

Oral History of Vietnamese Refugees 1975-1980

Interview with Mr. Hoang Chuong, by Hoang My Huynh, 8/20/2002

Interviewer: Today is August 20, 2002, 10:30 a.m. My name is Hoang My Huynh. I am interviewing Mr. Hoang Truong. Please uncle, introduce yourself.

Interviewee: My name is Hoang Chuong. My address is 48 Martin Street, Metuchen, New Jersey.

Interviewer: Let's begin the interview. Let's go back to the past for a little while. Could you tell me about yourself, your life in Vietnam, your city, and your family, social status, as well as your profession.

Interviewee: I prepared some notes here because I tend to forget things. My hometown was Thanh Vu village, district Khe, city Quang Binh, in central Vietnam. I was born on May 31, 1924. I went to a local elementary school in Quang Khe. At the age of 15, I was sent to study to become a priest at the Pre-Seminary School An Ninh, in Quang Tri, then at the Seminary in Hue. In both places, I spent the years 1939 through 1950. After I graduated from the Seminary, I taught at the private school Binh Minh at Thien Huu Province, Hue, from 1952 to 1954. After that, I was drafted to join the officers' training class from April 1954 to October 1954. I graduated as a warrant officer. I served in the Republic of Vietnam's armed forces working in military training in the center for psychological warfare and other military schools. I was selected to attend a professional development session in psychological warfare at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, another training session for communications and press officers at Fort Lawson, New York for eight months in 1959. Upon my return, I worked as an assistant at the armed forces' radio in Saigon from 1961-1963. I was chief of the psychological warfare office in Region 4, Ban Me Thuot from 1960 – 1962. In 1964, I served in the headquarters of division 2 based in Danang. During my service in the Republic of Vietnam's armed forces, I served in many units, but most of the time I worked as a trainer teaching in military schools until my discharge in March 1975 at the rank of Major.

When the communists took over South Vietnam in 1975, they sent me to a concentration camp in Thanh Ong Nam, Mau Hoc Mom in June 1976 to July 1976. After that, they transported me to the re-education camp in the North at Hoang Lien Son, on the border with China from July 1976 to July 1979. I was discharged because I was near death with body swelling, and the communists didn't want to have dead prisoners in their camps, so they released me in July 1979.

Interviewer: Can you tell me how was your life and family in Vietnam and what kind of entertainment you enjoyed?

Interviewee: When I lived in Vietnam, I got married in 1953. In 1954, I was drafted and was sent to the military unit, my family was settled in one place, sometimes they followed me, and the place where we stayed the longest was in Thu Duc. Here, my wife set up a Shell gas pump in the university town of Thu Duc. As business flourished, my

wife built a house for our children. All our children went to school in Thu Duc from elementary to high school. A few of my children, Nga, Hong and Duc went to catholic schools run by both Vietnamese and American religions. My daughter Nga in particular went to Sacred Heart School in Vung Tau, following a French curriculum.

Interviewer: After you were released from the re-education camp, when did you have the idea of leaving Vietnam, and why?

Interviewee: When I was still in the North, I headed home and arrived in Qui Nhon when I had to stop because the connecting bridge collapsed. I was told that the government was not responsible to take me home to Saigon, and I was free to find my way home. I had a nephew who was studying in the seminary in Qui Nhon, and had become a priest. I went to search for him, and found him as the Reverend Hoang Minh Tam. My nephew, the reverend, found that I was very sick. He told me that in my sick condition, I would not be able to make it home alive, and he took me in to take care of me. He asked his congregation to help me with food and medicine to treat my swelling. After more than a week, I got better, and I wanted to go home. Father Tam helped me with a bus ticket. When I arrived in Tan Binh, a place formerly called Phu Loi, I made a stop. This is where my father still was living, and my mother just passed away a few months before. I went to visit my mother's grave, and went to my father's house to visit him. My father and I just hugged each other and cried. Something unexpected happened: without having the chance to inform my wife of my release, two days after I arrived at my father's house, I met my wife who arrived from Saigon on her monthly trip to visit my father to bring him some supplies and some money. When she saw me, in our discussion, she told me that I had to leave. I asked her where to go, she said I had to go over the seas to be safe. I asked what "going over the seas" meant. She explained that if I arrived at home in Saigon, my whole family would be sent to the "new economic" zone, because any family with a man had to be relocated to the new economic zone. She said either I took the risk, or I would end up dying here in Vietnam. I listened to her. After that, two days later, a distant nephew came to look for me. He told me ": Uncle, I want to escape by the seas with you."

