

**Oral History of Vietnamese Refugees 1975-1980**

Interview with Mr. Bui Chuong by Anh Tung, Duong on 8/22/02

INTERVIEWER: The purpose of the interview today is to document the immigration experiences of Vietnamese overseas, specifically Vietnamese who have lived and settled in New Jersey. My name is Tung Duong. Today is August 22, 2002, 8:15 p.m. I am interviewing "uncle" Chuong Bui. Please state your name and your current address.

INTERVIEWEE: My first name is Chuong, family name is Bui. In Vietnam, my parents usually called me Chuong. Currently, I reside at 12 Rue Chagall, Somerset, NJ.

INTERVIEWER: May I ask you to talk a little about your past, your family situation, and about yourself before you left Vietnam?

INTERVIEWEE: I left Vietnam in 1975. That was April 29, 1975, when the communists were approaching Saigon. Before 1975, I was a college student in the Faculty of Law, University of Saigon. That year, I was a third year law student in constitutional law.

INTERVIEWER: Wow. . . . So you lived in Saigon?

INTERVIEWEE: I lived in Saigon.

INTERVIEWER: Your family also lived in Saigon?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, they also lived in Saigon.

INTERVIEWER: Your family's condition at that time must be pretty comfortable?

INTERVIEWEE: Life was very . . . normal. In 1975, my older brothers were in the armed services, my older sister had jobs, and both my parents were employed, so I concentrated on my studies, and I worked part-time for a newspaper for my personal expenses.

INTERVIEWER: So you worked as a journalist?

INTERVIEWEE: Just part-time, assisting in a newspaper office, writing a few things.

INTERVIEWER: Can you tell what newspaper you worked for?

INTERVIEWEE: The newspaper Song Than (Magic Waves). I was assisting the writers there in copy reading.

INTERVIEWER: You studied until 1975 when you had to evacuate?

INTERVIEWEE: I got evacuated with my family, because my oldest sister was working for an American company. I think it was a transportation company that was responsible for logistics and supplies for the former armed forces of the Republic of Vietnam. On April 29, while I continued to go to work in Saigon, my sister advised me the way to leave. She told us that the communists were coming, there would be a lot of bloody revenge, and she directed us to the new port near Saigon. We boarded a ship the evening of April 29. At midnight, the ship sailed into international waters, and the morning of April 30, we lost our country.

INTERVIEWER: So your entire family managed to escape?

INTERVIEWEE: My oldest brother, who worked for the armed forces' headquarters, was stuck behind.

INTERVIEWER: The main reason your family decided to evacuate was the fear of the new government, fear of the communists?

INTERVIEWEE: Exactly. Previously, my parents were evacuated from North Vietnam. In the old days, in North Vietnam, my parents were both anti-communist, and anti-French, so they took revenge against them a lot. In September 1954, due to fear of their revenge, my parents decided to evacuate to the South. The situation in 1975 was rather similar to 1954, and my family had to leave.

INTERVIEWER: Your family left by boat?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, by boat.

INTERVIEWER: Where were you heading?

INTERVIEWEE: It was a transport ship; it took everybody who boarded into the lower deck. It was full, but we had to leave and had no choice. It was the last ship leaving the new port on the Saigon River. On the open seas, the ship accompanied the U.S. Seventh Fleet. By the time we passed Bung Tau, we entered international waters. On the morning of April 30, the ship turned back a little, and it turned out that according to the radio, Saigon was taken. From the land, people rushed to the seas in small boats. Our ship received orders to turn around to save those people.

INTERVIEWER: You mean the U.S. Seventh Fleet ordered your boat to turn back to help?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, we turned back to rescue those people who escaped by small boats and sampans. Well, we helped to save those Vietnamese people. They were on those tiny boats...

INTERVIEWER: So, on the morning of April 30, your boat was still within Vietnamese water?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, we were still within Vietnamese waters, and we started to leave when our boat was filled. At that time, it was so crowded, practically chaotic.

INTERVIEWER: Where were you heading?

INTERVIEWEE: Well, our boat headed toward the U.S. naval base in the Philippines. It's called Subic Bay. It took quite a while sailing, perhaps three or four days. Our boat allowed people to board, but it wasn't prepared for such a trip with probably a thousand people. People had to share a small amount of rice to sustain them until we arrived in Subic Bay. Here, at the naval base, they gave us enough foods and clothing. We stayed for 24 hours.

