orientation necessary to continue on his own.

Now aware that I often needed help to deliver furniture to other Vietnamese, this newcomer offered to assist me with moving and lifting at any time in the future. It was an offer I accepted. I remember driving a borrowed truck to an apartment building on Grand Avenue which had a security entrance. While I went inside with our donor, my assistant waited outside at the truck. I still regarded him as just another newcomer, but I observed his manner. He had an obvious dignity in his stance and posture. He was always cheerful and somehow self-assured.
From time to time when I would pick him up to continue our "mission," I had observed how meticulously he took care of his appearance, even though it meant doing laundry by hand in the bathtub. He always pressed his clothes. I had seen him do this, laying his shirts on the floor. I also came to know that this 40-year-old man with an easy smile had come from a family of some status in Saigon (now called Ho Chi Minh City). He had money, cars, property, business, education, and a large extended family in Vietnam. Most of all, he was fluent in his native Vietnamese language which had enabled him, with a large amount of savoir faire and cunning, to maintain several businesses and generate income under the very noses of the communists who had persecuted him.

Now, in Des Moines, Iowa, he was starting over with a GED program which denied all of his previous accomplishments. He had no bed, no family support, and his new job was cleaning hospital offices at night. He never complained. Not once. His unflagging willingness to do any work whatsoever, believing in the dignity of work, inspired me. His ability to smile in the face of unbelievable adversity fascinated me. His joy in living and hope for the future amazed me. I began to realize that this newcomer from 10,000 miles away was my destiny.

It has been my privilege to come to know this man, Vo Van Vinh, who is now my husband of three years. During our
acquaintance and marriage, his incredible story has gradually been revealed to me. It has been told to me in visits while sipping Coke after work, it has surfaced through terrible dreams at night, it has been observed by me through loving eyes, it has been expanded by my questions and his answers. I am always surprised when my husband tells me that his story is nothing special, nothing out of the ordinary. To me it is like so many refugee stories, a story that must be told.

My husband has often said to me, "I am you and you are me." It is in this spirit that I can only attempt to give voice to his incredible story of "rising up" again. It is in this spirit that I humbly try to commit some memories to paper for posterity in an attempt to give an almost lost voice a sounding board. It is in this spirit that I recognize the voices of all refugees who share a loud, yet unheard voice. It is in this spirit of unity with him that I would like to record his story for our children and those who make their lives working with others with similar tales. It is my hope that understanding may be increased in some small way as we validate the experience of the invisible in our society and lend credibility to them.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Freedom is an unattainable state for many people in the world. It is my goal to share how highly it is prized, not by those who already live with its benefits, but by one man from South Vietnam who risked his very existence and endured unspeakable suffering to live in the light of freedom. He arrived in his country of asylum, the United States, after several years of planning, secretly organizing, and living in the shadows of communism. He kept his goal of freely living under the benefits of basic human rights and never lost sight, over many years and disheartening setbacks, of his ultimate dream to possess the right to work and succeed based on one’s own merit, the right to vote, the right to practice one’s religion, the right to know the news of the world, the right to speak freely, and the right to live in an environment where these inalienable rights are protected. Generations ago, many of our American forefathers also sacrificed, were jailed, persecuted, or died in the name of democracy, justice, and freedom. Forging the Constitution of the United States and the Bill of Rights was a sacred task. It set the stage for America, as a nation, to value and defend personal liberty and human rights more than any other nation in the history of the world. Today, in the relative
comfort of America, it is easy to forget that the fight is not over for many people. It is a daily struggle with compelling stories unfolding every day. This is one such story, told through the eyes of a courageous man who gave up everything looking for his freedom.

Following the sections entitled "Prologue," "Family History," and "Boyhood Memories," which historically situate the story and provide background information, "Vinh's Narrative" begins by recounting the story in the first person. That is how the story has been revealed to me over several years, as well as told to me during countless marathon sessions of my transcription. Vinh's story should be told in the voice of the first person to better convey the full power of his experiences. It should also be noted that, because of the ongoing status of this story and the sensitive nature of some of the content, that names of both cities and people have been changed to protect innocent survivors.

Since the native language of this storyteller is Vietnamese, sharing the story is more complicated. It is not a story that could be written by the storyteller in English, thus expanding his audience. As a result, I became the medium for telling the story, transcribing Vinh's words over hundreds of hours, thereby restoring a voice which could have easily been lost forever. This method was the most expeditious, since both video-taping or tape recording would
eventually involve transcription. This story adds to a human tradition of oral history which needs to be preserved and handed down to generations so that they will understand and more highly prize the liberty that has been won for them. This kind of story offers a podium to a voiceless person in the sense that, as an English as a Second Language speaker who struggles with fluency, he has neither a forum nor an audience. This narrative provides an audience for a speaker who otherwise lives in an overlooked and politically powerless segment of society. It allows such a person to make a contribution to the body of information about his history and validate his experience. This kind of insight can be valuable and useful for those who teach English as a Second Language, refugee workers abroad, domestic social workers, and others in their work with recent immigrants. It can also be enlightening for employers, neighbors, educators, and in fact all segments of society to understand the power of conviction that has driven some refugees now living in exile from their homeland. Finally, I wanted my family, mother, brothers and sisters, their husbands and wives, nieces and nephews, to know this particular story and begin to comprehend the depth of moral conviction held by this new member of our family. Since language serves as a barrier at all levels of society, it became imperative for me to become the vehicle for the speaker’s thoughts, words, and feelings.
This story presents an obviously blurred line between research and narration. I pondered this blurriness since it seems an accurate reflection of life. Living one's life is not neatly carved into segments highlighted by dark outline-yielding quantitative data. Rather, this story offers factual as well as biased information previously unknown by anyone, not even the parents of the storyteller. It qualifies as research, yet it is also a narrative since it chronicles events as they were experienced. Vinh's story has merit that stands alone and it needs to be told.
CHAPTER 2
RECLAIMING A LOST VOICE: A LOOK AT LITERATURE

A literature review related to this personal narrative is an infinite, eclectic list. I found myself drawn to a broad variety of diverse topics related to Vietnam and Vietnamese culture as I tried to ground the writing of my husband's story in credibility. This look at literature reflects my struggle to relate a broad spectrum of work to various aspects of Vinh's story. I examined work explaining psychological and physical benefits of processing one's story, texts that provided authoritative background on Vietnamese culture and history, Vietnamese poetry, first-hand quotes, government reports, international news' records, statistical analysis of refugee acculturation, population graphs, interviews, and more. Together, they form an intricate web in which Vinh was living. It was my goal to examine several strands of this web to better understand how it all fit together. As a result, I hope to have provided the reader with a broad framework of useful sources for further reading.

As I began to write the story of my husband, I observed that there is a distinct comparison with the current trend to interpret women's lives through life histories as scholarly work and the telling of his story as a scholarly
work. In *Interpreting women's lives*, the various authors utilize diaries, biographies, autobiographies, etc. to, "illuminate the course of a life over time and allow for its interpretation in its historical and cultural context" (Personal Narratives Group, p. 4). Many of these women had previously lived their entire lives in obscurity and were ignored by the annals of history which were recorded by males, about males, for the edification of males. How is it that these powerful female existences nearly evaporated away, without ever being shared or appreciated by any audience? It has been noted that the role of women's narratives "was gaining critical importance . . . and women's testimonies about their lives were playing an increasingly prominent role in the scholarship and teaching of feminists" (p. 8).

There is an obvious parallel between the situation of the unempowered women whose histories situate them in domination and fail to recognize them as conscious social beings, and the disenfranchised refugee who is powerless to express him or herself in the target language as a result of political, rather than gender-related, domination. Other issues further exacerbate the plight of the refugee, including prejudice related to skin color, shape of eyes, angle of nose, etc. The role of the newcomer refugee is constrained by all these isolating factors. As a result, both women and refugees in history have suffered a loss of
their voices, an inability to be heard and therefore validated. They have been denied the very real value of their existence for all to know and further understand the contributing dynamics of their historical circumstances.

Allowing both of these oft-marginalized components of society a voice, considering their life stories as revealing fact, and giving credence to their experiences, is long overdue if historians are to be inclusive and realistic in their view of world history. It is most heartening that feminist theorists have blazed a trail of accepting narratives, diaries, writings, letters, journals, etc. to encourage cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary dialogue. It can only serve to empower more people while recognizing that all people have valuable contributions to make through their lives.

Furthermore, in *Voices from the language classroom* (Bailey & Nunan, 1996), Kathleen Bailey notes that,

> The diary studies are thus first-person case studies—a research genre defined by the data collection procedures. Proponents of this type of research say that the use of self-report data from personal journals allows us to tap into the affective factors, language learning strategies, and the learners' own perceptions—facets . . . which are normally hidden or largely inaccessible to external observers. (p. 197)

These interpretations could easily be missed in a nonintrospective analysis by an observer. It seems clear that elements of complexity, reality, and vividness are added when events are personally reported. I certainly found this to be the case in re-living Vinh’s story.
Max van Manen (1990), in Researching lived experience, remarks:

It has been noted already that lived-experience descriptions can be found in a multitude of expressions or forms: in transcribed tape conversations; in interview materials; in daily accounts or stories; in supper-time talk; in formally written responses; in diaries; in passing comments; in reflections on other people's writings; in accounts of vicarious experiences of drama, film, poetry, or novels; in the play-acting of little children; in the talk that accompanies bedtime story-telling; in heart-to-heart conversations among friends; and so on. (p. 93)

van Manen further notes that "Any lived-experience description is an appropriate source for uncovering thematic aspects of the phenomenon it describes." "When a person shares with us a certain experience then there will always be something there for us to gather" (p. 93).

Such valuable contributions are encouraged by Tee A. Corrine in "Telling the world" (1996) as she invites her student writers to heal through writing. She notes that "conflict and resolution are your allies" and a way to "confront personal fear." She views such synthesis as a way to "sort out the past and set new goals." As a healing process, every person should have the opportunity for such clarification. It is further support for lending a voice to the disenfranchised refugee, especially due to the accentuated isolation which results from lack of fluency in the second language.

Other benefits exist for those who process anger and hostility in a productive way such as getting the story out
and moving on to forgiveness. In the article "Gripes of wrath" (1996), Gurney Williams III describes the physical toll of harboring anger or rage, including increasing the risk of infectious disease, contributing to high blood pressure and heart disease, and significantly increasing the likelihood of heart attack. Providing an assertive response to a wrong, such as telling one's story, is an important step toward defusing anger and living a longer, happier life. This prescription would be beneficial medicine for all refugees.

In Introduction to Vietnamese culture (1987), Huynh Dinh Te articulates part of the tremendous sense of loss that permeates both Vietnam and Vietnamese refugees. He relates that since 1975, with the communist takeover of the whole country and the tragic exodus of the Vietnamese people throughout the world to search for freedom, the Vietnamese family has become increasingly broken and dispersed. This desolation is testimonial to the fact that millions of people, forced to take up residence in new cultures, share an isolation and a separation from the mainstream that needs to be bridged. It can be bridged by restoring voices both in the native language as well as in the second language.

There are now several books which have emerged as testimony to the plight of the Southeast Asian refugee. For example, Linda Hitchcox (1990) in Vietnamese refugees in Southeast Asian camps describes government priorities for
accepting refugees for resettlement and points out that there are far more boat arrivals in the countries of first asylum than there are refugees being sponsored through the Orderly Departure Program (O.D.P.). Most O.D.P. applicants, who have filed immigration papers prior to immigration, have been resettled in Canada, Britain, France, and Australia and by 1987, over 600,000 Vietnamese refugees had resettled in the United States. Hitchcox incorporates short excerpts from refugee experience into her text such as this comment from a Vietnamese approved for resettlement in the United States:  "When it was announced that I had name in the list of flying I couldn’t accept it as a true matter until now it seems to be a dream, a fragile dream" (pp. 75-76). This factual research uses statistics, government manuals, and maps, interspersed with personal quotations, and provides an authoritative resource on the resettlement process and related topics. It couches brief refugee quotations in pertinent information.

In Strangers from a different shore: A history of Asian Americans (1990), Ronald Takaki richly sprinkles his narrative with first-hand quotes of many Vietnamese refugees and also provides background information relevant to understanding the Vietnamese history and culture. Takaki uses poetry as well:

Can you imagine human hair
Flowing all over the sea,
Children's bodies ready to dissolve
As human meat dinners of fish?
But they keep on leaving
As humanity turn their heads away
And still they serenely
Throw themselves into death.

In rapid-fire succession, Takaki uses a combination of brief testimonials and quotations to create a powerful compilation of historical facts.

The second wave of Vietnamese refugees took their wives and children and boarded crowded, leaky boats, risking their lives at sea where storms threatened to drown them and pirates waited to rob them and rape the women. Two thirds of the boats were attacked by pirates, each boat an average of more than two times. (p. 452)

The Issue of Which Voice to Use

The first-person narrative is used interchangeably with third-person description. An example of the third-person narrative:

Luong Bot Chau told a similar story. She and her husband, along with over two dozen refugees, had sailed away on a small 30-foot vessel. Off the coast of Thailand, the boat was attacked by Thai pirates. The pirates chopped off one of her husband's fingers to get his ring and then tried to slit his throat. (p. 453)

In contrast, the first person using direct quotation from a letter of a Vietnamese woman is also effective: "I ran, fell, and ran for my life in the unknown darkness of a strange forest, totally oblivious to my bleeding wounds." A combination of both third and first person is also used to
convey a strong story supported by more information than the speaker herself was able to communicate in one more technique employed by Takaki:

When they saw the Thai pirates approaching their boat, Hue and the other women smeared their faces with engine oil and fish sauce to diminish their appeal. But the pirates ordered them to bathe and then raped them. Hue still wakes up screaming, from nightmares of the experience—the 'dark skinned men' encircling her, the knife at her throat, the hands that 'clawed,' and the teeth that "bit," mutilating her breasts. (p. 453)

While it seems ludicrous to examine which grammatical person is utilized to convey such horrors, the point is that in order to restore a voice nearly lost, one must broaden acceptance of multiple styles of expression and use whatever means are most effective.

James Freeman, in *Hearts of sorrow* (1989), provides a backdrop of historical events from Vietnam in 1975 and goes on to explore why, beneath a surface of success in American culture, there is an underlying sorrow in Vietnamese Americans which relates back to a poem written in the early nineteenth century by Nguyen Du, Vietnam's greatest poet:

> Those vicissitudes we have experienced
> Cause our hearts to break. (p. 19)

Freeman employs several different anonymous narrators to tell parts of their stories in chapter form, such as "Brutality in a Thai Refugee Camp: 1982," which was told by a former army colonel from South Vietnam. Freeman prefaced the chapter with his own insightful notes:
During the period that the colonel was in the Sikhiu Camp in Thailand, refugees were not allowed to leave. Morale was low, for the prospects of resettlement to a third country seemed remote. According to the narrator, camp guards and officials often beat the refugees and skimmed off rations that were intended for refugee consumption. The colonel claims that his treatment in this camp was no better than in the Vietnamese reeducation camps in which he had been incarcerated. (p. 343)

This format makes for some fascinating and extremely informative reading. Freeman's broad scope also tries to make sense of cultural upheaval as experienced by Vietnamese-Americans:

Many refugees have experienced devastating losses of relatives and friends, have personally undergone terrifying ordeals as prisoners in re-education camps and jails or as "boat people" fleeing Vietnam; virtually all have experienced a sense of guilt at leaving behind loved ones in Vietnam whom they probably will never see again. They know that the communists in Vietnam are deliberately dismantling society as they knew it. In America, too, they find that many of the values and social arrangements that they cherish wither when confronted with the American leveling process. Vietnamese parents have much difficulty rearing children in the permissive society of America, in which the authority of adults is undermined. Children distance themselves from their parents. For many parents, who sacrificed greatly for their children, these changes are almost as devastating as the loss of their homeland. (p. 18)

Similarly, Paul James Rutledge in *The Vietnamese experience in America* (1992), uses direct quotations from Vietnamese refugees to support his remarks. However, rather than restore a lost voice, Rutledge reinforces his own voice. Rather than tell a story and allow the reader to draw conclusions, Rutledge has drawn his own conclusions and further supports them with evidence. There is nothing wrong
with this approach, but it clearly serves a different purpose than restoring a lost voice. For example, Rutledge says,

In the search for employment, many refugees were surprised to learn that American businesses and institutions did not automatically recognize training or skills which they brought with them from Asia. Experience gained in Saigon did not necessarily translate into a job in Oklahoma City. Professional credentials were also carefully scrutinized by American employers and for many Vietnamese this was an insult.

Rutledge goes on to support his claims with comments from a Vietnamese physician from Oklahoma:

In Saigon, I was a surgeon and had practiced for many years. When I come here, I am told that I must be a beginner again and serve like an apprentice for two years. I have no choice so I will do it, but I have been wronged to be asked to do this. I am a good doctor and I do not have to be treated like a second class doctor. (p. 79)

This use of first-person quotations is utilized throughout and enriches the author’s text immeasurably.