I asked: "How do we survive escaping by the seas? Where would we live?"

He said: "Don't worry. When I am ready, I will take you along."

Only two days later, they were ready to escape. It turned out that they had prepared for the trip for two years, but they hadn't gone for lack of a good opportunity. Now that I was with them, they hoped that I could help them learn overseas, so they went ahead with the trip.

Interviewer: So at that time you decided to leave by yourself?

Interviewee: Yes, because if my wife went along, we had no one to take care of the children. So I went alone. At that time, my daughter Nga and her little boy Ti missed the previous trip, and I wanted to take them with me, but the owner of the boat wouldn't allow them because the boat was already overcrowded. Even for me, the husband of the boat owner allowed me to board, but the owner's wife didn't want me despite the fact that I was their relative because she didn't want to be responsible for the possible danger

for me due to the overcrowded condition of the boat. I tried to board the first time; she wouldn't let me on board. When I turned back, her son ran after me in water up to his knee, and called out to me :” Please go ahead, don't mind her!” I went back to board, and again she stopped me.

Interviewer: Pardon me, so you decided to leave alone. Can you describe your experience in this escape by boat, from crossing the sea to when you arrived in New Jersey?

Interviewee: My escape by boat was complicated and lengthy. I remember when I boarded my nephew's boat; it was July 14, 1979. We had to start in disguise while passing under the bridge that was heavily guarded by communist police. We pretended to be fishermen with a fishing net on board, all the children had to be kept quiet, a couple of parents had to give sleeping pills to their children to keep them quiet. We traveled at night, and after passing the bridge, we had to row for a while without the motor on to keep from being detected. By the time we arrived at Cam Ranh Bay, it was morning.

Interviewer: From what city did you start?

Interviewee: From Kilometer # six also in Cam Ranh area. It took us three hours, and if we sailed with the motor on, it would take half an hour. Since we were rowing, by the time we arrived in the bay, it was broad daylight. I told the boat owner that since we were supposed to be a fishing boat, it would be advisable to go along the coast, because if we headed to the open sea, we would raise suspicion and could get arrested. I told him to head south a little, and if everything was O.K., to move north and then going east. He followed the instruction. We continued for two days, and started seeing big boats. We were all feeling a little relieved...

Interviewer: How big was your boat, and how many people were on board?

Interviewee: The width of the boat is smaller than my size, that is if I lie across it, my feet would be hanging over the other side of the boat. The length is about 11 meters, or about 14 or 15 yards. There were 26 people, mostly women and children. I as an uncle to the owner, my sister, my sister-in-law, were on board. On the second day, we saw bigger boats, but we didn't approach them for help since we were not yet in international waters and we were afraid that they might be communist patrol boats. On the fourth day, we saw many ships, but none came to help us. I was afraid that the motor would get hot after four days of continuous operations and it might break down. So we decided to turn off the motor to let it rest. We had to put the anchor down, but it could not reach ground. I told my nephew: ‘ My God, this is not a safe place to anchor.’

“What are we to do?”

“We've got to repair the motor and continue moving.”