INTERVIEWER: You stayed there for only 24 hours?

INTERVIEWEE: After 24 hours, they transferred us to another ship to go to another island, then to the island of Guam.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, the island of Guam.

INTERVIEWEE: Here on the Guam island, all the Vietnamese refugees were gathered to be prepared to go to the United States. It seemed that I stayed there in total about 30 days.

INTERVIEWER: Only 30 days in Guam. So, your escape from Vietnam to the Philippines seemed rather smooth.

INTERVIEWEE: Rather smooth. Except for some problems on the ship because of the crowded condition and the lack of food, we didn't even encounter any storm at sea.

INTERVIEWER: At that time, there probably were no pirates for you to encounter.

INTERVIEWEE: No, at that time there were no pirates. Later, they came into existence. And those who escaped later had to face these pirates

INTERVIEWER: When you arrived in the refugee camp, you were given shelter and foods?

INTERVIEWEE: They set up tents for us. We called the camp "tent city". Tents all over. Here we completed procedures to be transferred to another camp within the U.S. In California, there was Camp Pendleton, in Pennsylvania; there was the Indian TownGap. They were army barracks converted into refugee camps.

INTERVIEWER: When the Vietnamese refugees arrived, they all went to these camps?

INTERVIEWEE: There the government provided English language instruction, and then processed paperwork. That means that they would not allow us to be out immediately, because they were afraid that we didn't know our way around. They relied on volunteers and charitable organizations such as the Catholic or Protestant organizations to sponsor the refugees out and to provide guidance in employment and other things.

INTERVIEWER: But what happened when you got transferred from Guam?

INTERVIEWEE: The American officials processed our papers and brought us directly into the country.

INTERVIEWER: Without a sponsor?

INTERVIEWEE: Correct, but when we arrived, we also went to the refugee camp inside the U.S. where we were sponsored by a Refugee Resettlement program who matched us with a charitable organization as sponsor.

INTERVIEWER: Your whole family was all-together?

INTERVIEWEE: We were together when we were in the island of Guam. Once we arrived here, we were split.

INTERVIEWER: How?

INTERVIEWEE: My oldest sister, her family and a couple of my siblings were dropped off in California in Camp Pendleton. The rest of the family with me were brought to Indian Town Gap. The American government was afraid that Vietnamese all wanted to go to California because the weather is warm, and the camp there would be overflowed, so they just split us like that.

INTERVIEWER: What is the name of the refugee camp where you stayed?

INTERVIEWEE: It's in Pennsylvania, near Harrisburg. Its name is Indian Town Gap, formerly a Marine Corps camp, I think. These barracks were converted into refugee camps

INTERVIEWER: So you were there with two brothers?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, my older brother, two younger brothers and my mother plus I. In the camp, I studied English. There were members of the American Red Cross who taught us English, and gave us guidance about life outside.

INTERVIEWER: How long did you stay in the camp?

INTERVIEWEE: Probably about two months.

INTERVIEWER: After two months, what was the reason you left the camp? You resettled in the region?

INTERVIEWEE: :In the Indian Town Gap camp there was a Protestant church in New Jersey, in the town called Hightstown which came forth to sponsor my family. There, they rented an apartment, paid for our rental for a few months, supplied us with food for a couple of months, and then they helped us get a job.

INTERVIEWER: Did they contact you directly, or what was the procedure?

INTERVIEWEE: I am not sure about the process. The Protestant church had direct contact with the American government, which had a list of families, and the church chose whom they wanted to sponsor.

INTERVIEWER: Your whole family settled here?

INTERVIEWEE: We have been here, Hightstown, for a long time.

INTERVIEWER: Once you arrived there, did you work?

INTERVIEWEE: After a couple of months, my brother and I got a job with a liquor company. It's an assembly job. The liquor was poured into bottles, each worker stood in an assembly line, under a supervisor, so nobody could stray.

INTERVIEWER: What was your assignment?

