

## ORAL HISTORY OF VIETNAMESE REFUGEES 1975-1980

Interview of Mr. Tuyen Manh Ha, by Tuyet Kniering, 8/26/2002

INTERVIEWER: Today is Friday, August 26, 2002. I am Tuyet Kniering interviewing Mr. Tuyen Ha, residing at 24 Calder Street, Edison, N.J.

To begin, could you go back to the past and talk about your life in Vietnam, what town you came from and your family situation?

INTERVIEWEE: My name is Tuyen Minh Ha. I was born in Phan Thiet, completed the 9<sup>th</sup> grade in Phan Thiet. I started 10<sup>th</sup> grade in Saigon. Here I stayed in the house of a relative and went to a private school first. I got enrolled in Petrus Ky high school, currently called Le Hong Phong high school after I passed an entrance exam. It was a difficult exam, and only those who passed ranking from the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 5<sup>th</sup> could be enrolled. Petrus Ky high school was all free, its students were outstanding. They started learning English at the 6<sup>th</sup> grade, by 12<sup>th</sup> grade many went to the U.S., or France or Australia for higher education. My family was just middle class, we didn't have much resources, so I didn't have the chance to go overseas for further studies. I applied to take an entrance exam to the school of architecture, school of pedagogy, and the technical college of Phu Tho. I attended the private school Minh Duc for two months. I didn't pass the entrance exam to the schools of architecture and pedagogy. But I passed the entrance exam to the technical college Phu Tho mainly because I applied to enroll in a major with few applicants. I settled with studying industrial arts.

INTERVIEWER: When did you decide to leave Vietnam, and what were the reasons?

INTERVIEWEE: I was living in the community housing in Phuc Hung. I had an older brother who was studying in the school of pedagogy. We were getting ready for our second semester's exams in 1975 around March or April. A friend of mine came to visit and told me that the communists were coming and that we should leave or die in the communist hands. I didn't quite believe it and continued to go to school. Shortly after, a friend took me around passing the residential area occupied by Americans, and we found that it was all deserted. When we returned to our community housing, everybody was agitated by the news that the communists were coming.

INTERVIEWER: Could you talk about your experience escaping Vietnam and your trip to New Jersey?

INTERVIEWEE: We took a small bag, stuffed it with some packages of dry ready-to-eat noodles, and rode our Honda to Back Dang port. Here, there were two huge ships, crowded with people. The ships needed repair, and people were looking for someone who could repair the ships. My brother said something about being able to fix it, the people on the ships invited us to come on board saying that if we could fix them we would be allowed to have free passage. But I indicated that I didn't know much about ships, I only knew about cars. We went along the river, and while waiting, I got a ride on

a motorbike to go to my parents' house. They had evacuated from Phan Thiet to Saigon. They gave me three ounces of gold which I hid in the sole of my shoes, then I went back to Bach Dang port. I took a ride on a motor bike to district 5, and discovered a ship waiting. I got my brother to leave with me on this ship called Truong Xuan. When we tried to board, many people rushed to go on board, my brother and I just followed the crowd. A number of people fell into the water. I managed to get on one ship, but the ship didn't work. At that time, a few soldiers nearby had the radio, and we learned that the communists had arrived at the Independence Palace, and South Vietnam fell in the hands of the communists. After a while, the engine started, and we sailed out. After a distance, the engine died again. We were lucky to get pulled by another boat into the open sea. The engine of our ship started again. After a while, when we arrived in the international waters, the engine sputtered and stopped again. Fortunately, at this time the communists hadn't established control of the sea yet, so we were not pursued. The ship Truong Xuan floated in the ocean for 2 or three days with its cargo of 3 to 4 thousand people. It was a freight ship carrying merchandise to Singapore or Malaysia and East Asia. After three days at seas, we ran out of food. We brought with us only a few packages of instant noodles. After three or four days floating at sea, we came across a ship. Every body was excited. But someone on our ship was so happy at the prospect of being saved, he fired into the air, and the ship was afraid to come near to save us. At the end, we met a huge Swedish ship. The sailors on this ship noticed that many people were lying on our deck, they came to inspect and decided to save us, or else we would die. Since the ship was heading to Hong Kong, after they allowed us to board, they brought us to Hong Kong. It seemed the day we arrived, the Queen of England came to visit Hong Kong, and allowed us to stay in Hong Kong. We were housed in a military barrack in a small town near the border with China. We were provided with food and games. We were not allowed to work, but we could go to the market. We stayed in the camp until September or October when an official delegation came to check if we had any relatives in another country to sponsor us. We were lucky to have an acquaintance living in California who was asked to sponsor us. In all, I stayed in Hong Kong from April to October, almost 6 months. I left Hong Kong in October and arrived in the U.S. at the beginning of November.

INTERVIEWER:                      Who helped you to get settled in New Jersey?

INTERVIEWEE:                      We stayed in the refugee camp Indian Gap in Pennsylvania for a while when it started to get cold and snowy. A church sponsored us out. It was just me and my brother, so we stayed in the house of the sponsor. The sponsoring couple did not hold a high position, but they were very good to us. They had one son, one daughter and an adopted child with disabilities. Therefore, I highly respected and admired their charity. The first town I stayed in America was Middletown, a small town in Pennsylvania. During the two years I lived there, the sponsor rented a small apartment for us. Both I and my brother worked in a restaurant that looked like a diner.

