

Oral History of Vietnamese Refugees 1975-1980

Interview with Mrs. Nguyen Truong Phuong Chi, by Kim Oanh Nguyen Le 8/20/2002

Interviewer: I am Le Nguyen Kim Oanh, interviewing Mrs. Nguyen Truong Phuong Chi. Today is August 20, 2002 at 5:00p.m., at her residence 111 Calvert East Ave., Edison, N.J.

Let's begin. Could you tell me a little bit about yourself and your life in Vietnam?

Interviewee: In Vietnam, I was born on the banks of the Red River, in Hung Yen province. I grew up there in my youth until 1954 when my family immigrated to the South. We settled in Nha Trang where we built a new life. I worked as a clerk for the public works department. My father continued to work for the Customs Office. Time passed by the blue sea. Every afternoon, in my leisure, I would take a walk along the sea among the pine trees. This was where I met my future husband. We got married in 1959. After he was demobilized, my husband worked for the Vietnamese Commerce Bank. My first son was born in 1961, followed by more beautiful children until 1975 when I got 4 sons and two daughters. The oldest then was 15 and the youngest was 5. I thought life would be peaceful until we retired. Who knew that "the sea became stormy", and once again, we had to leave everything that we had built up since 1954. In April 1975, we had to leave our country, this time like washed up seaweed, we drifted very far. Our journey was extremely difficult. We ran short of food and water, we thought we would die at sea. We were rescued by the American Seventh Fleet, and were brought to Subic Bay where we stayed for one week. After, we were transported to Guam. My father couldn't bear the hardship and he died 10 days after we arrived in Guam, never reached the shore of freedom. From Guam, we were transferred to a refugee camp in Indian Town Gap, in the state of Pennsylvania. A church in Wayne sponsored us into New Jersey. Here after two weeks of orientation and assistance from the church members, we adapted to the American life. My husband and I . . . uhm . . . didn't know much English. Although we had degrees in accounting in the French curriculum, it was not useful here. My husband got a job as a dishwasher in a restaurant. I worked part-time for the church to earn a living. Meanwhile, we tried our best to learn the English language to facilitate our daily interactions. After six months, with the help of the church, we got a new job with a pharmaceutical company, and all my children went back to school. Today, my oldest son has completed his Master's degree in Microbiology. My other children also completed 4 years of college and all got good jobs, all employed. The saddest thing for me was that when my children are all grown, my husband passed way in July, 2000. Among my children, 4 are married, and I have got 4 grandchildren from my daughters, and 6 grandchildren from my sons. In my remaining days, my only wish is to marry off the last two children, to see them all happy, and that they always remember parental advice to love and support each other all their lives. That way, I feel that we have fulfilled our parental responsibilities and are at peace that they are out of communist danger and live in a free environment.

Interviewer: Well, could you tell me in more details about your escape from Vietnam, from Nha Trang?