We started the repair, checked the water and oil level, pulled on the starter cable, but the motor wouldn't start. We opened it up, and with further inspection, we found a long nail about the size of a child's finger. Everybody believed that was the cause of the motor

failure. We removed the nail, pulled on the starter cable, but repeatedly the motor refused to start. We continued to try for more than a day and half. On the sixth day of our trip, still the motor failed to start. I told the group that our boat was small, the motor was useless, and we should get rid of the motor by throwing it into the sea. I consulted with my nephew, the boat owner, about the direction he wanted to head. He said he wanted to sail toward Hong Kong, where his own uncle Mr. Nhan and my daughter Nga's husband had previously succeeded in arriving.

Interviewer: You mentioned that you were at sea for six days at this point. During that time, with 26 people on board, how were the provisions of food and water?

Interviewee: Your question reminded me to talk about the food provision on the boat. The boat crew had prepared for the trip for a very long time to have enough food supplies for seven days. Usually, after four or five days, the boat people would be rescued at sea. On the sixth day of our trip, after failing to repair the motor and then throwing it into the sea, we still had some food, rice and some water. On the seventh day, we ran out of food. We came across several ships, but strangely, none came to our rescue. Later, after I arrived in the Philippines, I began to understand why. On the seventh day, we had three cans of condensed milk, in the open sea, on a small boat without a motor; we put up a sail to follow the wind direction. I recommended the group to use one can of milk per day, by diluting the can of milk in a big container of water. Each member, both adults and children, was given a bowl of rice with the diluted milk to sustain them. On the tenth day, I began to feel starvation, but somehow the air of the sea prevented me from fainting. On the thirteenth day, we ran out of water. We could bear hunger, but thirst is unbearable. Fortunately, thanks to the grace of God, it rained. We used all the containers on the boat to collect water for drinking. On the fourteenth day, we also ran out of rainwater.

Interviewer: Did you know what ocean you were sailing?

Interviewee: Sure, I knew I was on the Pacific Ocean, that I learned from my geography lesson.

Interviewer: Were you anywhere near a country?

Interviewee: I knew that if we continued East, we would arrive in the Philippines, or if we headed north we would arrived in Hong Kong. I knew that we couldn't move north because of the direction of the wind, without a motor, we couldn't go toward Hong Kong, instead we had to go toward the Philippines.

I told the group: "I know the Philippines had several thousands small islands. If we missed one, we would find another. If the island is inhabited, we can land." So, we continued the trip with the wind. On the thirteenth day, we ran out of water. To alleviate the unbearable thirst, I led the young men on the boat jump into the sea to get wet to allow some humidity to absorb through the skin. For women and children, they were told to scoop seawater to pour over their body for skin absorption. We labored to bail out all the seawater used on the boat. Our boat floated along with the wind into the fourteenth, fifteenth, then sixteenth day, hunger and thirst were constant. On the boat, there were

two seminarians who recited prayers every day, but on the fifteenth day, they were so exhausted, they couldn't say their prayers out loud, but prayed quietly in their hearts. At that point, everybody was losing hope. But in this extremely difficult moment, the wife of the boat owner who originally tried to prevent me from boarding the boat, became very sympathetic to me. She said : "We are really in dire straits, please, uncle, have pity on us and pray to Jesus Christ to save us sinners."

I responded: "Don't say that, I love all of you."

I tried to comfort her, and we continued the trip. On the seventeenth day, I couldn't move my body out of the boat cabin, my sister in law was also lying in there with a few children. The younger men with some strength stayed outside to watch for ships. While I was conscious, I counted about 42 passing ships. Whenever a ship approached us, at a distance about 100 meters, I told the women and children on our boat to bow to them and showed their empty food containers to indicate that we were out of food and begged them to save us. The sailor of the ship made some hand signal. I read in Chinese character the name of the boat something like Dai Du, and didn't know if it was a ship from Hong Kong, China or Taiwan. Anyhow, they didn't rescue us, we had no choice but continuing on our way. During that time, we even saw a submarine. Mr Cuong, a young man on our boat called me: " Come see, Uncle, what kind of huge fish this is! It has a huge tail!"