INTERVIEWER:                      Did you have any difficulties in your life in America?

INTRVIEWEE: Although I studied English in Vietnam, and could read and write correct grammar, but I couldn't make myself understood. So working outside was an occasion to learn how to converse with Americans. In the morning, I took the bus to work. I remember one day it snowed terribly, but it was so beautiful. I worked the night shift from 10 p.m. to 6 a.m. because this restaurant was open 24 hours. My job was to wash the dishes and mop the floor before I went home. During that time, I improved my English with the cook, and learned about American fast foods. When I had free time, I read the newspaper (New York Times) I learned a lot from it, and I continue to read it today. I went to work for Olivetti, where I came across an incident that gave me the determination to go back to school. I was working next to an African American, about 20 years old. This guy provoked me and said that I worked without paying taxes. I couldn't stand his disrespect and arrogance, I hit him in the face. The boss penalized me by cutting my salary for one week, and made me and him shake hand to reconcile. After that, people stopped showing disrespect to me.

I graduated from a four year college in electrical engineering. I went to Houston with my brother to work in a small company called Haliburton. After six months, I couldn't stand the hot weather. I had some classmates who worked at AT & T, so I sent my resume and got an interview and then a job offer. I was hired in November 1981. I worked in Holmdel, N.J.

INTERVIEWER: From the time you left the refugee camp and arrived in American, what have you been doing to earn a livelihood for your family, and did you get married?

INTRVIEWEE: When I arrived in Middletown, I was 19 years old. I went to school and worked part time, and the sponsor occasionally took me shopping in the grocery store. I liked this quiet life, and stayed there for about 2 years. A year after my arrival, I got a job with Olivetti, the typewriter manufacturing company, on an assembly line. I then enrolled at the community college. I attended the community college in the morning, and worked in the afternoon from 4 p.m. to 12 midnight. There were several Vietnamese who attended school with me. After graduating from the 2-year program in the community college, I was promoted to become a technician. I was careful in my work and was very hard working. My supervisor liked me very much. When I applied and got admitted to Penn State's Capital campus, I had to quit my job and got a student loan to pay for my expenses.

While working in Holmdel, I was still single. I usually went with my friends to Philadelphia for fun. I met an acquaintance and former business associate of my family who invited me to visit his family. His family consisted of five children, the oldest daughter was 18 and in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. I proposed marriage and was accepted. After our wedding, my new wife, Linh, came to live with me and worked part time in a Chinese restaurant. I helped her enroll in Brookdale Community college. When she finished her studies she got a job with AT & T. We got married in 1983 and had our first child seven years later because Linh had to finish her studies. The first year, Linh's grandma helped us take care of the baby.

When I came to the U.S. I was 19 years old, and Linh was ten years old. We didn't encounter much of the language barrier. We both worked for AT & T, and life was comfortable. In my work, I interacted with Americans, but for leisure time, I usually hung out with Asians.

INTERVIEWER: What do you consider as success in your life in New Jersey?

INTERVIEWEE: After getting married, my first wish was to get my wife to finish school and get a job with AT & T. While I was working for At & T, I went to Rutgers University part -time, but the distance was far, so I transferred to Monmouth College..

INTERVIEWER: Since your arrival in New Jersey, did you meet any Vietnamese or Vietnamese families? On what occasions?

INTERVIEWEE: When I arrived at my job in 1981, I looked up in the phone book and met Mr. Liem who came as a student many years ago and who also worked for At & T. He was the first Vietnamese I met in New Jersey. I met others during the TET celebration. Life in New Jersey is good and comfortable.

INTERVIEWER: Since 1975, have you got the chance to go back to Vietnam?

INTERVIEWEE: I came back for a visit in 1995. I was away from Vietnam for 20 years, and my first impression when I arrived was that the Tan Son Nhat Airport looked the same as in the old days.

INTERVIEWER: Do you wish to go back and settle in Vietnam?

INTERVIEWEE: I don't want to live in Vietnam now, but maybe when I retire.

INTERVIEWER: Do you feel that you are a member of the American society? Do you consider yourself Vietnamese-American? Can you explain how you feel that way?

INTERVIEWEE: I have lived in the U.S. for a long time, and I consider myself an American citizen, although I don't vote regularly. I only vote in presidential election. I have two children, my son is 12 years old, and my daughter 8 years old. I enrolled them in the football and basket ball programs. I volunteered to help the teams and other activities. I want to contribute to the community, and I feel happy.

INTERVIEWER: Do you see any differences between Vietnamese and American cultures?

INTERVIEWEE: When I was in Vietnam, I learned about American culture, so when I came here, I could adapt to American lifestyle more easily than for older

people. I don't see too much difference. I like the fact that Americans are straight forward, and frank. But older Americans tend to have more mental problems.

INTERVIEWER: Do you have any advice for the young generation of Vietnamese-Americans in New Jersey?

INTERVIEWEE: In my opinion, the U.S is the most civilized advanced nation in the world. To succeed here, and to have a comfortable life, it is important to have an education. And most important, to choose the right area of study. Children should live with their parents until they finish college.

INTERVIEWER: Thank you for your time.