Thomas Kessner and Betty Boyd Caroli also use direct quotations from refugees to relate stories in Today’s immigrants, their stories: A new look at the newest Americans (1981). For example: "I’m a Catholic person and we be proud of Mr. Diem." Many other passages that omit verbs and articles from the second language do restore an accurate literal translation of that person’s voice, but subtleties and the perception of intelligence of the refugee are sacrificed. In Swaying: Essays on intercultural love (1995), edited by Jessie Carroll Grearson and Lauren B. Smith, Nora Egan notes of her experience in Taiwan,
I was reduced to children’s sentences. It was as if I had become physically impaired; my mind raced with ideas and observations, but I couldn’t get them out. To compensate, all my expressiveness shifted to my face and hands. I was humbled. Never again would I judge people by how articulate they were, for underneath a simple or silent expression could be a vast and deep realm of experience and feeling. (p. 182)

Out of total understanding for this dilemma, I chose not to write the exact literal transcription of Vinh’s story because to do so could compromise the reader’s perception of his capabilities and intelligence. Rather, I blended his voice with my own, through the filter that knows him and appreciates him. I smoothed out grammatical imperfections while maintaining his meaning. Still, I am certain, I have not succeeded in expressing the fullness of meaning which he could do for himself using his fluency in his native language.

Additional Resources

In *Asian American experiences in the United States* (1991), Joann Faung Jean Lee has collected oral histories on varying topics, including interracial dating and marriage, prejudice, and nationalism. Using quotation marks throughout an entire chapter to denote its oral nature, Lee offers insights of post-resettlement immigrants such as:

I grew up in a white society. So that is my background. I don’t have any accents except a California accent. If you think of identity as food or dance or customs, I grew up on a small farm in a small town. But I don’t identify with the Irish or the Dutch. (p. 211)
Such a statement made by an immigrant credibly points out that it is not only the first generation of refugees which is impacted by immigration, but that the tidal wave of upheaval is felt for generations.

In both N. Kibria's *Family tightrope: The changing lives of Vietnamese Americans* (1993) and *Between two cultures: The Vietnamese in America* (1981) by Alan B Henkin and Liem Thanh Nguyen, the focus is post-resettlement. It was refreshing to note a Vietnamese name as author, marking a trend that is sure to increase as more and more Vietnamese develop a facility at processing their experiences in English. Nevertheless, Henkin and Nguyen focus on generalities related to Vietnamese culture rather than any personal story. On the other hand, Kibria, who interviewed refugees new to inner-city Philadelphia, had a more research-based work. Her personal attitude was unveiled with her observation that, "This struggle to come to terms with the traditional Vietnamese family system in a manner that could be sustained in the context of life in the United States was particularly apparent among my young, single adult informants" (p. 166). While there is not necessarily anything wrong with this approach, it clearly establishes the author as the authority and has a purpose other than restoring a lost voice. It was also interesting to note that Chapter 4 was introduced by another quote from Nguyen Du's
famous poem, "The Tale of Kieu" which was previously cited in Freeman's *Hearts of Sorrow*:

A hundred years—in this span on earth
talent and destiny are apt to feud
You must go through a play of ebb and flow
and watch such things as make you sick at heart
Is it so strange that losses balance gains? (p. 73)

Several books were useful as resources in expanding cultural awareness and heightening sensitivity to cultural differences. "Intercultural Friendship: A Qualitative Study," which included a section on intercultural views on American friendship patterns such as: "In other words, American friendships tend to be widespread and trusting, but lacking in a sense of obligation and permanence." She cautions Americans about entering relationships with persons from high-obligation and high duration cultures since it is in such relationships that American openness and friendliness are often ethnocentrically interpreted as promises of closer involvement, and a sense of disappointment and failure ensues on the part of the foreigners when this promise does not become realized. Such studies broaden the understanding of the resettled refugee's experience, as well as one's own.

In *From Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia: A Refugee Experience in the United States* (1995), Jeremy Hein uses a more analytical approach, including tables, to explain differences in Southeast Asian perceptions of such cultural
aspects as: parental authority, family form, peer group, interest in homeland, career goals, and major problems. Hein shares his conclusions in passages such as:

The attractiveness of some elements of American culture for Indochinese refugees is most evident in changing gender roles. Women in the United States have more egalitarian roles within families and greater freedom to define their roles without reference to the family than has traditionally been true for women in Vietnam.

This external observer has arrived at many such conclusions. The concept of culture and environment as a complex web provides support for surveying an extremely diverse collection of resources.

Jamieson's *Understanding Vietnam* (1993) further contributes to the body of information about Vietnamese culture and relates concepts such as "hieu," the cardinal virtue for children, and the cultural ideal of an extended family household functioning as a single, well-integrated unit, hierarchically structured, in which all authority and ownership of all property rests with the parents. Furthermore, the parents must be obeyed (p. 23). This source is authoritative rather than inductive and serves as a further foundation for building empathy for a new culture in a different land. It also provides background for understanding some basic tenets which may drive some Vietnamese refugees.

Other sources which contributed to my understanding of the Vietnamese are *Vietnam opening doors to the world* (1988) by R. Graetz, and *The Vietnamese culture* (1990) by Vinh Pham
P. Graetz provides the historical events which detonated the refugee explosion:

Saigon’s last day... April 30, 1975... early in the morning a helicopter lands on the roof of the American Embassy... At 11:00 a.m. the same day Tank #844 flying the blue, red and gold colors of the National Liberation Front (Vietcong) broke through the gates of South Vietnam’s Presidential Palace... the terminus of the Ho Chi Minh Trail had been reached. With the raising of the NLF flag, the Republic of Vietnam vanished into history. The war and almost 35 years of armed struggle and resistance, including combat with the Japanese and the French, came to a halt; Vietnam was soon to be unified as The Socialist Republic of Vietnam, and Saigon renamed Ho Chi Minh City. (p. 15)

Pham, another Vietnamese author, provides many cultural insights on various topics, for example: "Almost all Vietnamese old legends transmitted by mouth or in writing always contain personalities who quietly and patiently accepted all kinds of injustices, deprivations and hardships" (p. 126). Also, "It is a sacred duty of a son in the Vietnamese society to care for his parents when they are old. If he neglects his parents, he becomes an object of contempt of his relatives and friends" (p. 129). These cultural gems, communicated by a Vietnamese authority, tend to carry more weight than an external third-person observation.

In David Haines' Refugees as immigrants: Cambodians, Laotians and Vietnamese in America (1989), Haines uses surveys and statistics to explain the refugee acculturation and adaptation process. With a definite clinical, psychological bent, Haines notes significant positive
predictors of depression, factoring variables into a regression equation. This book, while relevant to the Southeast Asian refugee experience, did not restore any individual voices. Similarly, *Adaptation of immigrants: Individual differences and determinants* (1989), by William A. Scott and Ruth Scott, used statistics to reveal stressors and facilitators in a new community. They produced a multiplicity of tables and concluded that there are positive correlations between: "measures of emotional well-being obtained before and after migration, pre-migration optimism and post-migration well-being" among many others (p. 142).

Another detached study can be found in *Asians and Pacific Islanders in the United States* (1993), by Barringer, Gardner and Levin. This demographic research born from the national census examines the stability of Asian Americans as it relates to marriage, education of heads of household, readjustment difficulties, discrimination and exploitation, and occupational distribution. It contributes to a vast pool of information, but is a secondary source, rather than a primary source coming from the mouth of the refugee him or herself.

Other useful resources in a similar vein include *Reviewing Asian America: Locating diversity* (1995), edited by Ng, Chin, Moy, and Okihiro. The authors employed interviews and open-ended questions, then compiled statistics to utilize as predictors.
Vietnamese Americans: Patterns of resettlement and socioeconomic adaptation in the United States (1979), utilized surveys and schematic diagrams to convey his information about what happens from homeland to assimilation. He chooses not to use first person narrative.

In another post-resettlement publication, Asian Americans: America’s fastest growing minority group (1991), by William P. O’Hare and Judy C. Felt, the authors focus on population trends and public policy related to the tremendous influx of Asian Americans. One graph illustrates that Asians had the highest percentage of population growth between 1980 and 1989, 80%, compared to 4% for whites, 39% for Hispanics and 14% for Blacks.

All of these different resources combine to provide the refugee story with a context or a framework. The vast variety of resources available created from various perspectives also enhances and expands the meaning of the individual stories as the listener more fully comprehends what drives the speaker.
CHAPTER 3
FAMILY HISTORY

It was during "Trung Thu," the moon festival that celebrated the full moon and served as an omen of good luck, when "Anh hai" was born, the first born son of Le Thi Nga and Vo Duc Thoi. "Anh hai" which literally assigns the number "two" to the firstborn in an attempt to confuse any ill-meaning spirits, was destined to become the leader of five more siblings who would be required to solicit his advice and guidance due to his pecking order. The status of firstborn was honor enough to the Vietnamese who revere large extended families, but nothing could surpass the enviable status of being the firstborn son. The moon was huge and bright that October 14 night as it shone, yellow-orange and gleaming, over the teeming streets of Saigon of 1950. It was 8:00 p.m. at St. Paul Hospital, a large private hospital located at the center of Saigon at 220 St. Paul Street. This was a night of a good luck moon. It was also during the month of the tiger, one of the strongest and most resourceful signs of the Chinese zodiac. That would prove to be a good omen as well, for this baby would need every ounce of luck he could muster as his life unfolded.
Had he been born a generation sooner, this baby would have borne the family name "Tran," the same as his paternal grandfather, Tran Van Hai. It was after the death of Tran Van Hai, who died at the hands of the communists from gunshot wounds to his back, that the family name was changed. At that time, the court system of Vietnam was amenable to changing first, middle, and last names of citizens as a legal means to obscure identities and resist the encroaching communists. Since the French had established and supported the government in Saigon, there was a high risk of loyal Saigon citizens facing persecution or even death at the hands of the communists. For this reason, the Tran family changed the entire family identity in 1948 and secretly moved from their home in the district of "Go Vap." It was necessary for the whole family to disappear to "Long An." Such a move was considered illegal by the communists, but was necessary since the parents feared that the communists would kill all the Tran children as retaliation for their loyalty to the French.

The newly-named "Vo" family lived in Long An for several months until they felt it was safe to change their location. Next, they moved to a district about five miles from Saigon called "Phu Nhuan," where they felt more secure. The family lived in Phu Nhuan in self-imposed exile for 13 years as they and their countrymen continued to be oppressed by those who would take Vietnam for themselves. Some people
said that the communists would improve the conditions in Vietnam. Others familiar with the deceitful ways and pervasive corruption of the movement continue to compare communists to robbers who hold a gun to the temple of an entire country.

The question of why the communists shot Tran Van Hai and left him to die is easily answerable. During the early 1940s, the French had tremendous political influence. They had begun to strengthen the transportation infrastructure inside Vietnam. There had been meetings and negotiations of French government officials with the Vo family to organize plans. Sympathetic with the French, the Vo family had agreed to give control of some of their property to the French for the purpose of relocating a train station. This clear alignment of the Vo family with the government in an effort to improve the economy, as so many times in Saigon's past, met with destruction and revenge by the secret and violent forces of the Viet Minh, which is the term used to describe the Vietnamese people who followed Ho Chi Minh. The Viet Minh did not appreciate the Saigon people who worked closely with the French and they had unmistakable ways of dealing with opposition. The Tran family was notified hours after Tran Van Hai's murder. Nevertheless, the train station called "Xom Thom" was constructed on the family property and is still there. Tran Van Hai died a very young man when his
son, ne Tran Van Huy but later named Vo Duc Thoi, was only 15 years old.

It was against this backdrop of political unrest that Vo Van Vinh, as Vietnamese custom dictates last name first, was born. The grandson of Tran Van Hai, this privileged baby grew up with his parents and his paternal grandmother, Nguyen Thi Xanh, known to her grandchildren as "Ba Noi." It was she who was the wife of the late Tran Van Hai.

Vinh developed a special relationship with this sweet grandmother, "Ba Noi." He occasionally awoke during a sweltering Saigon night to glimpse Ba Noi seated at his bedside, fanning him gently so he could sleep. She often cooked his favorite foods for him and would allow him to enjoy the crunchy leftovers when she cooked the sticky, sweet soup, "che." He was a "golden boy" in the eyes of his parents, his growing family, and those who knew him. She nurtured his growth, took him frequently to the temples, and taught him about business practices for entrepreneurs in Saigon.

On the maternal side of Vinh's family, his "Ba Ngoai," Pham Huu Hoa, had died when Vinh's mother was a small girl in Saigon. Ba Ngoai was buried in a family ceremony at the backyard of the family home in Phu Nhuan. Her husband, Rajiv Raman, who was born in India and had moved to Vietnam as a businessman, returned to India after his wife's death where he remained until his own death in 1962. Vinh never met
either of his maternal grandparents, though he bore a resemblance and dark complexion similar to his paternal grandfather from Bombay.

Vietnam was in the throes of colonialism with the capitol located in Hue and ruled under the puppet king, Bao Dai. It wasn’t until 1954, when Vietnam was divided into North and South, that the capitol was moved farther south to Saigon, now known as Ho Chi Minh City, and which was the birthplace of Vo Van Vinh. Six siblings followed, each of them two years apart. There are four sisters and two brothers: Vo Thi Trang, Vo Thi Phuong, Vo Cuong Hai, Vo Thi Linh, Vo Mai Long, and baby sister, Vo Chi Lien.
CHAPTER 4
BOYHOOD MEMORIES

Vinh grew into boyhood and attended "Vo Truong Toan," which was one of the largest and most respected high schools for boys-only in Saigon. It boasted its own swimming pool and stadium and an extensive curriculum ranging from math to music to judo. Graduates of this school had options of study abroad in Germany, the United States, France, etc. Vinh began to entertain the idea of study abroad after graduation, but during the Vietnamese new year of 1968 (TET), and the year that Vinh should have taken the final examination to complete his high school career, the communists attacked Saigon. Any plans for after graduation were dashed as all males over the age of 18 were required to enter the military in an attempt to push out the communists from the capitol.

Each day, Vinh would prepare himself for classes at Vo Truong Toan by putting on his crisply pressed uniform of blue pants and white shirt. The economic status of his parents often allowed Vinh to take a taxi to school. He was a lucky one. His father was a career naval employee who worked at Ba Son shipyard and his mother was an "entrepreneur extraordinaire." She opened a space at the famous Saigon Market and sold many foods and useful items
there. Vinh enjoyed the favored status and learning opportunities that this fortune afforded him.

Having worked during the early morning, Vinh would arrive at high school. He often stood briefly outside the school gate, looking in the mirror mounted for all boys to adjust their grooming before entering school, and ritually checked his jet-black hair. This morning gesture reminded him of the teachings of one of his earlier teachers who had taught him to look in the mirror frequently, not to check his hair, but rather to check the look on his face in order to know the look of an angry face and to understand what another person feels when they see that face. Vinh was taught from an early age to be self-aware.

Since the age of four, Ba Ngoai had taken Vinh with her to the temple "Giac Vien" every two weeks. This remains one of the most revered temples in Saigon and has been maintained as a tourist site for pilgrims who come from far away to spend the night or more. The monks who live there have a schedule for prayer that usually coincides with the full moon on the 14th of the month. Visitors such as Vinh and his grandmother often arrived in the afternoon of the 14th and partook of the prayer service that evening and the next morning. The temple was constructed to include modest sleeping quarters for such visitors as well as a large kitchen. Food flowed freely at the temple and any hungry person could always go there for a meal. Since it was a
Buddhist temple, the food was always "chay" or without meat. Still, there are many excellent ways to prepare tofu, vegetables, sauces, fruit, and rice, etc. This generous practice continued until the communists took over South Vietnam in 1975. At that time, the communists forbade anyone from keeping rice in the home. All rice was under strict control of the government and only the government could give food to people. Food was a weapon used to manipulate the people. Especially if they had children they needed to feed, Saigon citizens were bound to submit to the wishes of the invaders.

During his high school years, Vinh often visited the many temples in Saigon and the surrounding area. As a student, he carried firewood, cleaned, cooked, and did other useful chores for the monks. It was not for any money; it was because that was what he wanted to do. He often drove others who had no money or transportation to visit the temples as well. That was his private way of being happy. He lived in the hearts of monks, old people, and even young children whom he took to the beach on a holiday. The life in Vietnam was not rich in money, but rich in relationships and sweetness that one person could offer another.

It is a reflection of Ba Noi's kindness and generosity during her life, as well as a testimonial to the warmth of the culture, that at Ba Noi's funeral there were over 1,000 mourners who came to pray for her and offer condolences.
Over 50 monks came to the home in shifts to pray for her over a period of two days and to be present at her burial. This left an indelible impression on her grandson, Vinh, to carry with him. It was he, a young man of 23 years, who carefully prepared her body for burial, a last sign of his undying respect and devotion.