I looked and realized it wasn't a fish, but a submarine nearby, and we tried to avoid it. At that time, it was afternoon. A half hour later, a helicopter hovered nearby. I guessed that perhaps the submarine notified that there was a refugee boat to rescue. But the helicopter hovered about us for about 20 minutes, and I guessed perhaps they would send a canoe to save us. By night fall, nothing came, we continued on our way. On the seventeenth day, I was "bedridden" in the boat's "cabinet", along with my sister-in-law and the children. Suddenly, Mr Cuong, the young man who was still relatively strong and worked very hard, called me out: " Uncle, please come to see, something is looming like a mountain top."

I told him: " I am so exhausted, I can't look. If you guys, young men, with your sharp eyes, observe the cloud or mountain for about 15 or 20 minutes. If it doesn't change its form, it's a mountain. If it changes its form, it's the cloud." I just told them that based on logic. At eight o'clock in the morning that day, Mr Cuong told me: " Uncle, come look again. I found that the looming block didn't change its shape, but it got a little bigger."

I managed to look, and hoped that it was a mountain, so that we could continue to head its way. But our boat didn't have a motor to guide, so we floated with the wind until 5 p.m., that was from 7:30 a.m. that day till 7:00 p.m., we started seeing trees. I thought it was either a mountain rising from the sea, or the land mass of the Philippines. I told the crew to get the sail up, and used our hands to row to get the boat quickly to land. But that didn't really work. By 7:30 p.m., we missed the first island, I continued to have hope. In about 15 minutes later, another island appeared. It was evening time, we tried to land on this island. It was a moonlit night, so we could see our way. We managed to get near the shore, but the waves were very strong. I told the boat owner how to control the waves. Based on my maritime experiences, when the waves were sideways, we had to go straight, otherwise, the waves would break us. On our fourth attempt, the waves brought us onto a huge boulder, and when they receded, our boat was on a huge dry rock table. I began to

assign tasks to everybody. The six men were put in charge of the sick children, the women had to help themselves. I was in charge of a little boy, whose name was Khoi. By the way, Khoi at the end flew to the U.S. and completed his studies very well. I told Khoi to ride on my shoulder, then, I walked off the boat into the water which turned out to be deeper than my knees. Other people followed me. But unexpectedly, the receding waves pulled me down, I hit against a boulder. I felt pain, touched myself and felt blood. I knew I was injured. I told the little boy Khoi to hang on, so I could stand up when the waves and water receded. In the meantime, the wife of the boat owner yelled: "Uncle is drowning! Uncle is drowning! Somebody help!"

A young man, Huy, came to save me. He yelled: "Uncle, give me your hand, give me your hand, give me your hand!" He was still very strong; he pulled me back on the boat. When the boat managed to get to shore, everybody went off, children first, and then the young men sorted our belongings and pulled the boat ashore. It turned out to be a Filipino rubber plantation, and coconut plantation. In the moonlight, we saw a lot of coconuts on the trees. We spotted them immediately probably because we were starving. We assumed that if we stole a few coconuts to tide over our hunger, we would not be sent to jail later. A couple of us went to some trees nearby to climb up to get the fruit. An hour later:

"Where are the coconuts?"

"We climbed up about one third of the length of the tree, we had to go down, because we were so exhausted and the tree was too tall!"

We decided to gather coconuts that had dropped on the ground, and ate the good ones to recuperate from hunger. After finishing seven or eight juice coconuts, the young men discovered some short coconut trees that they could climb. By the moonlight, they spotted the fruit, and after one hour, they brought back hundreds of coconuts for everybody to feast on.

Interviewer: After you arrived at that island, how long did it take for you to be brought to the refugee camp?