INTERVIEWEE: When the bottles were packed in crates, those crates were transferred to a lift. At that time, the method was rather unsophisticated, so for example, out of ten crates, four would fall off the lift. My job was to watch for fallen crates, and put them back on the lift to be transferred to the sealing machines where they were sealed

INTERVIEWER: Both you and your older brother worked there? And your mother worked too?

INTERVIEWEE: Later, she worked in cleaning offices.

INTERVIEWER: Let's see. When did your family come to New Jersey? What year were you sponsored into New Jersey?

INTERVIEWEE: In 1975, we left (Vietnam) in April, we were sponsored into New Jersey in October, and we entered our apartment and started working in November.

INTERVIEWER: You moved into Hightstown in November?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: You said you were a college student in Vietnam. When you came here you had to go to work. Did you feel anything different?

INTERVIEWEE: My life totally changed. In Vietnam I didn't have to work, focusing on my schooling. Over here, I had to deal with American people in English. Luckily, when I was in Vietnam, my family sent me to a language school, the Vietnamese American Association, to learn English. My brothers and family members were not fluent in English, they had to rely on me to communicate. The church members didn't know Vietnamese, a few members had been to Vietnam and knew a few words, but that was not enough, and my English competency helped.

INTERVIEWER: How was your life at the beginning?

INTERVIEWEE: I found life was pretty hard. I missed Saigon a lot, and wanted to go back. I was used to life in a big city, lots of friends, life there was peaceful with my family, siblings, relatives, all around. All of a sudden, I came to live in Hightstown surrounded by cornfields, it got so dark at night. My goodness, from the city to a rural area, it was so isolating. It was so sad, after work, I didn't have anyone to talk to, everything in the house was unfamiliar. The first few years, I was pretty discouraged. After work, I didn't know where to go (for amusement). I watched TV, and wouldn't go out. There was the Mall, Bridgewater Mall, but I was afraid to enter, because it was so huge, everything was modern and technical, it made me very nervous. When I entered the automatic turning door, I was startled, it felt so strange.

INTERVIEWER: You said you knew some English, so it wasn't too bewildering.

INTERVIEWEE: I could understand a little, it took time to learn.

INTERVIEWER: You were like that, what about your family?

INTERVIEWEE: My mother absolutely couldn't speak or understand English. She was very frustrated. In Vietnam she could be independent to go places and could communicate. Here, wherever she went, somebody had to accompany her, and she couldn't understand anything. She stayed home most of the time, so she was very unhappy.

INTERVIEWER: How long did it take you to adapt to the new life? How long did it take you to get used to it?

INTERVIEWEE: I think it probably took about 2 years to slowly get used to life here. The first few years, well, the first six months were totally depressing, I just wanted

to go back, but my homeland was lost, I couldn't return. The first six months my spirit was really terribly down

INTERVIEWER: Were you in touch with your relatives in other states?

INTERVIEWEE: My sister in the other state was in similar situation. She and her family were sponsored out of the camp, but life had changed and we had to deal with it. It was extremely hard in the first six months.

INTERVIEWER: You worked for a while, and then you went back to school?

INTERVIEWEE: I worked for six months, and got laid off, but my brother was able to stay on. I went to look for another job. I knew an apartment landlord who gave me a lawn mowing job. In addition, when an apartment became vacant, I helped him clean up and paint the place. In the evening, I got a cleaning job in a company, probably J & J. I cleaned the cafeteria, emptied the wastebaskets and ashtrays.

INTERVIEWER: How long did you stay with that job?

INTERVIEWEE: I stayed with that job for a long time.

INTERVIEWER: You went back to school?

INTERVIEWEE: I went back to school later.

INTERVIEWER: Did you study in the same field as before you escaped?

INTERVIEWEE: A totally different major. I went back to study electrical engineering, unrelated to what I studied before. When I was in high school in Saigon, my best subject was math, I still remember a lot of it. So, it was relatively easy to return to studying, and my math helped me pull up my grades in other subjects. If I continued with the law school, it was too difficult because of the language barrier, and I wasn't familiar with American laws.

INTERVIEWER: Do you feel proud of any success?

INTERVIEWEE: You mean here, in the U.S?

INTERVIEWER: Your achievement in this state (N.J.)?