While a young student, Vinh’s interest in reading and debate blossomed. He and his friends often discussed philosophical questions of the day outside of classes and during breaks, usually based on the current events and morning news. One favorite recurring question was situational: "What would you do if, while eating your breakfast at a restaurant, an obviously poor and hungry person came to you and asked for food?" There were several alternatives and Vinh measured his opponents by their answers. Vinh enjoyed making a game of debate, observing who could keep his temper the longest and prided himself on never becoming angry with his adversary. His family teased him that he should become a lawyer because of his way with words and how he could turn a phrase. Vinh excelled in his studies and each year passed the examination that was meant to weed out those less scholastically inclined. Those failing students were destined for an early military assignment in the army. Vinh, however, had other plans in mind and was interested in learning how to become a businessman himself.
One of his earliest business adventures came about with the ducks.
CHAPTER 5
VINH'S NARRATIVE

Childhood in Vietnam

When I was a little boy, about six years old, my mom usually went to the Saigon Market to help her great-aunt (her mother's sister) with her business there. My mother saved her earnings to buy market space of her own. My father was driving a taxi at that time, also earning money for the family. Eventually, they saved enough money to buy a house in Phu Nhuan for 60,000 piasters. They also built a rice stick (a kind of rice-based noodle) factory that employed 60 workers.

Since many of these employees came from other cities and did not have their own transportation, my mom tried to build houses for them in the Phu Nhuan area. My mom was always kind to her employees and though they are now old, they still go to visit her in Saigon. I remember as a four-year-old boy that several of them took very good care of me. One day, Hai Chu took me to the barbershop for a haircut. I sat tall in the high chair, and as usual, two Vietnamese barbers worked on me at once. I remember feeling so itchy and squirming in the chair. As a small child, I had the luxury of many adults looking out for my welfare. In Vietnam, there is great value placed on the length and
detail of service offered to a customer. Labor is a very inexpensive commodity. I notice in the United States that great value is placed on the brevity of service. Whether a car wash or a hair cut, I have not found either to equal the detail provided in Vietnamese service.

My mother operated that rice stick factory until 1960 and I continued to enjoy the benefits as well. In the meantime, my father applied to the shipyard for work, was hired, and eventually ordered a Bentley automobile from England. It was a spacious black car that reminded me of a big bug, but the whole family enjoyed that car. We began to "rise up" again.

The Vo family, having spent enough time in Phu Nhuan to become anonymous, wanted to return to our previous home before Tran Van Hai’s death in Go Vap, a suburb-like district of Saigon. So, we returned to Go Vap after my mother sold her rice stick factory. She decided, instead, to open a bean sprout factory at home on our very large Saigon property. The property itself had many kinds of fruit trees such as coconut, banana, and mango. There were birds and other animals which inhabited the yard. We even tamed a small monkey who lived in a tree. It was a good location to begin a bean sprout business and employ many workers.

Growing bean sprouts is a very exact science requiring round-the-clock diligence and good marketing skills. Each day, 1,000 kilos of bean sprouts were produced in my
mother's new facility. This was enough to supply Quang Trung Army Training Base, Saigon Market, Tan Dinh Market, Thai Binh Market, Xom Chieu Market, and many restaurants in central Saigon.

I grew up learning the bean sprout trade because I wanted to learn something new. Every day, I helped my grandmother and mother select the best mung beans because there are many different qualities of beans. To sort the beans it is necessary to put them in water and sun-dry them before sorting by hand. The least good beans were sold to vendors who sell che, the sweet soup sold on the street and in restaurants. The green hulls of the beans were sold as feed for horses. I thought to myself at that time that I should save those hulls to feed some kind of livestock of my own. I began to plan my duck adventure with Ba Noi when I was 11 years old.

The first time we prepared to buy baby ducks, Ba Noi bought 100 and I bought 10. We fenced one area of the yard to contain them and built a small lake with a trench leading to it to carry water. Every time we irrigated the bean sprouts at home, which was every three hours, the rich food-laden run-off was channeled through the trench into the small duck lake. This was an excellent environment for the ducks for bathing and for feeding. We stocked the lake with small fish and it was attractive to frogs. Full of tadpoles, fish, and remnants of bean sprouts, the lake environment
proved an easy place to raise fat ducks in about three months. Then we took them to my mother's store in the Saigon Market where people love to buy duck. In Vietnam, duck is eaten more commonly than chicken and is much less expensive.

The second time around, I increased to 100, and then later 200 ducks. I became very skilled with raising and marketing my product. Step by step, my mom began to share the market with me. First, she gave me Tan Dinh Market and two of the restaurants. I began to increase my responsibilities.

My mother would rise at 1:00 a.m. each morning to prepare for work. Saigon is a city that never sleeps. Proprietors needed to be in their shops for those other early risers who were ready for a hot tasty breakfast of "pho" and getting on with the all-time-consuming task of earning enough food to feed their families. Breakfast shops opened at 4:00 a.m.

At 4:00 a.m. the military trucks arrived to pick up their goods from our depot and the car arrived after that to pick up the rest for distribution. They were finished with their work by 6:00 a.m.

I, too, had a distribution route. I covered it on my bicycle which was completely loaded down in both the front and the back. At that time, I had an inquisitive interest in electronics kits that I could build myself, so I had fashioned a turning signal for this bike which blinked a
warning to followers. Some days I felt so sleepy as I mindlessly rode the four miles that I drifted off, almost unconscious as I pedaled until I suddenly bumped the edge of the road which jolted me back to consciousness. There was no traffic at that moonlit time of the day. Startled, I would wake up and continue my route which I completed before heading off to school which began at 7:30 a.m.

I was an avid athlete and greatly enjoyed following my interest in judo by studying at the Quang Trung Judo Institute operated by a well-known monk named Thich Tam Giac. My goal as a teenager in judo was to earn a black belt since that was the means to a scholarship for travel and further study in Japan. I earned the black belt, but I was unlucky in my timing. The black belt scholarship program was cancelled due to the increasing seriousness of the political situation in Vietnam. Nevertheless, I continued to train for three months for commercial shows. I could lie flat on my back and easily spring forward to my feet then, and enjoyed performing for the public. As a result, two of my sisters were able to study judo there without cost.

During the "duck period," when I was 14 years old, my father ordered three Italian three-wheeled delivery cars. Eventually, I came to use one to deliver products and to collect money for my mom. This was a lot of fun for me since I enjoyed the independence and the growing responsibilities.
increase my profit. I have never been a person to rest in
the security of one venture. Rather, I prefer to try new
things and learn more about this life.

Imported chickens from Australia and Europe began
arriving in Vietnam to improve the existing breeds. As new
breeds were introduced, the sponsoring laboratories
encouraged people to raise their chickens while the
laboratories would sell the necessary supplies. They
provided other support such as how to build cages, how to
cut the beak to prevent the chickens from fighting, the way
to mix the food, which medications to provide at the
appropriate chick ages, etc. I was interested to know more
and, with my brother-in-law, Nguyen Van Hai, decided to give
poultry a try. I enjoyed having a "business head."

I set out to build two cages since one cage could hold
50 chicks. After three weeks, there was a need to double the
number of cages due to the increasing size of the chicks,
and again at six weeks. In my first attempt, I bought only
50 baby birds, but the second time I increased to 200
chicks. After four months, the chickens could be sold at my
mom's store. It is true that the chickens' feed was more
expensive and had to be mixed properly, and they needed
timely medication to prevent sickness, but chickens were
higher value than ducks.

I made use of some profits to develop my carpentry
skills by buying materials and custom-building my room on
one side of the house. I enjoyed taking care of things and kept my new quarters well-organized and extremely neat. That is my nature. In keeping with this, I believe that parents give birth to a child, but not to the child's nature.

After my bicycle and then the little Italian cars, my father bought a Toyota Corona Mark II pick-up truck. At that time I had no license to drive a tricycle, but my brother, father, and I continued to deliver for the business every night. My brother did have a license and we always traveled together, as if I were in training. I was stopped by the police several times on the dark and empty streets in the early morning. The police confiscated my paper and I had to go to speak with them, but because they saw us drive the same route every night, returning at 5:30 a.m., they relaxed toward us. I carried sweet potatoes, rice paper, sweet rice, rice stick, and many other products. I was very friendly with the police. On holidays, I would give gifts of food and small favors to the police for their families. Later I would drive that route alone, still without the tricycle license, like a trusted friend.

I was a voracious reader and read many books about communism and the incredibly crafty Ho Chi Minh who had changed his identity multiple times to suit his needs. I came to understand more about communist tactics and to be suspicious of communist leaders who had no compunction about using people to accomplish their goals one moment and then
murderously turning on them. In my heart I knew who I was and never lost myself. I was never a communist. It was my father who later, after the communists invaded and took over Saigon, incinerated all of my books to protect our family from suspicion of being sympathetic with the Americans or of being anti-communist.

Tet Offensive - 1968

I continued to raise chickens until 1968 when the communists came to Saigon. My whole family was required to evacuate our house while it was occupied by the invading communist soldiers. Three weeks later, the Republic of South Vietnam had succeeded in pushing back the communist offensive and the communists left the capitol. We returned to our home where I discovered that all of my chickens were gone, food for the enemy already. That was the first time, the first time of many times, that I lost everything; I had completely empty hands. My attitude was to take the setback in stride and try to regain my status.

In retrospect, Tet was an excellent strategic time for the communists to attack Saigon. All houses were completely full of special foods in anticipation of the biggest holiday of the year that usually lasted four days. The invaders needed to bring only guns because the supplies were in the homes already.
The attack of 1968 took several forms. Many different kinds of missiles were fired into the center of the city and important targets such as the Saigon Air Force Base, radio and television stations, the United States Embassy, etc. Viet Minh soldiers, who were wearing the clothing of the South Vietnamese, ran house to house, taking the homes for themselves and killing innocent civilian people. Thousands of Saigon residents were murdered and left homeless. Buildings and houses were leveled. It was a terrible period when it was often difficult to know who the enemy was. The amazingly resourceful communists situated themselves in crowded scenarios such as day care facilities where no Saigon citizen dared fire a shot at risk of harming an innocent child.

After the three months of occupation, Saigon was faced with a monumental task of cleaning up the destruction and dealing with the shattered families, now homeless. Youngsters who were students were required to finish the school year. All males aged 18-45 were conscripted. Every high school and college student joined a huge group effort to provide relief to those injured and experiencing loss. They cooked for the homeless, cleaned the streets, renovated homes, and tried to restore a semblance of order to the city.

It is ironic that the elected leader of Saigon students, Thieu Than Long, who had tons of rice and medicine
at his disposal to manage and distribute, was a communist. But of course, no one at that time knew he was communist. They thought he did selfless actions only for the good of the country, that he would certainly not divert his power toward the good of the enemy. They were wrong.

After the Tet attack, I never returned to my high school, Vo Truong Toan. It was not until later, in 1971, following more study and a trip to the United States, that I successfully passed the national standard exams which certified my completion of all my high school studies there. There was never any question in my mind that I would finish eventually. I have always believed that study is a main purpose in life and I will continue to study as long as I am alive.

Still, 1968 posed a question: What should I do next? My father expected that I would enter the Navy and continue the family relationship with some high-ranking officials there. But I had a different idea. Actually, I prefer the air to the water. As I usually was very independent, I went to take some screening tests for joining the Air Force, unbeknownst to my family, and was accepted. I was classified as an electronics trainee which pleased me, since I had enjoyed building those electronic devices since I was a little boy.
Military Service: Air Force of the Republic of South Vietnam

While in Vietnam, I trained for five weeks in Air Force military training, followed by six months of intensive English. Having passed the English exam, I received orders to train in the United States at Keesler Air Force Base in Biloxi, Mississippi, for 15 months as an Aviation Navigation and Communications technician. The Air Force of the Republic of South Vietnam was working very closely with the United States Air Force.

I studied very hard in the United States and though I did not realize it at the time, that education was to serve as an excellent foundation for my current field in computer systems coordination. In addition, every week the school offered a free trip to such places as New Orleans, NASA, Alabama, various parks, etc. I didn’t waste any opportunity for travel or seeing as much of the United States as possible. I am kind of strange, but I never felt homesick, not in the United States and not even in the communist jail I was in later. While studying at Keesler, I received a paycheck from the United States as well as the Republic of South Vietnam. I saved money so that I could buy a car after I returned home to Vietnam.

In 1970 I returned home and bought my Fiat 850 to use for work. Since I had passed the Air Force exam upon return with a high score, I had the right to choose the base where
I would be stationed. I chose Bien Hoa, the large military airport which was 30 kilometers from my home. I sometimes made this trip with 10 passengers using a Honda microbus to transport other military personnel going back and forth to the base. It was a small venture for me. I began to see other people undertake my idea and that was when I stopped doing it. I didn’t want to do anything for a long period of time—-I am not a machine.

During the Bien Hoa years, I also organized an electronics business with a friend’s father who owned a large import/export business. We repaired electronic equipment, duplicated tapes, sold equipment, etc. Later, I operated a similar business in Saigon. I had many things to do for survival of myself and my family. Scrambling for survival in an environment where death, punishment, capture, and reprisals were commonplace certainly provided the opportunity to contemplate one’s fate.

I always have had a rather cool attitude toward my own death. If one were very nervous and afraid, it was certainly very easy to die in Vietnam. I saw it happen too many times. There were incoming missiles at the Bien Hoa base over 50 times while I was there, some close enough to throw me from my bunk onto the floor by their force. We airmen took turns standing watch as we played chess into the night. This group of colleagues was close like family because we depended on each other to survive. You had to trust each other and take
care of each other like brothers. There is a tremendous fellowship. From what I can see, it is a different type of relationship than in the American military.

My job as navigator meant that I flew in helicopters and other aircraft. While I was not a pilot, I was required to participate in any flight that took off. I traveled everywhere in Vietnam. I could draw a map from memory of any small city or geographic area. Travel was my job, but also my entertainment. I loved the action, the pace, the change of environment, and meeting all the people.

It was the job of my Air Force group to patrol surrounding areas. We often flew to remote areas in the mountains to connect with the various ethnic groups of people who spoke different languages. We were always well received. We carried medicine and other supplies like salt, black pepper, and garlic to them. They understood that it was our duty to protect them and the area. As a result, they often greeted us with kindness and hospitality, cooking feasts for me and my colleagues. One most notable feast included grilled tiger which was very tasty.

Between 1970 and 1972, the communist forces regularly shelled Bien Hoa, which headquartered both American and South Vietnamese personnel. On a clear night, sometimes the shelling was beautiful, more beautiful than fireworks. They were sparkling. The Americans were living on the base. At the gate, there were both American and Vietnamese military
police. There were theaters, a leisure travel bus, several clubs, and an exchange for shopping. They could arrange for any service they needed.

One weekend morning, an especially violent bomb explosion set off by remote control killed several people. The bombs had been our own, sabotaged by the Viet Cong. The debris flew miles and broke glass all the way in the city. It created a crater as big as a lake and rained down its heavy debris on many airplanes. They were damaged beyond salvage. The news traveled fast. I was very surprised that, not knowing if I was dead or alive, my father had gathered up several of my siblings and driven his car to the gate at Bien Hoa to rescue me. When I finally saw them, I did not feel happy. I told them that if I were going to die, I would be dead already and there would be nothing they could do. Now they were in a position of great danger to themselves. I understand love, but this was the time for love with thinking.

Saigon Falls - 1975

Many people are already aware of the incredible confusion and desperation during April of 1975 when the communists launched an offensive to take over the capitol city. The entire world has seen photographs of hundreds of crazed people being airlifted from the roof of the United States Embassy, frantic to escape an impending slaughter.
They know of the heroic effort called "Operation Babylift" which rescued orphans from an uncertain fate. Each house and each family had a terrible and individual drama imposed by the invasion of the Viet Cong and its ensuing policies as, one by one, the people either died or came under control of the long-resisted enemy. People lay dead in the street and others were searching for any way to escape the country. The city had no government in place whatsoever, only the communist military. It was an unbelievable city. Military officers threw their uniforms in the street in an attempt to blend in as the communists began searching out those who had a relationship with the United States military. I will not describe that horrible conquest further except to express the disbelief of many South Vietnamese when their ally, the United States, finally succumbed to pressure and disengaged, pulled out, abandoned, and seemingly cast Vietnam to the wolves. They waited for the U.S. to help them again. Even today, over 20 years later, many Vietnamese still keep a friendly attitude toward the U.S. despite their unspeakable losses and suffering at that time. Many still believe that the U.S. will ultimately be loyal to South Vietnam and, in their infinite patience, with an added Buddhist influence of acceptance, many South Vietnamese believe that "time will tell everything." To a country that has thousands of years of history full of domination and war, 25 years is merely a moment on the continuum.
During the upheaval, the communists used the lists of military personnel that they had compiled and came looking for me. All anti-communist soldiers were at risk of capture and reprisals. They knew my name and my parents' address, but they did not know my face. One day, four of them came with guns to the house and stood outside at the fence. I saw their faces and quickly ran into the house. I broke a window at the back, climbed out, and ran for my life. I fled to relatives' house in another district where I bided my time for several months. I waited while the "hoi dong quan quan" (military management) continued to establish its iron fist around the neck of the people of Saigon and continued to kill innocent citizens. No one controlled the communist military action closely at this time. If they saw any property they wanted, they took it. Actually, I think they were somewhat surprised at their victory and in many ways, unprepared.