Interviewee: On this island, at that time we met nobody. We started a fire to signal for help as well as to keep warm and to dry our clothes. After prayers, we went to sleep about nine o'clock that night. I was the first to awake the next morning at about 8 a.m. I woke up everybody for the Morning Prayer. When we were almost finished with our praying session, from a distance, a woman approached with a dog on a leash. I first finished my prayers, then I walked toward the woman who saw us and stopped. I told my group not to follow me in case she was afraid and I went toward her. When I was about 10 meters from her, she turned around with her dog and moved away. I looked back and saw the two seminarians behind me. I told them that because of their following me, the young woman probably was afraid. They withdrew, I continued to follow her. When I almost reached her, I asked in English "do you speak English?" She shook her head; I continued to follow and repeated the sentence very slowly. She slowed down and answered: "I only speak Tagalong." She must know English since she answered in English. Most Filipino people speak the local language, Tagalong. I followed her, about a kilometer, up and down a hill, when I addressed her again; she spoke English fluently, and told me she only had two younger brothers, and that they had a cornfield that they

protected from thieves or animals. She invited me to a house on stilt, like our montagnards' house. She told me to sit at a bench, went to the kitchen to bring me a large dish of corn, and told me to eat. I thanked her, and I was ravenously hungry, but my folks were also hungry, so I asked her permission to take the food back to share with them. She said O.K. When I went down to go, I found the two seminarians had followed me closely. After we turned away about 20 meters, she called us back, and gave us a package of 10 kilograms of rice. I was so happy, and hurried back to my group near the bonfire. I must say the Filipino people were very charitable. On the way, I met a young Filipino man, who spoke English very well. I greeted him, and he cheerfully said: "I have met your group over there. Please go and join your group. I will be right back and will get you in touch with the local government to help you since you are refugees." An hour later, he came back with 10 kilograms of rice. Since he saw that we were hungry, he gave us a total of 20 kgs of rice, and told me to cook for the group. We finished eating around 11 a.m., and we asked him to help us contact the local authorities.

"O.K. let's go." I followed him, and the seminarians followed me. They liked to follow me wherever I went. I was very touched, because along the road, the Filipino people demonstrated a lot of compassion and charity, despite the fact that they were poor, I was offered foods at every coffee shop, every food stall. I was full, but I accepted the food. Down the hill, we arrived at the village chief's house. The Filipinos called a village "barrio". The village chief was very helpful, very nice, like all the Filipinos. He asked me a few questions, and wanted to know where was the rest of my group. He then made a telephone call in the Filipino language which I didn't understand. Then he said: "Alright, now you can take me to where your group is."

When leaving his house, we found a big group of Filipinos, young men, and women, who came because the chief announced that there was a boatload of refugees. They went to my folks, carrying pots and pans, and carried us on their shoulders. The chief arranged to put us up in an elementary school for nine days. I couldn't imagine how nice the Filipino people were to us. To date, I have continued to send monetary gifts to those who helped us that day, including the village chief.

Interviewer: You are still in touch with these people?

Interviewee: Yes, there is a Filipino priest whom I met in the refugee camp, and who came over here, now living in New York. During our stay in the elementary school, they had teams who would come to visit us in the morning, noon, afternoon, and evening. Each team consisted of from three to six people who brought us clothing, rice, and medicine.

Interviewer: Your boat was very fortunate, wasn't it?

Interviewee: We were lucky beyond imagination. We thought we would die 100 per cent, yet we survived. I requested the village chief to help us contact authorities in the refugee camp to be processed for resettlement in other countries. He said: "Don't worry, I am contacting the authorities."

After nine days, a navy bus came to pick us up. We couldn't bring along the donated rice, so we asked to return it. We were processed to be admitted to the refugee camp, Tara, where there were already a number of Vietnamese refugees. Upon my arrival, I was asked to become the camp leader. I told them: "You see that I am not in good health, I can't work as a camp leader. When I regained my health, I would be glad to serve."