INTERVIEWEE: In this state. . . well, I went to college, I graduated, and I got a job within a few months, my family situation improved, life was less uncertain, and more settled. I had the opportunity, met other people, and learned new technology in electrical engineering and computer. I learned a lot and worked a lot. I went to work for a small company whose scientists came from Bell Laboratories. Working with them, I learned a lot in fiber optics communications. I didn't know anything in this new field,. Over here,

thanks to the educational system and facilities, I could understand more things. I believe in Vietnam, we studied a lot but understood little, whereas here we study less but understand more. That's the difference.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think you owed your success to the help from other people, or was it due to your own efforts?

INTERVIEWEE: Working at a manual job was very hard. I thought about how to get out of such situation. Slowly, I found out about educational opportunities, went back to school to study English, slowly rising. It was extremely hard. But later, it was a great joy to finish and get a job. Another success could be considered the luck we had to come to America. That was the first step to improve our life. I felt that it would be difficult to overcome life difficulties if I stayed on in a manual job. With some technical knowledge, I could learn many new things.

INTERVIEWER: What year was it when you finished college and got a job?

INTERVIEWEE: It was 1983. It was quite a long time since 1975 to 1983, seven years with many years working. The first five years were quite a sacrifice, that means I had to earn a living, learn about new life in a new society, learn English to communicate with people, and help my family.

INTERVIEWER: You said you were the sole support for your family?

INTERVIEWEE: No, everybody in my family. My younger and older brothers did too. The youngest brother was still young. He was the only one in school. The three of us worked to help out.

INTERVIEWER: When you moved here, how was your neighborhood? Was there any Vietnamese around?

INTERVIEWEE: There was no Vietnamese around near me in 1975. It was very rare to find one, except in New York or Philadelphia. A few months later, I happened to go to church and found one Vietnamese who came to this country many years ago. She got married to an American man. They came here in 1970. They were so happy to meet a Vietnamese. They lived nearby, so we made friends. It became less lonely, particularly my mother could talk to her.

INTERVIEWER: It would have been nice to have a Vietnamese community like we do now.

INTERVIEWEE: Now, the Vietnamese people help each other. It's better because wherever we go, we can meet Vietnamese.

INTERVIEWER: Did you feel that if there had been a Vietnamese community you would have been happy?



INTERVIEWEE: I would have been delighted. At that time, I kept wishing to find some Vietnamese, but didn't know how, nor did I have any opportunity. I met Americans who asked me where I was from. When I said I came from Vietnam, they asked me if I was VC (Vietnamese communist). They thought all Vietnamese were VC. They said they were soldiers serving in Vietnam, they would kill me. There was a lot of misunderstanding.

INTERVIEWER: You felt lonely?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, lonely, very lonely.

INTERVIEWER: Have you been back to visit Vietnam?

INTERVIEWEE: Since then from 1975, I have never been back. My older brother and my mother have gone back to visit. I am the only one who hasn't gone back. I don't have anybody to visit, all my friends were dispersed.

INTERVIEWER: Besides, all your family is here.

INTERVIEWEE: My older brother was stuck behind, but he came here in 1997 sponsored by us.

INTERVIEWER: You don't have any relatives there?

INTERVIEWEE: My immediate family is all here, I still have some extended family members there.

INTERVIEWER: Would you like to make a pleasure trip to Vietnam?

INTERVIEWEE: I would like to, but with my job, I couldn't take off. Even if I went to visit, I wouldn't know what to do. Saigon must have changed a lot, it's been a long time, and many people I know in Saigon have left.

INTERVIEWER: If you have a chance, would you like to go and live in Vietnam?

INTERVIEWEE: I don't think I can live there again. It's O.K. to just visit the former motherland, but to live there again, I know no one, and am not familiar with life there at all.

INTERVIEWER: You said you live here and visit over there, do you feel that you are a member of the American society, or do you feel that you are still Vietnamese?

INTERVIEWEE: I think I am Vietnamese, and I can never be American. Talking about contributions, I can't say I contribute anything. I work, make sure that I don't violate the laws, live a normal life of an American citizen, fulfill my duties, do a good job at the workplace. When I do my job well, it benefits society, my Vietnamese community and myself. As a result, my co-workers will have a good impression of Vietnamese workers as serious workers. In my opinion, I would like people to look at Vietnamese differently than before 1975 when people saw us as just fighting and killing each other. That is not right, we need for people to understand that Vietnamese are not into war and poverty, and hatred. We need people to recognize that Vietnamese are good workers and not lazy.