Interviewee: About the escape by the sea from Nha Trang. . . It was the night of April 29... when the communists shelled Tan Son Nhut Airport, I was at.... well, I escaped from Nha Trang, and was staying at my brother's house near Tan Son Nhut airport. So we ran to the barrack of my younger brother stationed in Khanh Hoi. Here I couldn't turn back, and at 8 p.m. I boarded a boat that carried ammunition that usually supplied ammunition to the army. Once I was on board, I sat down against the side of the boat with everybody. At noon, April 30, the boat arrived in international waters around Vung Tau. The night of April 30, it rained dogs and cats, we were sitting on the boat without cover, fortunately we were used to hardship.....we had nothing in our hands, not a blanket. Luckily some of the soldiers on board held up their ponchos to protect us from the elements a little. The night of April 30, we received news of the loss of Saigon. The boat continued sailing for three days, without meeting any ship to save us. Our boat wasn't prepared for an extended escape, so it ran out of gas. At the end, we heard that there was a sand carrier pulled by a Panama ship. It was an ammunition carrier on its way to supply to the armed forces. It had a wall of sandbags four meters high to protect it from bullets. I realized that the carrier seemed very crowded, because people on it wanted to chase us away. Probably for survival, they didn't want the ship to sink. But on our boat, the soldiers threatened to shoot, by shooting first into the air, if we were not allowed to board this ship. A priest appeared and allowed us to transfer over. A rope was thrown to connect the two vessels. People hung on to the rope and it was pulled to move them over to the ship. But not every body got in, a lot of people remained on the small boat, crying loudly for help. Even when we got on that ship, it was extremely crowded, we sat without much elbow space. No wonder they didn't want to take us. All four sides were tall sandbags, each of us could see the sky about as big as a room ceiling. We sailed for about a week. At two o'clock one morning, a ship came to rescue us. The first ship came and told us to let women and children go first. But people didn't listen and fought to go, so that a wall of sandbags collapsed, injuring a number of people. This ship took the injured and left without taking any more people. We encountered the second ship, but my family couldn't climb up, because we had nine children, three of my younger sister, and 6 mine: the oldest was 15 and youngest was 3 months old. The fourth ship found us, and it had something like a pulley basket to transfer us to life boats, the elderly and children got to go first. It was the U.S. Seventh Fleet. They did very a careful inspection of our bodies and belongings. From early morning to about four o'clock in the afternoon, we were settled in the lower deck where we were stripped of all our belongings from nail cutter to my father's bottle of honey. After that we climbed a huge tall rope ladder up to the big ship. We were leaving Vietnamese waters. On the ship, the floor was very warm. Without shoes, I had to alternate my feet to stand, then I found a piece of cardboard, I tied it on my feet to walk. We climbed down a rope ladder to the second deck where we were given each a small mat. It was crowded there with many other refugees. At meal time, we climbed the rope ladder up stairs to receive a small plate of rice. We were told that there were not enough provisions for so many people, but we took the chance to be saved rather than dying in hunger and thirst on the sand carrier. My sister-in-law could joke that if she and her children couldn't stand the lack of food here, they would rather jump into the sea than dying as dry bones on the sand carrier. In fact, when she arrived on the American ship, she was on the verge of

fainting because she had to nurse the young child, and was without food for a while. In the meantime, the older kids could sip a little water to hang on. The American ship took us to Guam,... no, to Subic Bay first. We stayed in Subic Bay for one week. Here, on the ship, there was a pile of rubber sandals. We were allowed to take one pair each. Here, the Americans fed us very well. After one week, we were transferred to Guam where we stayed one month and nine days. Every day, we went to the canteen to receive our food portions. Here it was cold at night and warm during the day, it wasn't good for the beauty of the young women. After one month and nine days, we were told that there might be a storm, and we were transferred to the refugee camp at Indian Town Gap in Pennsylvania. Here we lived in barracks. We received food supplies, and there were volunteers who came to teach us English and other basic knowledge. When I was in Vietnam, in high school, I had to take English and French two hours per week, so I knew English a little, even though it was difficult to understand. My oldest son studied English at the Vietnamese American Association, two hours a week for one year, and he went around being able to converse with the cooks. He brought the volunteers to talk to us. Later, after the camp, he was able to help our family a lot. We stayed in this camp almost three months. Between June and September, a lot of church groups came, and a church group sponsored us into Wayne, N.J. From then, our life was more peaceful. The hardship was really while we escaped on the boat and while sailing at sea. Once we settled in Wayne, living in freedom, life is good. We got help from the church groups, my children went back to school, I got a job, only two weeks after arrival.

INTERVIEWER: You and your husband worked in the same place?

INTERVIEWEE: At the beginning we worked separately. With my four years old, I couldn't work. The church group rented a house in Wayne for us with a rental of \$375 a month. I worked for the local church, cleaning on Saturdays and Sundays. On weekdays, I helped a teacher who taught a group of children, I helped take care of them. In 1976, we both went to work for Hoffman LaRoche from 4 p.m. to 1 a.m., and we usually got home at 2:40 a.m. After a few years in Wayne, we moved to Kinalon to work for the local church. The job involved taking care of 7 acres of garden, cleaning the church, from 8 a.m to 12 noon every day. We took turns to do the job, and my children helped out too.

INTERVIEWER: Your whole family performed the job?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, in fact, my oldest son, Huy, helped the most, and Huong and Hinh, the rest of the children. . . .