I suggested holding an election to elect a camp representative. It turned out that everybody voted for me. I accepted the responsibility. After two months managing the camp, I told the Filipino chief of the hardship caused by the lack of water supply; supplies coming from outside the camp were sporadic. I suggested digging a new well, but we dug very deep and found no water. I asked him to change the location, since this location is difficult without water. I was allowed to join the United Nations representative and the Filipino chief to look for a new location in Bataan. This facility later became the Refugees Processing Center. Here, at the beginning there was nothing in terms of housing. We cleared the forest to establish the camp. When we moved into the new camp, a large group of Vietnamese refugees arrived from somewhere. At the beginning, the camp population was about 800 people. Seven months later when I left the camp, the number increased rapidly to about 11 thousand. This center received refugees for processing from Hong Kong and Thailand before they were allowed to resettle in a third country. I applied to move to the U.S. After eight months, I received my papers to go. My daughter was in the camp with me. Even though she couldn't escape at the same time, she managed to arrive in the Philippines. When she heard that a camp representative was called Hoang Chuong, she believed it was me, her father. So, she asked for help from a nun, sent by the Vatican to help refugees, to look for me. She arrived by boat when I was meeting to organize the camp. I divided the camp into villages, each headed by a village elder. A priest or monk was assigned to religious duties for each group. Here, the young men tended to get frustrated and got into fights. One time, three young men fought each other, and beat a Filipino policeman. I was called often, even awakened while sleeping, to mediate.

Interviewer: During your stay in the camp, you were interviewed by delegates from third countries who accepted refugees. How long did you have to wait from your interview to your departure to the U.S?

Interviewee: They interviewed me in February 1980, and I was allowed to leave for the U.S. in April. I requested to have my daughter Nga accompany me. So, she and her two-year old son left with me. Even though I didn't have any identification papers, at the end I was allowed to immigrate to the U.S. When I escaped, I had nothing but a pair of shorts and a ragged tee shirt to disguise myself as a fisherman. When I arrived in the U.S. people donated a lot of clothes.

Interviewer: What state did you go to?

Interviewee: I first flew to Washington state. From there I arrived in Newark before coming here to Metuchen. When I was in Vietnam, my brothers and my family recommended New Jersey, so here I am. When I came for my studies, I spent two semesters here in New Jersey. I found "younger brother" (chu) Thong who has been here

for five years. When he arrived in 1975, at that time, there was no refugee resettlement program. It was very difficult, and people had to rely on the assistance of the church. I arrived unexpectedly, and Thong cried when he saw me. He took me, my daughter Nga and her Cu Ti, to his house. I contacted also my brother-in-law Huy, who was teaching at Saint Johns University in New York. He had been teaching there for more than ten years. He came to provide some assistance, and found a sponsor for us, whose name was Mrs. Zimmer. I still maintain contact with her today. We exchange greeting cards every year.

Interviewer: When you arrive in New Jersey, you had some relatives helping you, then the local church assisted you, therefore you decided to resettle in New Jersey.

Interviewee: Yes, that's correct.

Interviewer: In New Jersey, what did you do to earn a living for your family?

Interviewee: The first two months I stayed with "young brother" Thong who took care of everything for me. He looked for a church sponsor, by the local church where he lived, but this church already exhausted the number of sponsors. My brother-in-law, Huy, from New York introduced me to Mrs. Zimmer who found a church sponsor for me in Wayne-Peterson. In August, 1980, I moved to the new parish. Here, the church parish had a refugee resettlement committee. One committee member found housing for me, one was in charge of looking for employment, another helped with transportation. The first few days, we were accommodated in the house of a parishioner.

Interviewer: You mentioned that they helped with job placement. What kind of job did you get?

Interviewee: A church member, Mr. Mario Rosemini, who was a vice president of Chase Manhattan Bank. He knew that I knew English and some French, so he referred me for an interview. I ventured to the interview, even though I never worked in banking. When the interviewer asked me about my banking experiences, I honestly replied that I had no banking experience. However, if the bank needed a French speaking person, I could help. They said the bank needed English speaking employees. I gave up and went home. When I saw Mr. Rosemini, he asked: "how was the interview and any results"? I told him I gave up because I didn't have any experience in banking. He told me to try again. He gave me a letter which gave me a chance for a second interview. I told the same story about my lack of banking experience, but he gave me a job. At the beginning, I worked in the coupon department. After one year, I was transferred to the money market department, and I continued working there for ten years until 1991.