INTERVIEWER: You still feel you are Vietnamese, but you haven't had a chance to go back to live there, or don't you want to?

INTERVIEWEE: If life and politics in Vietnam changed, well, maybe. But if the government continues to be oppressive, with the present authoritarian regime, I think even if I came back, I couldn't contribute anything to help the people. Perhaps it's better to work here and enhance the reputation of Vietnamese than to go back and do nothing. There are various approaches to rebuild our motherland, not necessarily one has to be physically living there.

INTERVIEWER: You have been here for a long time. Do you find any cultural differences between the Vietnamese and American cultures?

INTERVIEWEE: The life styles are different, as well as the spiritual life. Society here is also different. Vietnam tends to be conservative or traditional, much more so than America. There are the good and bad aspects of being traditional. Americans are more pragmatic, to the extent it can become brutal..

In terms of feelings and family sense, there are the good and bad aspects. In Vietnam, when one grows up in the family, the parents are always right, and the children were not permitted to have their own opinions. I think, for children, which that are not good because it prevents them from being assertive, they don't dare to form their own opinions, or express their feelings for fear of being corrected by adults. They suppress their opinions, and become passive. It is the same in schools, where the teachers are always right, and the students are always wrong. In any matter if the student has different opinions, the teachers usually brush them off, or give a zero as grades. That was wrong. Here, people respect your opinion, regardless whether you are young or old. In the family or in schools, students have the right to ask questions to clarify their ideas. In Vietnam this is not permitted. This authoritarian mode practiced by parents and teachers have prevented the development of many very bright students. They became passive learners without innovative ideas. That was a disadvantage. On the contrary, here in America, people are free to express their opinions, whether with their parents or teachers. However, I observe that sometimes individualism becomes extreme here to the extent that it seems that people lack respect for their parents, they speak their minds, express their feeling despite their parents. It's a little too much, too free.

INTERVIEWER: You said that in terms of family values, Vietnam seemed old-fashioned?

INTERVIEWEE: In Vietnam, there is a clear hierarchy. Many times, it becomes excessive and hinders the intellectual development of the young people. It's the same in schools. Over here, it's the reverse, sometimes it's excessive, and family values seems not very important. All the children think that they are right, they don't need their parents, and therefore, the family foundation is shaky, lacking parental leadership.

INTERVIEWER: You just talked about family values, what about the American culture? What are the differences you observed?

INTERVIEWEE: In general, they are two different cultures, one is east one is west. But they both aim to enhance their people. The Vietnamese culture is several thousand year old, but in terms of development, there is not much, it's just too ancient to produce more.

INTERVIEWER: Are you talking about the Vietnamese culture overseas or in general?

INTERVIEWEE: In Vietnam, the culture doesn't keep up with modern life

INTERVIEWER: You mean it doesn't make progress?

INTERVIEWEE: No progress, only going backwards. It is true to say that America doesn't have culture, because it's a new country of 200 years old, but it's powerful. They have little culture, but they are better at long range planning, focusing on strengthening their country, and they are more pragmatic. By comparison, we tend to live in the past, which makes it difficult to develop. In addition, the Vietnamese tend to have the tendency to think that they are better than others, they don't respect others, and they tend to destroy those who are different or more successful. That is the disadvantage of the Vietnamese people. The American people seem more open, more willing to adopt the good things, and discard the bad things.

INTERVIEWER: My last question is whether you have any advice to give to the younger generation?

INTERVIEWEE: I think the younger generation needs to have unity with their families. It's important to help each other, and to listen to their parents. Sometimes parents can be wrong, but it is better not to argue back. There will always be many occasions to prove that parents can be wrong. Familial relationship is very important. In learning about technology, they need to remain open minded to learn. It's important to respect other people's opinions and to stay open to new ideas, because here in this country there are many ideas freely expressed and the best idea will be chosen. For Vietnamese, the family relationship is important, and although people tend to be materially poor, the spiritual life tends to be richer than that of Americans. However,

Americans are very strong in technology, individualism and competition. We can learn from them in these areas.

INTERVIEWER:                      Thank you very much.

INTERVIEWEE:            You are welcomed.