All employees and teachers were subject to screening by the new communist regime. Anyone found related or sympathetic to the previous government was served with severance papers. Now unemployed, thousands and thousands of South Vietnamese people had two options: move to the new, undeveloped economic zone or return to an original rural area outside of Saigon where there were still relatives living. In addition, the house in Saigon must be given to the communist party. We could, however, dismantle our homes
and take the materials to our new location. I observed this procedure and understood that my family was in extreme danger of being exiled again soon to live in a new economic zone.

The new regime did not have enough party line trainees to fill the new positions necessary to organize and control Saigon, so they used people from the area. They were looking for people without past relationships with the government, basically uneducated, and who had a distaste for rich people. This was the malleable type of person the communists wanted to cultivate. The "new leaders," handpicked by the communists, felt proud in their powerful positions of doling out provisions to the formerly elite doctors, lawyers, and other professionals in Saigon. Society was turned upside-down.

A very highly organized pyramidal plan with attention to minute detail began to unfold in Saigon neighborhoods. The communists used neighbors in each block to govern a small area; three houses had one "leader." Several groups of three houses combined to form one "to," the next level of military control. Several to combined to form one "khom" with the khom leader. Several khom combined to form the "khu" and khu leader. Three khu combined to form one "phuong" which ultimately, and according to the geographic area, contained between 500 and 600 houses.
At the house level, every family had to report the names of the members, their ages, and their jobs. These notebooks were referred to as "to khai ho khau," which refers literally to the mouths of family members. The communists used this information to organize the absolute power of food distribution to the people. Since they had closed all the markets, the communists were now in the business of distributing electricity, kerosene for lights, water, and food staples such as rice, oil, and meat. One person was entitled to 200 grams of meat for one week. One group of seven houses might be given one large portion of meat to share. The communists used the "food stick" to beat the people. Rice was distributed according to occupation: an office worker received 6 kilos of rice per month while a laborer was entitled to 12 kilos per month. Each child deserved 3 kilos per month. We were not used to such tight control of every morsel of food and every word or action. I began to think of ways to circumvent the communists.

Each week there were announcements by traveling loudspeakers which announced the weekly location for the food distribution. This did not mean that the government gave the food to the people, but rather they were entitled to buy it from the government. For example, the speaker would announce that from 7 to 10:00 a.m., rice and other supplies would be sold for "To 1, 2, and 3." This kept people very busy every day just for their basic survival.
The rice was not clean and white like before. It was like the rice used previously for pigs. Sometimes they sold half rice, half flour. The Saigon people learned to cook with flour and can prepare food a thousand ways. Sometimes it was completely soaked from having been in the hold of a ship. They still sold it to you and you had to find a way to dry it, cook it, and eat it. Since they had overtaken all warehouses in the many harbors as well as all the farms throughout the country, the communists also had such products as sweet potatoes and corn which they substituted for rice. No one was allowed to keep more than a one-week supply of "government property" (food) in the house. Offenders were automatically guilty and subject to being sent to "re-education," which meant jail.

I, as well as all other Saigon citizens, were required to report to our leaders if we planned to be absent from home for more than one day. Each house had to show one notebook to the leader listing who was absent, and another listing those who came to visit. There could be trouble if any visitor came for over six hours. Travel even within the city was carefully monitored and records were kept of movement between districts.

If you were a person who had no gainful employment in Saigon, your name was placed on the list of those who must move outside Saigon to the "New economic zone." I was still lying low in another district, but realized that those
looking for me had moved out of my home district as they continued their sweep to catch the military people whose names appeared on a different list. There were many kinds of lists, and fortunately no computerized records. I remembered the faces of my pursuers, but they still didn't know mine. Furthermore, if my hiding district was found harboring me, it would be guilty of crime against the communists. It was time for me to return home to Saigon where I was able to blend in because of the general tumult. Many innocent people died at this time as the communists conducted their pogrom. I needed to concentrate on how to survive in my hostile environment.

My close relationships with friends and neighbors in Saigon began to be useful. Because I was well-known, from an influential family, it was easy for me to jump into the various new mandatory groups to advise and influence the Viet Cong (VC) "nouveau power." The VC used those mandatory citizen groups as agents of change and for eavesdropping on all sectors of society. The required attendance was a way to keep track of each person after an already long day in the rice fields or at other work. Non-attendance would inspire investigations and reprisals. After the meetings, which ended at 10:00 p.m., people hurried home to bed since they would have to rise early in the morning to repeat this locked-in process. I understood this and undertook my mission of survival in solitude. It was safe to trust no one
with plans, ideas, or details. I became like a stranger to my family, close with them, helping them, but completely alone in my thoughts and actions.

In the South we received many warnings from friends and relatives in the North who were already disillusioned with the communist regime. They told us that we "an banh ve." They meant that the communists drew pictures of many kinds of cake and gave them to us to eat, but it was not real cake. South Vietnam simply could not imagine the depth of truth of these unheeded warnings from those who had already experienced it.

At the time of the takeover, there were over 150 kinds of automobiles in South Vietnam. The communists loaded them on trains and transported them to the North. They confiscated all auto parts and related items as well and stockpiled them in giant depots for storage and disuse. Years later, as travel sanctions eased, huge warehouses of rusting autos were found, wasted and outdated. Nevertheless, they would become a resource for repair once again in the future, like some kind of giant junkyard. People would one day travel to Hanoi to buy replacement auto parts from their own stolen property. But not yet.

Gradually, new communist faces began to appear from the North in Saigon. When I noticed such a face, I realized that they possessed two things I didn’t have then: money and a gun. However, they did not yet have a house or television,
they did not know how to drive a car or buy a shirt in Saigon, etc. I made it my job to "sponsor" these incoming communist government officials. I ingratiated myself to them, little by little dispensing favors, but not much at one time. I wanted to keep them longer so I played with them like a cat. I caught them in my net, hooked them with my hook. After that, when I needed a favor, the wheel was already greased. To some, I may have looked like a real communist. But I was never a communist.

In the future, I would rebuild my car. I would be the only person in my district to drive a car. Since I had developed a relationship with the communist Chief of Police and used his permission to rebuild the car on military property, other communist police were afraid to question me. I used that cover and false perception of communist camaraderie to increase my activities under the oppressive government. I used them like a puppy.

The communists reprised many old strategies to control transportation. Bicycles and motorcycles required license plates which were used to determine an individual's need for tires, chains, etc. Gas was scarce. If you owned a Honda motorcycle, you were entitled to buy three liters of gas per month to travel from home to work. As did the United States during World War II, the communists used a rationing book to record the purchase of commodities. All the while, the communists maintained that it was the people who own
everything. It was an interesting idea which I have observed in the United States to some degree.

The philosophy of "employee owned" business, which abounds in American industry today, has communism as its root. It is a 100% communist statement. It leads the employees to believe that they are the real owners, but behind that, who is the manager? It is not the rank and file employee. In fact, if the manager doesn't like you, he may very well fire the "owner." I truly hate that term "employee owned." Under communism, you can 'own' something; you can use it, but you cannot sell it. Therefore, in fact, you are not really the owner. It is the communist bosses who have the real ownership and titles to property. Ironically, it is the human trait of wanting more for oneself that will be the downfall of communism. Over time, the system cannot help but rot from within as graft and corruption make the communist dream of the same economic condition for all, collapse.

"Employee owned" makes me laugh.

After 1975, business owners of Saigon quickly understood the full meaning of employee ownership. For example, a Saigon businessman owned six three-and-a-half-ton pickup trucks in his trucking firm. He employed six truck drivers and he was the manager. The communists changed all that and gave this owner the right to be a truck driver of one of the trucks in order to receive pay from the government. As a result, the government now owned all six
trucks and gave the five other truck driver jobs to employees of its choice. All the small trucks under one ton belonged to the district manager. That included my little two-cylinder Honda microbus, now classified as a truck, which I stashed in the garage and would use later. It looked very unacceptable, rusty and falling apart. That was good. The truck title was not in my name, of course, but in the name of the district manager. I could not sell my truck, but I could drive it. Unfortunately, the communists did not see fit to allow me to have a driver’s license. That was of no matter at this time since I did not have a job that would entitle me to buy gas anyway. In the future, though, I would be very glad that I had taken excellent care of this little Honda and that I was a skilled driver. The gas was doled out carefully according to the distance you traveled in your work. If you were an excellent driver you could conserve the gas and hide it to save for future use. For example, one driver could drive 100 miles with 10 liters of gas. I could drive 100 miles on 7 liters. I could secretly stock-pile the extra 3 liters for personal use.

It was this crushing strategy that was used to build the hierarchical levels of communist government in Saigon, ranging from block to district, "To" to "Phuong." During the first several years after the takeover, these geographical divisions were utilized as training posts to train the real communist leaders imported from North Vietnam.
The communists organized businesses in a similar pyramidal fashion to the geographic areas, according to the type of business. For example, three small stores, such as barbershops, had one leader. Of course, they had to report all details related to the business so that the government could plan which and how many supplies they would need for one month. They would then sell those supplies to the workers for that business. People began to calm down a little, feeling a little less threatened and more comfortable after the business plan had been in place about one year. That was when the communists decided to take the next bite.

In a stunning brazen step, the communists declared that each business would have to pay a tax based on income since 1972, the year when a Paris accord had halted military involvement of other countries in Vietnam. The communists claimed that they were victorious since that time and were due exorbitant taxes. They demanded a huge tax, larger than the entire value of the businesses themselves, but they left a narrow legal path for the people to save themselves. Business owners found themselves pleading with the communists to kindly take their businesses as payment of their accrued tax debts. My parents lost two of their businesses at that time.

If your family had a car, the communists had the right to use it for public use. They could come and take your car
for district business. They spoke nicely about borrowing the car from you, the "employee owner," but the real owner wanted to take his car. No matter. You probably didn't have gas to run it anyway.

If you did own a car when the communists first arrived, you had to be smart. Many people simply abandoned their vehicles in the street to avoid future entanglements with the communists snooping for more booty. Others planned to disassemble their cars, piece by piece, and scatter the parts for future resurrection.

I was at Nha Trang Air Force Base when it fell to the communists in February 1975. I was rescued by helicopter during a massive evacuation and had to sacrifice my Fiat at the base. But I still had my 2-cylinder Honda pickup stashed which I would bring to life two years later when things cooled down. My father anonymously left his Bentley on the street.

In the terrible aftermath of the communist invasion, I will never forget the images that still haunt my dreams. The communists were routing civilians from their homes. People were fleeing for miles and there was a huge panorama of panicked families running from their villages; lines of men, women, and children extending for miles, being indiscriminately shot down by the encroaching communists. Our mission was to rescue as many as possible by helicopter. We would land in the midst of them, shots fired all around.
The people would run to our helicopter, scramble up and cling to it. There were too many people. We could not take off. The wailing and screaming was unforgettable as we tried to beat some of them off to lighten our load. We rose in the air with some people hanging from our runners. We carried as many as possible to a location a few kilometers away where we deposited them and returned to repeat the same operation. We spent the day in a kind of horrible hop-scotching, back and forth, to retrieve and deposit innocent civilians. Death, separation, loss, and profound injury were pervasive. I will spare you the details of the kinds of injuries that I witnessed, but I will carry them with me forever.

My military duties up to and during this upheaval were multifaceted. I helped many families to be reunited with the remains of their loved son, husband, or brother as I traveled to the area where they were known to have been stationed last. In Vietnamese culture, the remains of the loved one are particularly dear. A mother has been known to embrace the bare bones of her dead child. I located the body of a fallen soldier whose family I knew and carried it with me. I slept with that body as we made the trip home. I repeated this process several times. It was something I could do for the family that had paid the ultimate price for our country.

After the victory of the Viet Cong and the fall of Saigon, I had no job. My mom’s bean sprout production had
stopped. It was necessary to empty the house of all business equipment like water pumps, etc. to avoid the dreaded tax. We removed as many things as possible from the house, as did other citizens, so as not to look like business people or rich people. We distributed our equipment to homes of friends and relatives. We even broke things so they would not look useful. People on the street did not want to look privileged and wore only colorless, old clothes. Women stopped painting their fingernails. It was necessary to give no reason to be singled out.

Still, it was easy to recognize a Viet Cong soldier who had just become the victor in the South. Largely uneducated, the top leaders were easy to spot as they rode uncharacteristically perched on the front seat of an automobile with their hands held cat-like together at chin level wearing their jungle hard hats. Carrying automatic weapons, the soldiers were quick to fire at new objects such as television antennae on the tops of houses which they perceived as radio communication sets for the military. The spoils of war included many novel items for the ignorant young soldiers, often only 15 to 18 years old, including feminine garments such as the bra. One soldier used his plunder to slowly steep a double serving of "cafe sua," carefully draped across two glasses, not realizing that there were stainless steel filters which were usually used for that purpose. It would be suicide to laugh at any
improprieties. Other communist soldiers found feminine sanitary products quite useful to secure prominently around their foreheads as sweatbands. Again, a straight face was imperative. These soldiers were amazingly inept at using such things as the flushing toilet and riding a bus. As youngsters, they had been sent to live in the jungle for years when they came of age and knew nothing about urban living. They began to change the names of streets to the names of communist heroes. The capitol city, Saigon, was changed to "Ho Chi Minh City." One large maternity hospital was somewhat erroneously re-named on a large sign as a "baby factory." Everywhere there were reminders that strangers ruled the city.

My first job after the communists came to Saigon was to reprise my mother's bean sprout business in a very small scaled-back area inside the house. I produced 100-150 kilos of bean sprouts per day at home. Of course the communists investigated our home and found that small factory. I could give them a gift of bean sprouts if I wanted to. Of course I wanted to do that. Individual greed would prove to be the gradual undoing of the communist system. No policy or political philosophy could stamp out the universal desire to have more for oneself.

Each home was required to report all property such as television sets, refrigerators, cameras, bicycles, etc. In addition, the communists required a receipt or bill of sale
for every item in the home or they would repossess the undocumented item for themselves. As a result, I myself forged many invoices to help people keep their property. One person was allowed to occupy one house. Since my parents owned three houses on a rather large tract of land, this called for drastic action. My mother and father still live in separate houses today to protect their "ownership."

The communists made the people busy with everyday survival so there was not enough time to concoct large-scale plots against them. Their weekly distribution of commodities such as thread, fabric, firewood, and food items was a good way for the communists to take attendance in each "To." If someone were absent, suspicions were raised and an investigation followed.

Saigon had officially fallen to communist control on April 30, 1975. It was now several months later and the communists had begun to implement their organizational plan. Now that the people and property of Saigon were carefully catalogued and monitored, there was an even more insidious and deceptive plan in place to institute re-education camps for those formerly attached to the military of the Republic of South Vietnam. The radio carried messages of forgiveness, peace, and national unity, extolling the benefits of a now united Vietnam. We had been warned that we "an banh ve." The full meaning of that was about to be understood.
The district leaders had already used the lists of family reporting to identify former military members, their rank, job, length of service, etc. Next, the announcement was heard on television that former government and military employees must report to "re-education" to learn more about the new government and ease the transition. The retired personnel was directed to report for 5 days of service, technicians for 3 days, and combat veterans for 10 days of re-education. They were advised to bring no food or money because the new government would take care of everything. The first groups met at movie theaters and schools in their districts which still remained closed since the invasion. They were questioned closely about their previous leaders. I included myself in this first technician group. The communists put each of us on a kind of stage, surrounded by the others, to talk about ourselves. The communists asked me what kind of clothes I wore on the job. I lied. I told them I wore civilian clothes and that I only repaired airplanes. This was supported by the fact that when I returned home from the base by car, I always wore civilian clothes. No one in the "audience" refuted me, though it was clear that their purpose was indeed to help the communists set some records straight. Many people covered themselves the way I did. A captain who claimed to be a sergeant was smart because his re-education was only three days. These people returned home soon. I was released.
The next group was comprised of the retired people who also returned home safely. The last group of candidates for re-education were former military police or ranking members of the military, or other related positions. Some of these became remorseful upon questioning and even apologized with tears. But the more truthful one was, the higher price he would pay. This was a staggering number of the most betrayed men in Vietnam. Thousands of them would be carried away under cover of darkness to unknown destinations, ripped from their families all in one day, for undetermined numbers of years at hard labor in the "re-education camps."

At midnight, as planned according to the giant communist conspiracy, thousands of the "employee owned" trucks converged to carry away their countrymen. The military prisoners were moved several times, step by step, to confuse the families. Finally, they were all relocated somewhere in the North in remote camps at hard labor. These patriots spent as many as 17 years in captivity, incommunicado with their families. Some of them disappeared. Communists always said that they had escaped, but witnesses said that they had been killed. The families of these prisoners did not want to give any resistance to the communists. They hoped by their compliant behavior to win an early release of their loved one and not to endanger them further. I lost many friends and acquaintances who simply disappeared. The population of Saigon was decimated, first
through the bloody attack and then by the kidnapping of her citizens.

Additional organization and control of the remaining population was instituted. Membership in an age-appropriate meeting group was mandatory. There were groups for wives, old people, children, etc. which met twice a week. This was one more way for communists to gather and record information. Children could talk about parents, wives could discuss their husbands, and so forth. It meant that you could trust no one with your thoughts, not parents, husbands or wives, or best friends. They could inadvertently give away some costly secret. I would first join the group of young people under 30 years old.