Interviewer: Did you encounter any difficulties in your work life?

Interviewee: No. When I was sponsored by the church, they took good care of me. They even opened a bank account for my family besides providing housing and food. After I started working for the bank, and was a little more established, I asked to move

down to Metuchen to be near relatives. They allowed me to take the bank account which had two thousand dollars. I retired from the bank in September 1991. While I was working, my daughter Nga got help from the parish to go to college. She finished two years, and went to work for the same bank through the assistance of Mr. Mario Rosemini. After two years working, she finished her four-year degree; she went to work for AT & T. She got a Master's degree and along with her husband, worked for AT & T, and later Lucent Technologies, until they retired.

Interviewer: You said your daughter came here, went to college and then got a job. While she was in school, did you feel that she became too Americanized?

Interviewee: No, my daughter Nga has a son, Cu Ti, who was sent to kindergarten, and she took care of him. Wherever she went, she took her son with her, always taking good care of him as well as the family. I don't think she was Americanized, for the reason that when she left Vietnam, she was an adult, married. She was escaping with her husband Duc, but she arrived late for that trip. Consequently, He went to Hong Kong, and she arrived in the Philippines. She found me in the Filipino refugee camp, and went with me to the United States.

Interviewer: Living here, have you had to change your life style or customs to adapt to American life?

Interviewee: My family situation was a little different. I came to the U.S. without my family. Meanwhile, my wife at home continued to send our children to escape. I was worried that when my children continued to arrive, we wouldn't have any housing to shelter them. I consulted the church and my brother in law Thong. They helped me find an apartment as housing for my children when they arrived, particularly, Thong's house was too small to accommodate everybody. My daughter Nga and I rented this apartment, big enough for four persons, but eleven of us lived there. It was crowded, and every time my grand son, Cu Ti took a bath, it was too noisy. The neighbors couldn't stand it. At the end we had to move out. The housing solution was to buy a house, but I didn't have any money. With the help of Mr. Sharlow, a local attorney, we found a house. The church donated 2 thousand dollars, I had two thousand dollars saved from my bank job. The total cost of the house was \$60,000, with a down payment of \$12,000. At the end, the church loaned me \$4,000 through a bank loan at the interest rate of 11/2 percent. I paid the interest to the parish.

I promised the parish church that with my job in the bank, I would pay back the debt. Later, all my children arrived, went to work, and helped pay back all the debt.

Interviewer: Your family is very fortunate.

Interviewee: Very fortunate. For the love of Christ, God has set things right for us.

Interviewer: In terms of the English language, you didn't have any difficulty. But did you find any difficulty in adapting to American life?

Interviewee: In later years, many people have gotten Americanized. When I first arrived, there were very few Vietnamese. There were my family and my brother-in-law's family. I don't think we were Americanized. My children continued to listen to parental advice and guidance

Interviewer: In your daily interactions, how did you find Americans? Were they nice to Vietnamese? Have you got any close American friends?

Interviewee: I must say I am grateful to Americans. After a short time here, I realized that Americans are very open and casual, in addition to being charitable. They helped me without ever mentioning it. On the anniversary of my 20th year in America, I threw a party inviting all of my sponsors in the parish and other community members. At the party, they were all happy that all my children, especially my daughter Nga, had jobs, owned houses. They never mentioned that we owed it to their assistance.

After the ceremony at the party, the parish priest called me aside, gave me an envelope with 300 dollars as a gift for me. I almost cried, thinking of their generosity and how they had helped us during our initial hardship. Later my family returned the envelope with the money when the parish priest retired. We owed it to him with a loan of 4,000 dollars to enable us to buy our first house.

Interviewer: You have had very good experiences with Americans and their assistance. Do you participate in any American community activities?