INTERVIEWER: You mean just the three older children helped?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, the older children helped

INTERVIEWER: Do you need to take a break to rest

INTERVIEWEE:: No, I don't need to rest. My illness fluctuates.

INTERVIEWER: Working like that, did your husband feel upset?

INTERVIEWEE: Often depressed. In Vietnam....I must say our lives were comfortable. Over here, we were at the lower level of society, working as custodians... so.... For us women, it didn't matter. We clean house, we cook while the man goes out to earn a living. Many of the men became quite depressed. As for me, I was working part time for the church because my children were still small. The first time I walked into the house of a church member to clean, when I walked into her bath room to clean, I burst out crying. I cried because I was terribly homesick seeing that her house was just like my house in Vietnam. The lady owner came to console me saying that she considered me as her friend, and that I needed not be afraid. But I terribly missed my country, I missed my house. We left our house there, we couldn't take with us any money. The departure was quite sudden, we couldn't withdraw our savings in the bank, so we were literally empty handed when we arrived. We did house keeping work, then we worked for an electronic assembly company for a while. After the work here ended in the afternoon, I went to work in the nursing home until 10 o'clock at night. That was the most difficult period for us. Later, we got a job with Hoffman-LaRoche, and continued to work there along with the job for the church in Kinalon. To avoid traffic congestion, I started to leave for work at 4 p.m., arrived at 5 p.m., and worked until 1 a.m. By the time I got home, it was 2 a.m. I was doing that for 14 years.

INTERVIEWER: How much could you sleep in the morning?

INTERVIEWEE: I was always hungry for sleep, so when I drove, I was always sleepy. . . one must experience that sleepy feeling to understand the situation. . . There was no way to keep awake, except when something jolting or fearful happened to wake one up. You can slap your cheeks, pinch your thighs, chew gums, everything, and after a few minutes, your eyelids will still close! I had to drive on the parkway, always traveled by the highways, often half asleep! Once, on the parkway, while driving I saw a group of thatched huts in front of me, I slowed down to stop. My husband asked me why I stopped in the middle of the highway, people could hit me from behind. I woke up and realized that there was no thatched hut in front of me! My husband couldn't drive because of hypertension, his doctor would not allow him to drive. I was the family driver for the 14 years commuting to work. Sometimes, I saw on the roadside some of the young women cousins from Vietnam, it was kind of strange. After 10 years, my husband retired at age 65, I drove with my sister-in-law who worked at the same firm. Every time after work, we drove home, she talked a lot, but I wasn't aware of all her talk, being half asleep. When I answered her talks in an incoherent way, she would remark "so you sleep drive again, right?"

INTERVIEWER: Why didn't she drive?

INTERVIEWEE: She couldn't, you know aunt Kieu, wife of Hien. When I turned 62, my children told me that I needed a rest, or else I wouldn't last long. At that time, my oldest son graduated college in 1984, and two years later got a Masters' degree, got a

job. My second son also graduated and got a job. The younger ones were all in school. I drove on the left lane one day on Route 27 without knowing it until I got over a hilly section I saw the head lights of oncoming traffic. My number wasn't called yet., and I survived until today. That time I got broken bones, broken ribs and spines, and I recovered to live. The first year here, I was terribly homesick, developed a migraine headache, always wishing for a miracle that would return me to my motherland. I always worried, and that caused me a constant headache. I went to the hospital, and they gave me some medicine to take for 15 days. I took it for 10 days, I felt euphoric, healthy and happy, like walking on clouds. I would hold my car keys in my hands and was not even aware of holding them. That day was a Saturday, the 10th day of taking the medication, I went to work for overtime. I left my house, drove to a T-intersection, went straight into the garden of a house in front which turned out to be a Veterans' Center, hit a flag pole, and woke up wondering why I was there. At that time, it was in December, the road was slippery with icy snow, I quickly put on my brake, and the car spun past a large tree. Luckily, if I didn't wake up after hitting the flag pole, I could have driven my car directly against this big tree and got squashed. As a consequence, I got a broke rib, fractured spine. It took me four months to recover. After that, I went back to work. Three years later, I got into another accident at home. It was about 8 p.m., I had a headache, so I took 2 Tylenols and went to bed. I woke up at midnight. On the upper floor of my house, my bedroom door looks out the stairs. Usually, there was a night light there. That day, it was all dark. Instead of turning left to the bathroom, I walked straight to the stairs, and fell bouncing down the stairs. At the bottom of the stairs, I managed to yell out, and my family came to find me with a fractured hip. Miraculously, I recovered and have never had any problem with backaches. At work, I used to lift 25 lbs- containers of discarded bottles, and it didn't bother me. Just occasionally my ribs felt tired. Life was quite hard, always for lack of sleep, shortage of some necessities, working two jobs in order to manage. I worked at many things, from cleaning the church's bibles to custodian work to nursing home work.