During this time I was using my bicycle to carry large quantities of heavy fabric to the black market. Police regularly patrolled this market area and the vendors, spying them, would gingerly gather their belongings and quickly scatter. We all soon understood that, if we were caught, that would mean re-education camp for us, too. If the police were chasing us, however, we knew how to get away by throwing our goods to the street. The police would retrieve the riches for themselves as we ran for our lives. Everything was illegal. I didn’t even know how to measure fabric, but at the black market, mine was quickly sold. Every day was spent running to make a living.
In the destruction following the takeover, I had gathered some transformers from destroyed offices and businesses throughout the city. I knew how to disassemble them, using the wires to make a kind of battery which could be used as a power supply. Since the electricity in Saigon from 1975-1980 had been reduced to only three nights a week and then only from 6-9:00 p.m., I made many fluorescent lights powered by my homemade batteries. These were useful for the night vendors to illuminate their wares on the street and for the people forced to move to the new economic zone. I was able to make some money by carrying my batteries by bicycle to the place where che was sold on the black market. I would set up one battery and three fluorescent lights for them to rent. I earned three piasters for this (less than three cents). I had several sets to operate in a similar way. At that time, I earned a living only through "illegal" activities.

After a short time, the local police came to my house trying to discover the way I could make a living. They already knew I was not allowed any kind of driver's license or work permit. These police visits always made my father fearful, but I wanted to play with them a little. I was careful, but not afraid. They asked me to make a light set for them at a cheap price and asked me many probing questions. Finally, one day they asked me to teach them how to make the light set. I realized that I was under
surveillance and increasingly at risk for incarceration. I politely pretended that there was no longer a supply available and halted my light rental business. I would have to go another direction to keep ahead of them.

Because of my interest in electronics and my previous education, I decided to apply for work at the Sony company in Saigon. They responded that the policy from Hanoi was not to hire people like me. They did not want me to have the chance to repair any kind of communication set and would not issue me a license to do radio, television, or electronic repair as my business. I felt angry at that time, but decided to be patient. I did that repair work secretly, at home and without their license. That was a dangerous situation. I evaluated my situation and understood that, since I did not have a legal job in Saigon, I would soon be required to leave the city and work in a new "economic zone." These areas were uncleared tracts without electricity or roads, full of unexploded mines, and located far from the city. I did not want to leave Saigon.

I was always looking for a way that I could escape Vietnam, but I realized that I first needed a step-by-step plan to cover myself. For the time being, I showed them how busy I was, working hard all the time so they would think I was too busy to plan anything against them.

My mandatory meeting group of people under 30 years old was led by the communist party. I rose in the group to a
position of one of six leaders, but the top position should
be, and was, a communist. This position afforded me some
inside information since the communists liked to use the
youth as agents of change. I secretly helped the members of
my group, even though they didn’t know it. For example, the
party would arrange for a labor trip to last 15 days for
members to travel to another area to plant pineapple. I
organized alternative projects to keep them at home or to
divide the group. I did not work directly against the
communists, but indirectly. The people in my area understood
that I was on their side. They supported me and wanted to
involve me in their activities. I was busy building a base
of support with the people I had lived near for years and
whose history I knew. We shared secrets of the past about
each other which, unspoken, we protected.

It so happens that several members of my group became
quite influential as time progressed, including a Phuong
leader, a politician, and a police officer. The short time,
less than two years, that I spent in this mandatory group
was very useful for building my step-by-step network. Still,
I wanted to jump out of this group before they knew more
about me.

Security at the block level in the neighborhoods of
Saigon was very tight. The communists required 10 record-
keeping group leaders to sleep at the intersection each
night. I, with 9 others, would take a blanket and organize
an hourly watch. Sometimes we were visited by police on bicycles asking who was absent or if everyone was at home. I covered the tracks of many people, such as a person who escaped from Vietnam from our district. I would lie and say that he was at home. After the family received word that their member was safe, I would immediately report my "discovery" to the police. I continued to look like a helpful worker, but always thinking like a fox to try to organize a way for myself to go and to help my family and fellow citizens.

Looking for an Escape

One day my parents accompanied me to "Nha Trang," a seaside resort northeast of Saigon. Because I was a young male, traveling together was safer to avoid communist suspicion. We were searching for an escape connection. The communists set up a road block that day and took all the young people with them. They released my parents. They took me prisoner to "Long Binh," midway between Saigon and Long Khan, where they kept me for one month. They accused me of supplying food to some traitors in the area since I carried "banh trang" and "banh tec" with me. That is food wrapped in banana leaves that you can keep for a month in case of escape. I was now their prisoner and for the first time, but not the last, I was in a communist jail.
Every night my communist captors bound my hands behind my back for sleeping. Every morning they took me with them into the jungle until they finished their campaign of flushing out loyalists. I was on foot, this time walking through the thick foliage with my hands bound in front of me. My captors were trying to catch former military personnel they had somehow missed before in their systematic sweeping operation. They checked the feet of their suspects hoping to find a dark spot above the instep left as a result of wearing military boots. When it was time for these roving communists to return to their base, they turned me over to the communists at Long Thanh. That would be my jail for the next six months and I would no longer be "free" to walk.

The communists had built small cells which were buried in the ground, yet were constructed inside a building. There were three concentric levels of these cells. I stayed in the innermost level, in solitary confinement, the first month. The cell had a narrow slot for food, but there was no light, no air, and no blanket. It was stifling and cramped quarters with space to sit or recline only. They fed me their own leftover rice and already picked-clean fish bones with salt water or hot pepper. There was very little food, not fit for a dog. They did not allow a bath. I had worn the same clothes for four months and must have been unrecognizable. I fell back on my judo training. The meditation was very important to keep my health. I meditated in the lotus
position for hours and hours in that cell. That was my medicine. I developed an appreciation for food. To this day, it seems strange to me when someone will not try to taste a new food because they think it is strange. Food is food. It should be enjoyed. We work hard to earn food and should not rush to devour it, but rather take our time and savor it. We should change the taste frequently. My palate can equally enjoy sweet, sour, bitter, or salty, as well as any texture.

After one month in this cell, they decided to put me to work at hard labor. That meant the chance to take a bath at the end of the day. Every morning they opened the cells by key and let the prisoners out. I was very light-skinned then. They counted us. Two baby-faced, gun-toting, communist recruits then escorted the 20 of us fellow prisoners to the jungle to do our work. I remember thinking that if I touched the face of one of my captors, milk might squirt out because he was surely just a boy. With that in mind, I began to plot my method of escaping that jail. It wasn't pretty and it would involve the death of that communist boy. But patience first.

Our hard labor involved the laughable task of trying to free two huge tanks which had fallen into giant pits dug as booby traps by the South Vietnamese. We were divided into two groups of 10 and scurried around our assigned tank like ants on a hill. It was obviously hopeless as our milk-faced
sentries stood guard over us. I smiled to myself. But we worked on that project for two months.

One day, quite by accident after I had been moved to the outer core of cells, I caught a glimpse, out of the slot in my cell, of my father. He was striding purposefully toward the main door with two other men and a paper clutched in his hand.

I don't know how my mother and father organized my release, but my father had gone to the Phuong leader with the signatures of all people in my district vouching for my character as a useful and helpful member of the new order of things. For unknown reasons, the communists released me to my father and we returned to Saigon by bus. My father adamantly advised me to stay close to Saigon. I heard my father, but we have always been different from one another. He prefers the routine and predictable. I have a more aggressive philosophy.

If you want to catch a tiger you must go into the jungle. I decided to expand my area of influence among the communists in my Phuong. Old friends confided in me, yet the new communists began to believe in me as well. I was a chameleon, like when my dark Indian skin in summer changed to pale in the jail. I could adapt.

I changed my group membership from the "under 30" membership to a different group because of a change in my occupation. I always had more than one activity going to
make a living, in addition to helping my family. Now, I became involved in the government program that used small trucks to transport the people to the new economic zone. This meant my new group had an increased age limit of 40 years, but more importantly, the members were related by a common interest in transportation. Through this connection I met the man with whom I would plan my next escape.

He was a teacher by day, but he was involved in American intelligence. We pooled our money to buy a large boat, ostensibly for fishing. We planned to refurbish it for the escape. We needed a communist person to help us buy the boat so that his name would appear on the title since we ourselves did not have the right to own anything. We accomplished the purchase. One day my partner was on board testing the boat without me. Unfortunately, the sting had been set up by the communists who arrested him and sent him to jail for six months. I was not on the boat and I was getting smarter. All of my boat-related business had been conducted by proxy. Our contacts had not even seen my face. But we both lost all of our money, again, and the communists kept the boat.

The time was right for me to expand my area of influence within my small truck venture and, with some ingenuity and daring, to travel more freely throughout the entire city of Saigon. I was previously restricted to traveling at the Phuong level. Each district had 15-17
Phuongs. But small trucks like my Honda microbus were governed by the entire district rather than by the Phuong level. I traveled to the Hanoi office in Saigon which issued driver's licenses. Since my job for the district of driving people to the new economic zone was driving related, I was successful in getting a restricted license. This was a huge improvement in my status. Now I could join the union of truck drivers and resurrect my rusty but reliable Honda microbus which had remained in the garage for a few years. I did all of the repair work myself. Having a car, a driver's license, and a legal job through the district was an incredible opportunity.

I drove my Honda very carefully and was able to save some extra gas rations for my personal use. I was very popular in the truck drivers' group and rose to the position of account specialist. This gave me access to many official documents and forms necessary for administering supplies for 170 small trucks. I myself received 1,000 liters of gas at a time to distribute to these small trucks. It was a powerful position. Little by little, I won the confidence of party officials because I worked so efficiently. They believed in my skills as an excellent account specialist. Actually, they had no idea how to administer such distribution themselves. I legally kept gas at home and traveled more freely throughout the city. I was absent from my district for longer periods, but I was able to show them travel documents
which I had forged for myself. I began to make plans for another attempt at escape.

Meanwhile, I continued to take new communist officials sent to us from the North under my wing. Captain Tien arrived with his wife and two children ready to begin his new job, but untrained in executing the economic responsibilities. I played with this "tiger," even attending the funeral of his father. I stood close to him to intimidate my Phuong leader and others. It worked.

Using the extra gas I had saved, and my papers, under the auspices of district business, I again traveled to the coastal city of Nha Trang looking for an escape connection. I had to be careful. The communists were becoming well-known for setting up sting operations to catch would-be escapees. I was looking for a family I had been referred to whose father was in jail. They had a boat for sale. Sometimes I took Captain Tien and his family or others to the beach at Nha Trang for a holiday. Behind that I did my work. I would go to buy them some food and, during my absence, would also siphon out the extra gas I had transported. I had built a second gas tank under my Honda and could hold 100 liters. I traveled like this legally for a year and finally connected with the family I was looking for. I believed in them because I had observed them send a monthly package of supplies to their father and husband in jail. They planned to help him escape from the jail, first. After that we would
all escape in their boat. It was an extremely daring plan. We agreed that I would repair the boat, procure an engine and the fuel, as well as navigate.

The small boat they owned was constructed for travel close to the shoreline. I worked on that boat for four months to make it seaworthy. It was close to being ready. We needed the engine, the international maps, and some navigation instruments. I was entitled to take six people with me, including my 16-year-old brother, Hai. The family organized 18 other passengers. Everyone would need to be at the appointed place at the appointed time or they would be left behind. I was to carry the extra gas from Saigon in my hidden tank, fueling the boat and preparing for the departure.

Because of the big parties, parades, and drinking, I chose the birthday of Ho Chi Minh, June 19, of 1980 to escape. I reasoned that the attention of the police would be diverted. It should have worked.

The boat had been tested. Everything worked well. We hid the gas many places, even under the water with a net. It was organized down to the last detail. The boat was anchored next to "Ngoc Tuyen" Restaurant where I had offered the owner free passage on the escape for his two children, in exchange for his cooperation.

All escapees were to meet at the restaurant at midnight to leave the harbor together with the fishing boats. I had
given each passenger one half of a piaster, the bill worth about one-half cent, which I had cut in two myself, and given the other halves to the restaurant owner. Each person was to go separately to the restaurant, casually order some food, and pay using one half of the cut bill. The owner, matching the halves, would take these customers to a waiting place inside the restaurant.

I had been in the boat since 7:00 p.m. organizing the food, fuel, etc. I was waiting until the appointed 11:00 p.m. hour, but disaster struck at 10:30 p.m. Two communist boats approached, one on either side of our boat, and shined the big lights inside. I had been betrayed.

The first thing I did was to chew and swallow my papers which gave me permission to travel outside of my Phuong. I had jettisoned the ARC-10 short-wave radio, but they found the powerful battery which I had made myself. On the spot I changed my name to "Nguyen Tuan Thai" and my birth date to 1940. I instantaneously invented a false home address which was a very new, strange, economic zone that I was familiar with because of my unrestricted travel. It would be unverifiable.

Captured by Communists

The captain of our ship was quick enough to jump into the water and evade the communists, but I was not so lucky. Being caught in the act was incriminating. The shore patrol
took me to their post and beat me mercilessly with a four-by-four board. Three of them beat me, passing me from one to the next, as if playing volleyball. Round robin, they practiced kung fu on me. I lost many teeth. I didn't care about myself, but from a different level of the building, I heard my young brother's blood-curdling scream. I felt sick. They threw water on him to revive him and then beat him to unconsciousness. Silence. Again they shocked him with water to continue their brutality until he returned to unconsciousness. After 24 hours, they transferred both my brother and me to separate places. I was unable to move or stand up for days. Some of the other prisoners, experienced in nursing wounds all over the body that have begun to turn green with infection, made a drink for me from a pulverized crab. They took all of the foul-smelling juice and added a little strong wine to reduce the stink. They very kindly gave it to me to drink so I could get my strength back. I came to know that this was not a jail for murderers or thieves. This was a jail for others similar to myself. There was an unspoken fraternity among us. Though we had to be very slow to reveal any facts about ourselves, there was kindness in the cells. I also learned that communists had been placed in the jails as prisoners to gather information. I accepted full responsibility for my "crime." I told my inquisitors that I had taken my brother and others to the beach only for the holiday and that they knew nothing.
Throughout seven months in this jail, they beat me frequently and tried to persuade me to change my story. I was unwavering. They beat me more and hit my face. They could not make me incriminate anyone. I never wanted to escape at the expense of anyone else and vowed to myself that I would protect innocent people who helped me and might be traced by the police. I later learned that the police had caught two other boats that night and about 50 people. I also discovered that it was the very family whose father was in jail and whose escape I had planned that had betrayed me. They had reported to the police that I had stolen their boat. Now they had a repaired fishing boat and I had lost everything. Again.

Each time I lost everything, it would take time and careful planning to rise up again. Sometimes, I would eat nothing but rice for months at a time to save a little money. Money was necessary for everything: to bribe officials, to buy the boat, to make preparations of fuel, food, etc. Escape was a very expensive endeavor.

I was kept in solitary confinement for a month without clothes and shackled at the ankles. The first two weeks I was shackled by both ankles and could not move. After two weeks, I was shackled by one ankle so I could move a little better. They gave me a cup to relieve myself in in the cell, but I had to be very careful not to upset it in the cramped quarters. There was no air. They took me out once a week to
question me and every time they beat me again. I stuck to my story. I found the place where hell is on earth. Still, it gave me substantial comfort that I was able to protect my young brother and others by my silence.

My inquisitor had the nickname "Sau Chong Chong" which brings to mind a helicopter propeller: high speed, serious, deadly. Some people, terrified to be questioned by him, broke down in tears as the door opened and they were about to face him. I would return to face him myself one day, years later, and bargain for the release of some of the very prisoners I had met while imprisoned there myself.

It seems like I always believed I would survive and drew on some inner strength. One other questioner at this jail usually pistol whipped his victims. I think I had some kind of power in my eyes sometimes because I looked at him intently, I mean really riveted my eyes on him, and he slammed his pistol to the table. More than once I was spared a beating. When I was returned to my cell, my prison mates would ask if he beat me much because they knew they were next. Often, they were less lucky.

After my case had been closed, which meant my degree of guilt had been decided, I was allowed to send a letter or message outside. I feared that my family would try to communicate with me under my real name and jeopardize all of us, so I told my captors that my family lived somewhere in the new economic zone far away. I did, however, conceal a
tiny handwritten message in a seam of my shirt which I sent to my business partner in the small truck group in Saigon, which was about 60 miles away. The carrier of my strange "letter" was to take my shirt from the jail, give it to my friend, and receive money in return. The message was received.