You see, we were leading a middle class life, even though we were not rich, and now we came to the very bottom of the American society. It terribly saddened us, and we really felt sorry for ourselves. At the beginning, I got a job with LM (?). They assigned me to work from the 15th floor to the basement, cleaning all bathrooms. Since I was short, they gave me a step stool which was attached to the waste container. In each location, I set up the step stool to reach to install the toilet paper. Every time I stepped into a bathroom, I cried. I cried every time like that, for seven years. I kept praying to my mother-in-law who passed away but who loved me very much. I asked her to help me get out of this work situation. Three months after that, a worker on the 15th floor was transfer to the ID office where they took photos of new workers. I was assigned to the 15th floor where I did cleaning for the laboratory and helping out. Here, I stayed for 14 years. Everybody in this location, from the director to the doctors and secretary, loved me because I worked well, and I could manage a little with the English language, and also a little French. They were aware that I came over because of the Communist regime, and that I was an educated person. They were sympathetic to my sacrifice for my children, working very hard for them, so they really loved me. When I retired, the whole department gave me a surprise party. They turned off the lights in the room, and when I arrived, they turned on the lights and told me that they never saw me with any jewelry, and not knowing what

gift would be suitable for me, they gave me a cash gift to get my own choice gift. During my shift, they had a party for me. It was fun. It was nice to work where people loved you. They told me to come back to visit, but I have been so busy, I had not time to come for a visit. Life in American is really fast paced, quite different from the way of life in my homeland. There are many good things, but in many other things, I find that there was too much liberty.

INTERVIEWER: For example, in the children's behavior?

INTERVIEWEE: Yah, on the children's arena, they have too much freedom. That's my main concern, for the rest I feel we have managed to adapt without too much problem.

INTERVIEWER: What about grandma? Does she work on anything over here?

INTERVIEWEE: No, well, she. . . .

INTERVIEWER: She stays home to take care of the grandchildren?

INTERVIEWEE: She doesn't take care of them. At the beginning when I left the refugee camp, my English wasn't good enough, but my oldest was a keen student. I asked him to help me make an emotional sentence of thanks. When the church members came to pick us from the camp, I said the sentence expressing our happiness and gratitude. The Church members after that thought that I could speak English well, they came to talk to me every day. The church ladies were rich and didn't work. They tried to make me, a stranger, feel comfortable, they came to visit and talk for a couple of hours every day. I wasn't sure how to keep up with such long conversations. Although I had studied English, I wasn't fluent, and my understanding was kind of spotty. When they spoke, I listened, and understood partially, then I tried to formulate questions for them. Like that, the conversation could last two to three hours. Later, the neighbors also came to visit. I met this couple who were retired teachers from the school my children attended. They loved me. She would tutor me in English, and when I took a part time job with the local school, she would take me back and forth to work. Really nice. The whole neighborhood was very friendly to us.

INTERVIEWER: All of these people were Americans?

INTERVIEWEE: All of them. There were no Vietnamese around at that time. Our family were the only Vietnamese. Not only were we the only Vietnamese, but our children were well-behaved and good. The American friends loved them, and everywhere people knew about the Truong family. There was one American family with whom we are very close. They were devoted to help us, and helped my children in school. The husband was working, but the wife stayed home. She was close to us. When my son graduated from high school, she cried at the graduation ceremony out of happiness for us. I continue to keep in touch with them. But it's sad that she got some health problems that gave her tremors in the arms and legs.