My cryptically inscribed message included my new name and birth date, 1940. He took the message to my parents. I did not want to tip off the communists about my identity nor my relationship to my family because of the reprisals that would inevitably result. Later, I sent another secretly contrived message to my family in Saigon in an effort to discourage their looking for me or communicating with me. I prepared them that I would be sending a paper bag with a fabric handle that needed repair. I requested that they repair the handle and return the bag to me in the jail. After that, I proceeded to tear one side of the handle of my bag. I carefully opened the other side of the handle on the seam and inserted my tiny folded message which specified no contact. I felt angry when my family returned the bag to me, with some dried fish and food, and I discovered that they had not found the hidden message. Angrily and loudly I told my captors that I refused to accept this package and it should be returned. I was more successful the second time. My family now understood to contact me in the jail no more.
I was often smiling in the jail. My fellow captives often asked me about my demeanor. I did not become sad or display despair. My attitude was one of patience, acceptance, and an expectation that things would improve. I also realized that keeping my mental health would be crucial to keeping my physical health. After one month at this location, prisoners were allowed outside each morning for five minutes to relieve themselves and take a quick bath with water they had to quickly retrieve from the well during that time.

A prisoner whose case was closed was entitled to receive one package per month weighing one or two kilos. Relatives became skilled at inserting morsels of gold in young bananas using chopsticks, or imbedding it in pieces of soap or the entrails of fish. This meant that prisoners did not share their packages, even after the communists had rifled through them and cut the contents in half with a machete. Rather, inmates ate the contents slowly after midnight, carefully savoring and exploring every crumb for hidden treasure. I invented a way to boil water and make coffee in the jail. The guards would enter and smell coffee, but they had to pass three doors to arrive at the inner level. That was plenty of time to hide everything. We could even cook a little fried rice from time to time. It was a very painstaking process that involved cooking the rice almost one grain at a time. It required melting a plastic
bag, drop by scalding drop, onto a metal lid, but we didn't have much else to do.

One prisoner had received a big sheet of precious plastic. Five of us at a time used it as a makeshift shower. Four people would each hold one corner up high, while the bather stood in the center. We all helped him bathe and took turns until we finished, reserving fresh water for the final rinse. We still were released outside for only five minutes in the morning, but we would gather the water quickly and bring it into the jail for use later in whatever containers we could accumulate. From time to time the communist guards emptied the cells and we had to go out so they could confiscate all of our "toys," but soon after that we had replaced them through illegal purchases through civilians who worked at the jail, or family of the guards who lived at that base. If you had a little money, it was possible to secretly buy a plastic container, a sheet of plastic so you didn't have to sleep directly on the dirt floor, or even a little coffee which was strictly forbidden. The children of the guards could be very helpful in this illicit activity, but it had to be done very discreetly. Packages needed to be very small and sneaked in under cover.

My friends expected that I would never be released from that jail. One last time I was taken to see the brutal "Sau Chong Chong," but this time, it was not to be questioned and beaten. It was to say goodbye. I don't know why I finally
was released, but I believe it had to do with the highest ranking of all my questioners, Thieu Thanh Linh. I think he came to some kind of favorable conclusion about me. After the farewell to "Sau Chong Chong," Thieu took me to eat pho with him and asked me if I had any money for the bus. I felt very suspicious about this release, especially when he asked me where I would go next. I answered that I would visit a friend in Saigon before I went to see my family in the economic zone. He pressed on and asked me the address of my friend. I told him. He continued talking and told me about his family. He offered that I visit his mother's house at the district bordering mine. I got on the bus headed for Saigon, certain that I would be under close communist surveillance after that. I felt that uneasiness until I learned later that my high ranking investigator, Thieu, had successfully escaped Vietnam himself.

I felt uneasy to go home right away so I hid for a few days at a small truck station that I was familiar with before I was captured. I soon connected with a person who could forge paper from a faraway district explaining my lengthy absence. Many people from my Phuong would ask questions and be suspicious about such a long absence. At that time, many craftsmen could forge an official seal for you. They would stamp your document, take your money, and break the forged seal in front of you to keep their secret and earn money again the next time.
When I returned to my district, the police had lost confidence in me because of my long unplanned absence and were most interested to know what I had been doing for the past six months. They summoned me several times. Finally I showed them my document which I had made myself, explaining that I had worked in another district for seven months. Although I was legal, the communists chose not to use me again as their account specialist. I had lost credibility and my position controlling transportation.

Plotting a Successful Escape

It was now 1981 and the communists were loosening their iron grip a little. No longer employed as a truck driver, I needed a job. The communists were beginning to build an import relationship with Hong Kong. They wanted to bring thread into Vietnam to make fabric. I saw an opportunity.

I was acquainted with "Tran Anh Tu," a man from my previous Phuong group who had plenty of money, but no car. He had a relationship with the fabric-making group under communist control and was, in fact, communist himself. He knew I was a person who again had no money, but I could arrange a car. We became partners.

I transported the fabric from his group to the government depot. The amount of gas I received depended on the number of trips I made. This liaison got off to a slow start, maybe one trip a week. Meanwhile, I had been hired by
a Saigon truck owner to drive his three-and-a-half-ton truck with a coal-powered engine. It is challenging and dirty to drive a coal-powered truck. Coal burning is erratic. It goes smoothly at first. After a few hours the gas produced for burning has lower octane and the engine doesn’t receive enough power. That means the driver must keep one hand on the choke and constantly baby the engine along. The driver is always black with coal dust and must wear a wet towel around the neck. Still, this truck driving job was excellent for me since the truck was managed by the city of Saigon, not the district. I often drove this truck home to show my local police that I had a job. This job began to increase because of the communist policy that now required each district to be self-sufficient in all supplies, including food. This policy precipitated widespread trading and bartering among the districts, but travel outside of the district still required special permission and documentation. I forged it for myself since I was no longer in a favored status in my district.

The distance of my entire route was 60 miles, but there were at least 10 checkpoints for the communists to stop the vehicles and check everything. Sometimes it was extremely slow. They stopped long lines of traffic and there were lengthy waits as the police rode their bicycles scrutinizing all vehicles, documents, and cargo. Every day I drove the coal-powered truck I heard gunshots from communists firing
at the drivers who ran the checkpoints. Sometimes I myself carried several hundred kilos of rice for the black market from growers in the outlying regions who didn't have the right to sell it. The communists would give them a voucher for their rice, good for labor in the future, but the farmers needed money for their families. I always ran the risk of losing my entire cargo, but the people of Saigon needed food to eat as well.

One day I traveled with a partner. I was driving tons of rice at a high speed. I ordered him, all grimy and sloppy, to stand in the open cab door, wildly waving a bottle of brake fluid and yell for everyone to get out of the way since the brakes had given out. "No brakes!" We tore through that checkpoint at lightning speed and were successful that time. It was certain that the communists would be on the lookout for that truck in the future. But we would have a hundred different plans.

On a different occasion I was traveling with four other men far from Saigon. We were on a clandestine mission to carry more rice cargo into Saigon and were on the lookout for police. We had spotted them earlier tailing us, but I had decided to outrun them. I drove the truck very fast for an hour. They were nowhere in sight. I felt confident enough to slow down. Suddenly, one of the men in the back reported two bright headlights shining on us and I knew we were caught. The police pulled my three men off the back of the
truck and beat them severely. They were obviously extremely angry at having to chase us for over an hour. We rolled up the windows in the cab as one policeman stormed around the truck, waving his arms and yelling like a madman. He took his pistol and proceeded to shoot each of the tires of the truck, still circling and fuming for 30 minutes. We remained in the truck. I knew they needed to cool down before anything else happened. My partner and I finally got out of the truck and approached the police car where they sat at a distance. They demanded that we drive the truck back. I calmly pointed out that I was only following a small car that ran in front of us and who actually was the owner of the truck I was driving. I was merely the driver and didn't know where the owner had gone. I further pointed out, very humbly, that now the tires were shot out so we couldn't go anywhere anyway. We would have to wait until daylight. They sat in their car at a distance with my men, while my other partner and I returned to the truck to wait for morning. In the dark of night and with the large truck concealing us from view by the dark shadow it cast, my partner and I proceeded to back away from the truck and inch our way off the road into the jungle. We were successful in escaping the police that time and that was the final trip by truck. The communists kept the truck and the three men. Later, our contacts went to the jail of that district and retrieved the three unfortunate fellows. It had become easier to bribe
officials, though one still had to use good sense about it. It was time for me to find a new endeavor since my face was getting too well known at inopportune moments.

I would learn a new business in exchange for my expertise with a car. I would teach my partner, Tran Anh Tu, how to drive and get him a driver’s license. In the meantime, I would have a legal job since he was the owner and I was the driver of his car. I drove him on his rounds within the fabric business for one year, carefully studying his contacts and procedures. He would teach me to build a loom for making fabric from thread or yarn. We would build everything by hand except the motor.

After one year, my partner told me he needed to sell "his" car quickly and gave me the option to "buy" it, if I could come up with the money in one week. The asking price was 2 ounces of gold. He knew full well that I didn’t have that much; in fact, I had only one third of that price.

In a most surprising event, my associate, Nguyen Du Tre, who lived in my Phuong, understood this dilemma. He patted me on my back and offered to loan me the balance of the car’s purchase price. I was most surprised because of his timely generosity and the fact that he had gold to lend. I agreed to repay his loan within one year. This turn of events now made me not only the driver, but also the "owner" of the car. I still kept my "Shylock," Tran Anh Tu, close to
me because I wanted to utilize his knowledge of the growing fabric industry and learn it for myself.

The new government was increasing the balance of import and export. They were exporting rice to China in exchange for fabric and thread. In addition, the manufacturers were offered an improved rate of exchange by the government for their produced goods. For example, if you made 100 meters of fabric, you needed to sell 50 meters to the government at pre-arranged prices, but you could keep 50 meters for yourself. The market was getting more competitive.

My involvement in the fabric industry increased dramatically one day when a Chinese businessman came from Cholon to meet with Tran Anh Tu and his fabric-making group. They were forming a union and needed to include me in this endeavor because I could provide the transportation. Each partner had 100,000 dong to share. I had only 15,000, but that was acceptable to them because I had the Volkswagen Microbus. Tran Anh Tu’s name still appeared on the title. I appeared as the driver. We both knew it was mine.

Subsequently, I signed a contract with this Chinese business group of six and used that paper to travel legally. Our first fund without owning a business license was one million piasters. Tran Anh Tu, being our communist liaison, was able to get any forms or permits we needed. I worked in this group over a year. I increased my money 10-fold. But I always remembered my goal. My goal was not to do business.
My goal was to escape. Nevertheless, I was on a path to financial success. I expanded my fleet to one truck, three microbuses, and two small cars. I actually operated two cars under the same title with the same exact license plates. One day they met, nose to nose, and I quickly ordered the drivers to scatter before anyone noticed.

It was the six-ton rebuilt truck which enabled me to upgrade my permit and actually go into the carefully guarded harbor when the huge ships came in. When the ship came in, three to six trucks would meet it. I was in charge of this fleet for our fabric group and rode my motorcycle patrolling our vehicles. It was true that some people escaped by these ships. I had to be careful. More than once someone would joke with me that we could go that way. Laughingly, I would pretend agreement and say, "Oh, yes, I will hide there with you." There was more security inside the harbor gates because of increased escape attempts. I would have to be more patient and escape a different way.

I realized that the more rich one became, the more one would be expected to join the communist party. I knew I was rising up an economic ladder by doing what came naturally to me and I would be expected to participate with the "Party."

Through my affiliation with the Saigon City Truckers Organization, I met a former Major and Tank Division Leader named Le Tri Khanh. He was now a very high communist official who occasionally needed transportation for
government business or pleasure. He took a liking to me and often asked for me as his chauffeur, since all cars were owned by the communists and I only had the right to drive, technically. No one had the right to refuse such a request.

Four years after I had left the jail of the brutal Sau Chong Chong, Le Tri Khanh wanted to return there to visit his longtime communist friend. It was extremely ironic to me that he wanted me to drive him there on a social visit. Nevertheless, I drove. It was a very curious experience to be there in the same room with Sau Chong Chong, laughing and drinking, at a party. His staff cooked special foods for us. I flashed back to the meager fishbones and regular beating sessions from my last "visit." Sau Chong Chong did not remember me, but I watched him like a cat watches a mouse.

While a prisoner in Sau Chong Chong’s jail, I had promised to try to help some of my fellow prisoners if I ever got free. I fabricated a story for Le Tri Khanh, explaining that a few of these prisoners were personal acquaintances of mine and that they had been imprisoned on bogus charges. I assured my affable passenger that it was all a big mistake and I could vouch for them. As a result, Le Tri Khanh was eager to assist his chauffeur to take prisoners out of the otherwise permanent jail that very night. I made good on my promise from years before. As I always say, "Time will tell everything."
I continued to use Le Tri Khanh. I was like a rabbit that sits on the back of a tiger. I used his parties to build a wider network of contacts who could help me in case of trouble with police in the future and to rescue prisoners. Le also introduced me at many other military bases which had, since the invasion, a veritable gold mine in the form of old, rusting, confiscated automobiles. He provided me with the appropriate paperwork which entitled me to buy these auto parts. This was a very ironic situation when I actually introduced my District Leader to this Communist chief. I was the person whose family and friends were dead, whose house was invaded and occupied, who was imprisoned and beaten, robbed, and persecuted. Now I played the role of social agent. But no one saw my back.

In 1985, it was necessary to join the government as a member or you could not keep something you already possessed. Everything belonged to the communist party, regardless of name or title. Someone may appear rich, but that is the shadow of life, not real life. It is safe to say that 90% of the communist party thinks more about their personal life than their communist ideal. That ideal had begun to weaken. There was graft and corruption at every level as communist leaders lost faith that the party will provide them with a house, a car, or any reward. As a result, communist leaders of each district began to make laws that were separate and distinct from Hanoi and which
protected their new and increasing wealth. These communist leaders would provide boats for escape at a very high price to would-be escapees. There were many traps set to catch the people from Saigon who had enough money to escape. Carrying boat repair equipment could be allowed in one district if you had the correct permit, but if you traveled to a neighboring district it could be grounds for arrest.

During this time, I was caught three more times in escape attempts. They took me to jail each time, but they did not beat the people now. Their goal was to capture you, question you for a week or two, and then contact your family to make a deal. You should not attempt to escape without gold or money. Each time, I again lost all my gold. There was not a set price to reclaim your family member. It depended on their perception of how much they thought they could get.

I did not want to be caught twice in the same place during escape. That would require a more serious penalty. I used addresses which I had obtained from prison mates to make contacts in outlying areas. At this time, the buying or selling of any kind of map or weapon was illegal and grounds for imprisonment. Nevertheless, living in Saigon afforded a greater opportunity for finding an ocean map because of the ships that came into the harbor.

This time we organized as a group of 40 people for escape. It would be necessary to rebuild the old boat first
and to add a large engine, but I believed I had contracted with the real boat owner and we had confidence in each other. Since many people had already escaped from Vietnam, boat owners were on the prowl, looking for likely prospects such as those who had been recently released from a re-education camp. It was necessary to be extremely careful and to conduct many tests of your contact to be sure that they were the real one. We searched the countryside for some kind of large engine which would be suitable. Several times, I carried the engine for our boat to Saigon so I could work on it, like a drug runner carries contraband. It was necessary for the boat to return to work after it was refurbished so that the local officials could see it was a good work boat and not become alarmed when they saw it in the future. We built a friendly relationship with the police on the water.

This project was very expensive. Finally, the boat was 90% new with a strong hull. We deposited the boat at a very small town on the river where we had already bought our security from the local police.

The time was set to leave. It was a superstitious night, February 5, that we set as the departure date. We had calculated the cost of our expenses at $20,000: food, gas, guards, water, fuel, etc., and divided by three. I did not get involved in the part that organized the safe passage from the security posts along the river. The boat pilot needed to be skilled in avoiding the police after we got out
of our purchased safety area. That could mean about seven hours before we saw our way clear out of the finger-like tributaries and reached the open sea. It was my job to provide the map and the radar. We needed to know how deep the river was to avoid running aground or sinking. We planned to travel by the river west toward Thailand. There are many shorter routes to the ocean, but they are heavily patrolled. The area is riddled with waterways and the communist surveillance varies according to section.

The time for escape drew near. We set the time and the signal. One house in the appointed area was to play music very loudly, only one specific song, so that the escapees, converging in several different canoes, would know they were in the correct location. They traveled back and forth in these waterways, each canoe carrying a different escape cargo: food, water, maps, oil, radio, navigation equipment, etc. Meanwhile, the large boat chugged into view. Hearing the music, the captain would understand that it was the safe area to take passengers on board. The destination had been kept a secret up to that time.

The large boat displayed a sign on the front of the boat to communicate with the canoes that this was their boat. It would be necessary for all passengers to board at a different time. The first attempt was a failure because the escape boat arrived too early. We scheduled a second attempt three weeks later. We never knew exactly how many passengers
to expect. It was possible that some locals would climb on and it would be impossible to refuse them. During the second attempt, the timing was better. Quickly and quietly, the passengers boarded. We hadn’t had enough money to buy all the police along the way, but in case of trouble, we planned to jump back to our "purchased" area for safety.

We were now ready to begin the seven-hour journey on the river to the open sea. We had to pass through four important police checkpoints. This is where our advance planning was useful. We had already made friends with them with gifts of whisky or special fish during working days. They knew the faces of our crew already. My face was hidden below at that time to avoid suspicion. The friendlier the crew had been during the weeks of preparation, the easier it would be to pass the checkpoints.