INTERVIEWER: Like seizures?

INTERVIEWEE: Probably that's what it's called in Vietnamese. She is very weak, and I come to visit her occasionally, with some gifts. I keep in touch with other families, but I was most close to this family, because she was always by our sides since our arrival. They attended all wedding ceremonies of my children.

INTERVIEWER: You were describing your interactions with Americans. What about Vietnamese?

INTERVIEWEE: At the beginning, I met a few in church, the catholic church. Although I was not catholic, I am Buddhist, I don't discriminate against any religion. Currently, I have a good friend who is catholic, and a strong believer in the Virgin Mary. I offered at the Sacred Heart Church to donate a sign at the base of the Virgin Mary's statue for the praying public. The church continues to send me donation request, and I continue to contribute. I believe all religions are the same, all originates from our hearts. Envy and hatred are created in our hearts. Originally, I enjoyed going to community meetings in church. We had potluck dinners to share, and it was all very nice. Later, things got more quiet, partially because my children were grown and moved away, and many things happened so that the atmosphere wasn't like at the beginning. People also got dispersed, and right now I don't know too many families. Those I know, I meet at the market or at wedding parties. We exchange conversations and greetings, but I am not close to any one, because I don't have time. Although I am retired, I don't have time to go anywhere. I stay home to take care of my children, cooking and keeping the house.

INTERVIEWER: Are you planning to go back to visit Vietnam?

INTERVIEWEE: I would love to, but have not had the chance. I didn't have the means, and I still had to take care of my mother. When my children were grown and had babies, I spent time to assist them with their babies so that they could go to work. My children all live nearby within 5 to seven minutes driving. I don't have the time, but my consolation in my advancing years is the closeness with my children.

INTERVIEWER: Do you feel that you are really a member of the American society, totally blended into life here, or do you often miss Vietnam?

INTERVIEWEE: In truth, I always think of my motherland. Perhaps my children will be totally integrated because they came when they were very young, at ages 4,6,7. They probably could adapt totally. For me, I always miss my homeland.

INTERVIEWER: Do you observe any cultural differences between the U.S. and Vietnam, holidays, customs etc?

INTERVIEWEE: Here or in Vietnam, we have the first of the year as holiday. But the lunar new year Tet, was still the most important.. We celebrate Tet here, but to tell

you the truth, the atmosphere is not the same as in the home country. It feels out of place, diluted, boring. In addition, the weather during that period wasn't optimum. Christmas was more exciting, Tet was within the family, sometimes with the community. But with the community's celebration, sometimes, I couldn't go. So, I don't feel anything festive.

INTERVIEWER: Thank you very much for your time for this interview. In conclusion, do you have any advice for the younger generation of Vietnamese in America?

INTERVIEWEE: Well, my advice . . . is . . . despite hardship in life . . . the young people, once they are able to understand, they should study hard to become constructive useful citizens. Now that they are here in America, this is their second country, they should succeed in their studies and contribute to the welfare of the U.S. in general, and of the Vietnamese in particular. That way, they can help their homeland and its people as well. The most important is to maintain their dignity, their pride so that they won't shame the whole community, so that they won't commit shameful actions which would stain the reputation of Vietnam and its people. Another area of concern is that Vietnamese children growing up in America probably don't understand the suffering and horror of war that devastated Vietnam in the last dozen years. In this war, whether communist or nationalist, all were basically Vietnamese. Just like the war between the Trinh and Nguyen dynasties in the old days. So many people got killed, including the Viet-minh, nationalists, and Americans, a countless number. After, countless numbers became homeless, left their homeland to immigrate to America, and countless numbers perished in the seas. That was the most tragic thing for their and your generation. I hope the young people will be reminded of this war. I hope the young generation will maintain their dignity, their pride, and continue to improve their knowledge, so that I hope they will use their talents to help rebuild the motherland. It is important that they conduct themselves in a virtuous manner, maintain their morality, and pride in the fact they are Vietnamese, pride in their origin and their motherland. That's all.