For five hours, the boat traveled far to the west and circled back around southeast, avoiding the most heavily concentrated communist surveillance. We arrived at the gate to the open sea at the same time as many other fishing boats which had the legal right to stay at sea for one or two days at a time. If we could safely pass that gate, we could consider we had a 50% chance of success. We still did not know how many people were on our boat.

It was now 2:30 a.m. Passengers were gaining in confidence. They were laughing and talking. A few people at a time could go up on the deck. Unfortunately, someone
stepped on the wires leading to the battery. The battery suddenly exploded and a fire broke out. At this time, the engine was repairable, but no one wanted to step forward to do that. To do so would give away your organizational role in the escape which could be deadly in case of capture. Smoke quickly spread to the hold where most passengers sat. Panic set in. People became like a swarm of bees; they cried and screamed. They feared they would perish in fire.

It was 3:00 a.m. when 10 of the organizers jumped into the water to disassociate from the dangerous and incriminating situation. The boat was stalled in the water and all passengers now subject to capture. Still, a passenger would be less guilty than an organizer. Many of us threw oil out of a large can and jumped into the water with it. I floated with my oil can from 3 until 9 a.m. Finally, I was able to drag myself ashore. I didn't know where I was or where the other passengers were. I decided to hide in a bush where I could also hang my clothes in the sunshine to dry. Unfortunately, this was a thorn bush that scratched and poked me, but the final insult was that it was also infested with blood-sucking mosquitos. Still, I rested in that bush for several hours and began to plan the way to return.

Not knowing that the area was populated by communist families, I approached one house for help. I had one gold ring to offer them. We agreed that they would take me from their island back to the mainland in the evening. They
cooked some rice soup for me and left me to wait for them. Something didn’t feel right to me, so I decided to swallow my gold.

The truth arrived at 4 p.m. when my would-be rescuers returned with the police. I had sensed impending discovery and had hidden in some more bushes, moving from bush to bush. The police organized a search party and located me two hours later.

These police questioned me and transferred me through two other police departments. Finally, I arrived at the city prison of the area. The news was sent to Saigon that the boat had burned and all passengers were believed to have died. My friends and family thought I was dead. Still, a few of my more confident friends clung to the hope that I was still alive. They searched jails in the surrounding area and found my name on the list. It would be easier to close the case this time because the police wanted money. The government seized the boat to sell later. I spent six weeks in the city jail waiting for the deal to be made. They yelled loudly at me in the jail, but they didn’t beat me this time. That was an improvement over my last sentence.

After I was released, I waited three weeks to organize another escape attempt. I planned to use the same gate. Some people advised me not to do that because it would be more serious if caught there a second time.
By now the government was strangely involved in reselling confiscated boats. Some people made an agreement with the police that, when their boat passed the gate out into the open sea, they would toss the title and registration papers into the sea. They would then report that their boat was stolen and reuse the papers for a different boat. I believe that was the plan, but I cannot go back to verify it.

This time we bought a bigger boat that had become "nationalized" property. I didn't want to organize over a long period of time because I had already been caught in several escape attempts during one year. I had lost their confidence. The communists would be scanning me carefully and could easily snare me at something else.

Four weeks later, my next escape plan was in place. We prepared to depart from the same gate as before. We sailed smoothly past the four police check-points and arrived at the open sea at 9 a.m. The shore of Vietnam was still visible to me in the distance when I observed that a Coast Guard boat had spotted our boat and was coming toward us. People in the hold began to get very nervous. What should we do? I decided that we should turn our boat and run in a straight line directly toward the police boat, showing no fear. We continued toward the police boat with the suspense building. They must have felt satisfied that only a working
boat would exhibit that behavior toward the police. They turned the other direction, away from us.

By 10 p.m. we were far from land and other fishing boats. It was a threatening sign when a communist navy boat spotted us and shined its big lights on our boat. Next, they opened fire with automatic guns. All my passengers scurried down into the crowded hold to save their lives. At that time we still didn’t know how many people were on our boat.

There was no choice except to run full speed away from our attackers. If caught, because we were completely outside our purchased area, we would surely be sent to Hanoi. After four hours of travelling at full speed, we arrived at international waters where they could no longer chase us. We slowed down the speed to preserve the overloaded engine. We four in the control cabin celebrated outrunning our brush with disaster with the champagne which, by custom, we carried. The others, greatly relieved and heartened, ate and drank. The task before us was to concentrate on the map, pinpoint our location, and head for Malaysia.

We learned later that there were 189 people on our boat. That load, along with the high speed we had demanded over several hours, took its toll on the engine. After several hours, the engine stopped running. It was dead. Besides that, the destination of Malaysia which should take two and a half days when on course, was now farther away due to our evasion tactic. We were in the open sea, surrounded
by communist islands, carrying 189 passengers with a dead engine.

Since we were at least in international waters, we decided to go ahead and try to fix the engine. The mechanic on board located the broken gear which opens and closes a valve. This was a very unusual fracture for which we had no spare parts.

On our third day at sea, we asked whether anyone on board was a carpenter. We took wood from the hull of the boat to make the gear. It was kind of amazing. Surprisingly, the engine worked again. However, we could not cover the engine because we had to pour oil into it manually. We even whittled a second wooden gear as a spare part. Our carpenters also cut rugged oars from our hull. We made about 20 to 30 of these and the people lined up, paddling furiously at the side of the boat. As each person wore out, another stepped in. We all worked together.

The engine ran at a reduced speed for three hours before it stalled again. Even the carefully made spare gear could not revive it. With the engine completely dead and no shore in sight, we floated for one day and one night hoping for rescue by an international ship.

Meanwhile, I knew we needed to organize the distribution of food and water. Actually, there was little food left, and very little water since we had already been at sea for four days, one day longer than we had planned. We
carried water in a drum half-filled with oil. The oil was on the top with the water underneath so as not to tip off anyone as to our intentions for escape. I allowed one spoon of water per person every three hours. People began to get worried. The real nature of people, good or bad, selfless or selfish, began to show itself. There were those who would sacrifice their ration of water for the very young or very old by taking a dip in the ocean, but to drink of the ocean water would mean death. When people are close to death you can see more of their soul. Some were ready to kill each other, while others were willing to sacrifice their own well-being. Some passengers became irritable and easy to fight with each other for survival. Eight of us took control of the boat. We limited the people who came on deck and inventoried the water. We could not let anyone know how much was left or where it was kept. We had some limes, sweet potatoes, and a little water.

We ordered the people in the hold to sit there without moving. If they needed anything such as a bathroom break, they needed to ask permission from one of the eight leaders. We needed to prevent the strong ones from taking over the boat. The passengers needed someone to believe in who could tell them what to do with a plan. Since I was alone on the boat, I had no vested interest and they obeyed me. They called me "Father of fathers."
By days six and seven, the water had been reduced to one spoon per person every four hours. We still kept a little hope by continuing to try to fix the engine. I was still amazed at the calm conditions of the water. I had never seen it so flat and quiet. It was excellent conditions, more suitable for March or April.

Suddenly, someone noticed a small sign on the horizon. It was a boat. We sent them an SOS signal using flares. We put out a flag and sent a rescue message from the cabin. The boat on the horizon grew larger as it drew closer and closer. Hope was rising. We identified it as a French boat. Finally, they turned and ran from us. They didn’t want to rescue us.

The second ship we saw during the day was Japanese. We signalled them to come to us, but it was a cruise ship. They ran very fast and close to us and caught our boat in their wake, but they continued. Our boat shook violently and we were disappointed a second time.

On day seven, we saw three black dots on the horizon. Ever hopeful, we signalled them. All three boats changed their directions. We allowed all old people and children on the deck so our would-be rescuers could see with their binoculars that we were harmless. The children cried and the old people prayed loudly in view of the telescopes. We detected that all three boats had changed direction again and were getting larger on the horizon. We told the people
on deck to pray more and louder. Three hours later, three Thai fishing boats circled our boat using a loudspeaker to communicate with us in Thai language. Suspicious, they sent all our passengers to the hold with only a few on deck to communicate with them. One bilingual passenger swam to their boat to explain our situation. They now understood that we were escaped people. One of their group swam to our boat and examined our engine. Understanding why we were there, they now allowed all passengers on deck. We felt free.

Their three boats had a supply store on board, enough for a week at sea. The Thai rescuers threw bagged ice, food, and juice in cans like a shower. My passengers caught it all, but we prevented their accepting it. We said, "We don't need food. We need rescue." Our experience told us that if a ship gives you food or water, they will leave you without rescue. We ordered the people to throw the food shower back to the Thai boats. We communicated in the Thai language that we did not need food; that we needed help to repair the engine and continue, or rescue. The Thai captain returned. He noted that their engine was similar to ours and they would help us fix it. The four boats were now very close to one another. The Thai had many spare parts and a welding machine.

By now my boat was taking on water rather rapidly. It was definitely not seaworthy for overseas. We had organized the passengers in the hold, including the children, into
three groups, each baling water for half hour shifts. Still, they organized to take a collection of their remaining gold or money to give to the Thai fisherman. They collected a fruit can of watches and jewelry. We planned to give it to them.

During the repair, my boat continued to take on water. The Thais allowed the old people and kids to go on their boat for a shower. They worked for one day and one night, together trying to make the boat run. Their mechanic finally returned to his boat to rest, but we didn’t stop working. Everyone was elated when the engine came to life once more.

We suggested that the Thai rescue us by taking us to Malaysia, but they told us they would be shot by the Malaysian navy for such an act. If they took us to Thailand, they said they would go to jail. We then gave them our collected gold. We thought they were very kind when they refused it, but some of the passengers predicted that if they didn’t take the gold, then they wouldn’t help us anymore. So, some of the old people on the boat tried to persuade them to take it. This had the obvious effect on the Thai of making them angry. We ordered the elders to stop their persuasion.

The captain of one of the boats was a Buddhist from Pakistan. We appealed to his high respect for the Buddhist monk since we had six monks on board. We had an answer.
The fisherman said we needed 16 hours from our location to the Malaysian Sea. They offered to tow us to the border of Thailand, Malaysia, and international waters. Two of the boats towed us and one ran beside us, our engine running weakly. They towed us all night, from 7 p.m. until 8 a.m. They were kind and helpful to us. Their captain stayed on my boat to reassure us. If he weren’t there, we could imagine them cutting their ropes at any time and fleeing the responsibility.

Murderous pirates who raped, robbed, and left victims for dead are a fact on the ocean. We arrived at a dangerous area well-known for piracy. The captain didn’t want to leave us there. He would tow us two more hours to a safer place, but it would actually mean a longer trip of six hours to the Malaysia Sea. They took me and two others to their ship and showed us the map of our location, the radar screen, and guided us how to get to Malaysia. After that, we said good-bye. They wished “good luck” to us and gave us more sweet potatoes and some fruit to take back to our limping boat. We all waved to them as the distance between our boats widened.

My boat, leaking badly, continued chugging toward the sea controlled by Malaysia. After three hours, my boat, overloaded and weak, stalled again. We tried to fix it. It was 11 a.m. already, so there were fishing boats in the area, but we didn’t know where they were from. The engine
was revived for a half hour, again for 10 minutes, and finally 15 minutes for the last time. Now the battery was dead as well. We were disoriented, still two and a half hours from the Malaysia Sea. We had lost our direction.

We decided to try the SOS signal again. A wooden fishing boat came closer and viewed us with a telescope, but did not come close to us. After 4 or 5 p.m., these boats return to shore. So, one person from my boat swam to their boat to tell them we would like to buy a battery for gold. They agreed. When he returned to our boat, we knew there were six people on the fishing boat. We planned to keep some men in our hold just in case they had any robbery motives in mind when they returned with the battery.

Two of the fisherman came aboard and checked our engine. They said they had changed their minds about selling the battery in question, but that they would notify a friend to bring a different one. It was very dark already. They told us to wait there while they went to get their friend's battery and return to rescue us.

Something told us that all was not well. We feared that this group had gone to get reinforcements and would likely return to rob us like pirates. We desperately tried to start the engine. Miraculously, the engine ran again.

We turned off all lights and fled the scene as quickly as possible. Behind us we saw search-lights scanning the water for us. Even though we were lost, our engine was
running. We crossed the path of a large ship under its powerful lights. We yelled to them, asking which way to Malaysia. They pointed vigorously with their arms and we set that direction. We hoped they had told us the truth.

We saw some large boats and followed them. We didn’t know where they were going, but they were faster than we were so we followed them. The water in the hold was getting higher. The balers complained that they were tired. We answered that they must continue or they would die. It was extremely dark.

At sunrise, we spotted a shore bird. It was a great and lucky sign. Three hours later the horizon appeared and our passengers felt greatly encouraged. We kept heading in that direction, the people quiet as if their silence would encourage the engine to keep running. We kept moving until 5 p.m. We still had 600 liters of oil, but we needed water to drink. With the land in sight and feeling confident, we traded oil for water from a nearby boat.

We requested further directions from our water traders and understood that we must travel through an inlet to reach Malaysia. I headed the boat out to set that course. At the next shift, the alternate pilot headed more inland. The passengers wanted to get closer to the land. We were close enough to see the swimmers on the beach. I wanted to continue to Malaysia, but the passengers had had enough. Finally, our pilot ran the boat aground in the shallow water
off the coast of Thailand. Thailand was not friendly to refugees. It was the army that controlled refugees, while the police were more friendly.

Landing in Thailand

We sent some passengers to swim to the shore and contact the police for help. Having been floating on the open sea for eight days, they looked like monsters, all covered with oil and dirt, their clothes torn and filthy. The people on the shore ran away from them in fear. Finally, the shore patrol arrived and summoned the coast guard. The coast guard boarded our boat and saw my filthy, exhausted people. I was wearing the shirt that I had used as an SOS flag. I know I looked awful now, too. I was covered with oil from the engine. My skin had become the dark brown color of summer due to the harsh sun upon the water. It was my idea to ask the coast guard to tow us off the sandbar so we could keep going to Malaysia, but many of the passengers wanted to disembark here. The engine was still hanging on. The coast guard suggested that we wait there for one day to rest. They promised to fix our boat, tow us to deeper water, and allow us to go again. They towed our boat away and put all of us up at one large temple. That was the first time we had an actual head count of 189 people. That was, of course, significantly over the number we had planned.
The first day, the monks were very kind to us and helped us. We used supplies from our boat and the friendly fisherman. After that, United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) was called in. They distributed toothpaste and toothbrushes, towels, and other personal items. Still wanting to repair the boat, we connected with the Thai police. They told us that the cost to fix our boat would be $8,000 in Thai money. This was impossible. Finally, they decided that we were not free to continue. They planned to keep us in Thailand as prisoners.

The police took the first report from the passengers which was to be the first piece in a long trail of paperwork. We had no right to send a letter or message, unless one could bribe a policeman.

The first week, they organized us to work for the Thai government helping the monks of the area. Physical labor was preferable to nothing so that we could keep our health. The temple was equipped with huge cooking facilities and we organized ourselves into a cooking group. We ate fish and rice. A week later, 89 more refugees arrived, then 11 more. After one month, four boats had arrived at this location. The Thai planned to move us 1,000 miles to the north by bus. When we left the temple, one of the monks gave me a Buddha pendant which I still wear. The monks told us the news of the day as we said goodbye and wished us good luck as we boarded the large buses. The buses were sponsored by the
United States and were extremely luxurious for the trip, even equipped with television. It is almost surreal how I kept bouncing in and out of civilization. I was about to bounce out again.

Refugee Camps

We traveled from 10 a.m. until 11 a.m. the following morning when we arrived at Banthad Camp. It had two gates. No one could freely enter or exit, identical to a jail. The guards searched all of our meager belongings and kept any papers or identification. Again, they took a report from each person and added that to their files.

It was obvious that the camp had been previously occupied, but the occupants had been transferred. All of their shelters had been burned to the ground so as to leave nothing behind. This was a large, carefully fenced camp controlled by the Thai military. Escapees from this camp were to be shot.

They divided us into groups of eight for living quarters. Eight people would receive one tiny spot to build their shelter. Next, they led us to a supply station. They distributed to each group 80 bamboo trees, 150 coconut leaves, and some wire or nails. You could check out a hammer or pliers to build your house. It took all day to carry these supplies back to the assigned spot.
Your house depended on you, your design, and organization. Because of the limited supplies, the styles were basic and simple. The first task was to dig a hole close to your hut. You would then take this dirt and use it to build up the floor in your hut to make it higher. This would help keep you dry in the rains. Next, we cut the bamboo all the correct size for the frame, door, walls, etc., realizing that a wall might be simply a partition made of newspaper or a plastic sheet. If you conserved your supplies well, you could also fashion a kind of bamboo cot which could sleep eight people. We all helped each other. After one week, the huts had been built.

This was not a friendly environment. This was a place for illegal entrants into Thailand, not a haven for refugees. The Thai attitude toward us was very, very ugly. We were guarded with guns and the specter of beating was always present.

We dug a well which gave us filthy water suitable for washing clothes only. Each week, UNHCR provided 20 liters of water per person for cooking and personal use. There was not enough food. As time passed, we began to grow some vegetables, herbs, and even flowers outside of our huts. Some people had received some money through the police-controlled mail system. This gave birth to a new money changing and gold exchange business. The Thai military would change currency or gold for you, but you couldn't ask the
rate of exchange. All you knew was that they would give something back to you. After that, you could buy seeds if you could locate a seller. There was no electricity, but if you had money, they would sell you a candle. We kept the rainwater for ourselves and tried to keep our health and keep positive. Still, many people died in this camp from diarrhea, fever, malaria, etc. I had still not yet sent any communications.

Several months later, the camp was greener with foliage and flowers around each hut. There were more vegetables and small fruit vines which grew quickly. Time was spent on keeping my health and maintaining my hut. I remember looking at the sky during thunderstorms through small holes in my roof. I watched my roof dance.

I lived in the Banthad camp for one year. We became more organized regarding health and security. The UNHCR gave me a blanket and a pair of shorts and a t-shirt through the Thai government. We prisoners helped develop a security plan by dividing the camp into neighborhoods with security leaders so we could protect each other like a neighborhood watch. We held meetings every week and began to organize like a new country. Any new country may have some unsavory elements and a refugee camp was no different.

The UNHCR built an office in the camp. It was staffed erratically, but a few refugees worked for them. They were paid in scrip which could be exchanged for soap or other
supplies. I worked for them as deputy of security and supply distribution. Later, a weekly mail distribution was developed. People could both send and receive communication, though it was subject to search and seizure. The Thai military received the highly sought American dollars this way, but would return to you only Thai money. They wanted you to expect that you would not ever go to the third country for resettlement. It was also forbidden to read or study anything. Of course, I did in secret. The Thai army allowed some Thai locals into the camp to sell food to the refugees. I could place an "order" with one and my stuff would come in the next day. Of course, they wanted the money first. After a few months, it was easy to get money in the camp. People could secretly write to relatives in other countries who would send money through the Thai locals. They would extract their interest, but the prisoners were happy to receive any amount. Words cannot describe the terrible conditions in the camp.

From time to time, missiles were shot into or around our camp by Thai enemy forces at the border. It was a very confusing area, since it could have been the Pathet Lao, or the Vietnamese against the communists, or a number of smaller insurgent groups. There was much free shooting going on here, but it was never clear who was the source.

I kept my goal in this camp and did what was necessary for survival. I found joy in living every day and in the
small things which give pleasure in life such as humor, growing things, and creative cooking. I developed some exotic recipes using various roots and seasonings which were good for health and supplemented our sparse diet. Many people invited me to cook for them and that is something I still enjoy doing. Food is food! We should not be afraid to eat something. I remember waking up before dawn and thinking this is the time when a rooster should crow very loudly and awaken everyone within earshot. I became that rooster. People became curious and wondered where the rooster was. I continued my daily ritual for fun, observing who was annoyed and who was not. It was amusing. I was successful in maintaining my health.

After one year, I was transferred by a four-hour bus trip to another camp about 80 miles north of Bangkok: Panat Nikhom. I was allowed to take my few possessions. I had a battery operated watch I had bought in the camp, and two sets of clothes. There were about 200 people at Panat Nikhom already. This camp had cement floors and roofs already constructed, yet without walls. It was a large, new, closed camp to keep people inside the fence which had been carefully constructed at several levels and included barriers so that people could see neither inside nor outside. There was no electricity here, and food was supplied weekly. Water was dispensed at specified times for two hours a day at a pump. Growing flowers, vegetables, or
herbs here was not allowed. It was necessary to cook only once a week and keep the food without refrigeration. There were security lights along the fence and people would often gather there for conversation. There was a 9:00 p.m. curfew.

The Thai assigned 30 people to one tiny area with roof and floor. This was one tiny hell.

I used the time to think and rest. I always believed if my first plan did not work, I would invent an alternate plan and escape into Thailand. I would be at an advantage because of my appearance which is not strictly Vietnamese. I spent nine months here. I needed to work with my mind every minute. There was always the possibility of being beaten in this camp if you slipped up.

When you live in these kinds of conditions, you re-evaluate your view of life. You observe some people take care of each other, while others do not. You observe that money, sex, guns, and beatings are easy ways to control the people. The line dividing humans and animals blurs. The answer to, "Where are heaven and hell?" becomes more clear: they are both on this earth.

Three months later, the Thai opened a business inside Panat Nikhom to take American dollars which had been sent to prisoners. At their store, you could buy cassettes, food, clothes, film, etc. Money changers still returned dollars to you in Thai money. It was illegal for prisoners to buy items which came from outside the camp, but you could buy
carefully from workers who entered the camp for their jobs. If an item cost $1 outside the camp, it cost $5 at the store inside the camp. Studying or practicing religion were still disallowed and all mail was controlled and opened. The Thai camp leader was very powerful and easily incited to beat people. If you were a prisoner, you were not considered to be human here.

Living in this oppressive and fearful environment, all prisoners waited for "screening" which was an interview of each person by a delegation of representatives from several countries. Passing such a screening would mean resettlement in the third country. When your name appeared on the list, you would go to an interview at another camp. After the interview, you would never return to Panat Nikhom, but to a different high security place to wait for the results of your interview. Preparing for the interview was mentally challenging. Only 6 or 7% of the interviewees passed screening. If they failed, perhaps they would die, or stay in a camp forever, or be sent back to the country they fled. If you passed, you would be sent to a free camp within Thailand. The happiest day of my life was the day I found my name on the list: I had passed screening. I was now considered a verifiable refugee and in the new camp I could read, study, worship or pray, and live more freely. You could say I was alive. Still, I could not go outside the gates. During this time, I could apply to different
countries to interview me and sponsor my resettlement. The United Kingdom accepted my application. They prepared my passport and I was waiting to leave for England. Actually, I didn’t care what country accepted me. I can live anywhere.

In the meantime, the United States delegation came to this camp and called me for an interview. They also accepted me for resettlement and I decided to agree. That meant I would be transferred to one more refugee camp for six months, the final stop before resettlement. It is ironic that I simply boarded a plane for the United States in 1969. My return trip to the U.S. would take over two years with many unwanted stopovers.

I flew to Bangkok and then on to the Philippine camp at Bataan which is operated by the United States and the Philippines. That camp is protected by the U.S. Navy in the surrounding ocean. That was reassuring. While in this camp, the United States would organize a sponsor or family member for the refugee. There was a good mail system, a coffee shop, food, English classes, religious services from several different denominations, and cultural orientation classes. The attitude of the people in this camp was definitely lighter, buoyed by the hope of a better life.

In this camp, I went swimming every day in a nearby stream. I enjoyed the swimming, but I also gathered snails for dinner. Snails with curry can make a feast enjoyed by many neighbors. There was light and electricity. If you had
money, you could buy an iron for your clothes, a television, or a cassette player. You could live there forever. I taught some classes in cultural orientation since I had lived in the United States before, and I worked at the health clinic as an interpreter. I had returned to the status of human being, bounced back into civilization.

Resettlement

Finally, after six months of living at the Philippine camp, it was time to board the plane for America. I flew to Tokyo, then Taiwan, then Seattle, on to Denver, then Minneapolis, and finally landed in Des Moines. Many of the people I used to know in Vietnam were incredulous when they heard that I had escaped. I had seemed like the man who had means and power there. I arrived in the United States alone, with empty hands, knowing no one, and prepared to rise up again. I have kept my soul and also reached my goal of escaping the communist regime. It has not been a short or easy trip, but my destination is truly worth the price.
CHAPTER 6

REFLECTIVE COMMENTARY

Stephaney’s Perspective

The recording of Vinh’s story has been a meaningful experience for me personally. I am very pleased to have this family record to share and use as a teaching tool, both inside and outside of our family. It has served to bring my American family members closer to him and to enhance their understanding and respect.

The writing and clarification process also provided a vehicle for Vinh and me to increase and improve our own communication skills. By becoming more familiar with events and experiences, I have improved understanding of my husband, as well as my extended family, whom I have not yet had the privilege of meeting.

This recording of Vinh’s personal narrative has affected me profoundly as an ESL teacher. Realizing the benefit of such personal narratives, I initiated an ESL project in Urbandale, Iowa, this year for grades K-12. Each ESL student wrote his personal story. All stories have been compiled into an anthology. These are children’s perspectives of dangerous escape, brutal war in Bosnia, destitute refugee camps, children jailed in Africa, etc. It is a powerful collection that serves many positive purposes.
Importantly, the writing process itself facilitates English acquisition. More importantly, having written the story, possibly with the assistance of a bilingual tutor—or even in the native language—the student now has at least one person, the teacher, who shares some personal information about him and appreciates him/her. This is the first step toward validation and a building block for the teacher to use as a cornerstone for developing self-esteem and a positive self-concept in a new culture.

I have used the stories of my ESL students to establish them as resources in our school district. We have planned presentations at other schools as well as in our own to explain what has happened in Bosnia and Vietnam, for example. We have incorporated slides, videos, music, dance, food, readings of excerpts of the personal narratives, etc. at cultural fairs in other school districts. This preparation also allows us to take advantage of our ESL students as rich global resources in our own school district. For example, the high school ESL department has worked closely with the high school social studies department recently in an all-day project featuring presentations by the Bosnia ESL high school students. The presentation was repeated each 50-minute period, all day, for as many as 60 social studies students at a time who were rotated through. Such an authentic assignment allows a broad segment of native speakers to become familiar with the
newcomers, their culture, and the reasons for their immigration.

This far-reaching approach reflects a truly integrated curricular design and a high level of teacher collaboration. It facilitates intercultural peer interaction and relationships which can often be elusive at the high school level. As a result of this initiative, all freshmen students have had an introduction to their Bosnian counterparts with an opportunity to ask questions provided. This helps to ensure that the newcomers are more quickly accepted as an integral part of their student body. Hopefully, a template has been laid for the high school years to follow that will foster understanding and promote peace among diverse peoples. I believe that this idea could be replicated on a much larger scale with the underlying recognition of newcomers as assets, experts, resources, and bearers of positive attributes who have much to teach us as we teach them.

Vinh's Story

At least some small part of Vinh's story has now been told and it is evident the degree to which he valued reaching his goal of a free life. I apologize to my husband for the inherent loss of his meaning as I tried to put myself in his place. If only the reader could be privy to
the expressive eloquence which Vinh possesses in his native language, this story would be far the richer.

Last October, five years after arriving in the United States as a political refugee, Vinh took the oath of American citizenship. He now has the legal right to enjoy the privileges which he suffered so long to win. He points out, however, that as a result of communism, his family continues to suffer and be separated. His elderly parents are not even allowed to visit him in the United States. His sister, who lost her mind when the communists invaded Saigon, continues to worsen and require more medication. His parents still live apart to try to keep the family homes for the future. He has not seen his family for about 10 years. Still, he believes that what he did to win freedom was worth his sacrifice. He cautions that Americans who live in freedom need to be more aware of safeguarding it and protecting it as something precious. They need to be more aware of world events and disbelieve the communists, even though it appears that they have crumbled. He would caution that they are patient masters of long-range deceit and that it is far more critical to watch their actions more than to hear their words.

The increase of crime, violence, declining morality, alcoholism, drugs etc., is of great concern to Vinh who views the United States as the greatest nation in the world. He certainly recognizes its frailties as well, though if
called to military service, Vinh would not hesitate to fight for his new homeland. Still, his perception is that many Americans take their privilege for granted. They risk throwing it away by their casualness.

Vinh has also reflected on the recurring nature of conflict in the world. His story, now aging, may be reflected in the stories of refugees from many other nations. Currently, the tragedy in Bosnia which has resulted in the slaughter of thousands and the resulting refugee population tells a similar story of man's inability to live peacefully. The nightmare in Sudan, where the north has invaded the south and dislocated refugees to the U.S. is an on-going tale of man's propensity toward violence. The modern examples of tyranny observed in Somalia, Rwanda, Chechnya, Cambodia, and Ireland all cast doubt as to man's ability to solve problems and live respectfully. It would, in fact, be quite easy to conclude that the natural condition of man is conflict and that, while Vinh has landed in an environment of relative tranquility, that condition is, at best, fleeting. It seems evident that one, having come face to face with dark, elemental forces of existence could become pessimistic, defeatist, and discouraged. The fact that Vinh remains optimistic, humorous, and achievement-oriented is strong testimony to the resilience of the human spirit. It is powerful hope for the forces of good, justice, and the future of humanity.
Having asked Vinh his feeling upon sharing his story and having it written by me, I myself reflected on the sleepless nights and nightmares that dredging up all details had evoked. It was a very emotional experience which was also physically draining for both of us. At times, we would become exhausted and have to stop for a while. There were long periods of silence while Vinh relived some details and would be overwhelmed by the memories. But we would always return to reach the completion.

Vinh was always committed to arriving at the final chapter. He often has said to me that he would like us "to have the same head." It has been my honor and privilege to help this brave, courageous, golden-hearted man to tell his story.

One Saturday morning, Vinh awoke and said, "I've got it! I've got your conclusion!" I was relieved that this was not another bloody nightmare. I inquired, "Good. What is it?" Smiling and full of meaning, he pronounced, "Freedom, freedom, oh, freedom!!!"
GLOSSARY OF TERMS

an banh ve: a Vietnamese term meaning "to eat imaginary cake;" a caveat to the South Vietnamese issued by the North Vietnamese to describe the communist plan of takeover to come; meaning that a lovely picture would be painted, but it would be without substance

anh hai: a numeric designation used in Vietnamese culture to denote the firstborn son; "hai" meaning the number "two;" traditionally the most important position in the sibling ranking with the greatest responsibility

ba ngoai: maternal grandmother

ba noi: paternal grandmother

banh tet: traditional Vietnamese food made with rice and wrapped in banana leaves, popular at New Year

banh trang: a thin rice paper which can be moistened and rolled up with various ingredients inside

Banthad: Thai refugee camp where Vo Van Vinh lived, with other escapees, after being "captured" by the Thai government and leaving the Buddhist temple

Bien Hoa: large military base in South Vietnam staffed by both American and South Vietnamese personnel from 1970-75; often attacked by communist missiles prior to 1975
**block**: smallest unit of geographical organization of the city of Saigon instituted by communists after the invasion of 1975; comprised of a few houses and the "block leader"

**cafe sua**: a strong drink of coffee with milk which is steeped through an individual filter placed atop a glass.

**che**: sweet dessert soup made from various ingredients like coconut milk, peanut, tapioca noodles, mung beans, etc. that is often sold by street vendors or made at home.

**hoi dong quan quan**: military management imposed on South Vietnam by the North prior to the communist government taking control after the invasion of 1975.

**khom**: a middle level of geographic organization of the city of Saigon instituted by the communists after the invasion of 1975; comprised of several "to" and the "khom leader".

**khu**: a higher level of geographic organization of the city of Saigon instituted by the communists after the invasion of 1975; comprised of several "khom" and the "khu leader".

**new economic zone**: undeveloped area, sometimes with undetonated mines, designated for resettlement by Saigon citizens who did not qualify to continue living in Saigon by means of their employment.

**ong ngoai**: maternal grandfather

**ong noi**: paternal grandfather
Operation Babylift: organized effort to evacuate Vietnamese children by helicopter from Saigon to the United States in the aftermath of the fall of Saigon

Panat Nikhom: large refugee camp in Thailand

pho: a savory breakfast soup of noodles, meat, and broth, served with bean sprouts, fresh basil, lime, hot pepper, and hoisin sauce.

phuong: largest geographical unit and top level of organization of the city of Saigon instituted by the communists after the invasion of 1975; comprised of several khu, 500 to 600 homes, and the "phuong leader"

piaster: unit of Vietnamese currency; prior to invasion, 1,000 piasters per American dollar. After 1975, 10,000 pisters per dollar.

re-education camp: euphemism used to denote communist jails for South Vietnamese military personnel and others who had been sympathetic with the United States. Characterized by long term incarceration, hard labor, secrecy, and total separation from family

rise up: term used by Vinh to describe overcoming financial devastation and achieving success through using one’s wits

snake without a head: description of a lack of leadership or organization
Tet: traditional Chinese New Year based on lunar calendar; largest holiday celebrated in Viet Nam over a period of several days; falls on a different date each year

Tet Offensive: communist attack on Saigon in 1968 at Tet that was repulsed after several weeks, but left the city in ruins with high casualties

"Time will tell everything": proverb frequently relied upon by Vinh; encourages patience, acceptance and tranquility

To: low level geographic organization of the city of Saigon after the invasion of 1975; comprised of several blocks and one "to leader"

to khai ho khau: reference to the number of mouths of family members in each household; used by communists after 1975 to calculate how much rice families were entitled to

Trung Thu: Vietnamese moon festival celebrating the full moon; marked by special moon cakes, folk lore, and processions of children carrying lanterns

UNHCR: United Nations High Commission for Refugees; international organization that monitors the condition of refugees worldwide and advocates on their behalf

Vo Van Vinh: name of protagonist written as Vietnamese custom dictates: last name first, followed by middle name, and first name in the final position
REFERENCES


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