Interviewee: At the beginning, I couldn't help in anything. When I got more adjusted, I was all consumed with earning a living, rather than participating in anything. Occasionally, I was invited to a few community meetings, I came but I couldn't volunteer because I didn't have the time. After moving here, I started helping organize the Vietnamese Catholic association in Metuchen, and I became its president. Bishop McCarick officiated the group as part of the Diocese of Metuchen. He was newly appointed. I and my brother-in-law Thong, came with a bouquet of flowers to pay respect to him. He met with us, and became very fond of my family, he introduced us everywhere. Thanks to the parish, we bought the house for my children. You see, the former owner had a basement which I converted into four bedrooms, totaling seven bedrooms in this house. All my children stayed in this house. When they all finished schools, got jobs and moved to their own houses, in 1986, my wife was allowed to come on the ODP (Orderly Departure program). She came as an ODP immigrant, not refugee, while the rest of us escaped as boat people.

Interviewer: During your stay here, what kind of success have you got in your life in New Jersey?

Interviewee: I wouldn't dare call it success, but we owed a lot to the assistance of American people who helped my children in their education. When we lived in Paterson, my daughter Nga was the first to attend college. Americans helped with driving her back and forth to school. Other babysat her children in kindergarten. I was helped to work in the local bank, and in the evening, we, father and children got a roof over our heads to be

together. The Americans were very dedicated in their help. I am very grateful to them, and yet they never mentioned or reminded me of what I owed them.

Interviewer: Your family got settled well thanks also to your guidance of your children so that they finished their studies and became successful.

Interviewee: It's partially true, but it's my children's efforts. They were grown when they came, and they had absorbed the Vietnamese values. Otherwise, I would have no time for them here. My son was around 12 years old when he came. Now, he's married with two children.

Interviewer: Do you meet with other Vietnamese, and on what occasions?

Interviewee: I interact with a good number of Vietnamese families. In New Jersey, there are not many Vietnamese, but in Metuchen, there is a good concentration of Vietnamese. Many are my relatives, almost 200 people. Each year, we have two big celebration, one is the anniversary of my father, the other is that of my mother. All the relatives and children congregate to celebrate, we have to rent a restaurant or a club to accommodate all.

Interviewer: Your family is really large. Have you got a chance to go back to Vietnam? And would you like to go back to live there?

Interviewee: I haven't come back to Vietnam because all my children are here. Moreover, I am getting old, with loose teeth and blurred vision, I don't want to trouble people with my health problems, so I haven't gone back. But my wife wanted to visit at least once, because when I went to prison and then left Vietnam, she still regrets losing our two houses in Vietnam. One house near a big gas station, that has two stories and seven bedrooms. Another house was located on Hoang Dieu Street, rented to Americans, a total of 28 American tenants. The communist government confiscated the properties when we left.

Interviewer: Do you plan to go back and live in Vietnam?

Interviewee: No, I don't want to live in Vietnam, particularly because all my children are here. My wife and I plan things in advance. She even bought a space in a mausoleum to make sure that when we die, we have a decent burial space, near a chapel. She got it for ten years now. I didn't want to do it, my concern is for my children, but I ended up buying it too to make her happy.

Interviewer: Do you feel that you are truly a member of the American society? Or do you feel that you are a Vietnamese American?

Interviewee: In fact, my soul continues to be Vietnamese. I can't become American because I came here when I was much older. Although, in the past, I came to study in the U.S., I like the American life style, the spirit of liberty and civil rights, and especially the kind of help they provided to my family, I still can't live like an American, for the simple

reason that I am deeply Vietnamese. I advise my children to encourage their children to learn the Vietnamese language, to speak it often to get used to it. As we are of Vietnamese origin, we need to support Vietnamese. A number of the children/grandchildren were born here, but when my wife took care of them they were obliged to speak Vietnamese.

As a Vietnamese living in America, I think we have to be responsible to reciprocate the fact that thanks to the American government and other charitable organizations that we got jobs, that our children completed their schooling. Sometimes I told my children, by way of comparison, that if the Americans came as refugees to Vietnam, the assistance probably would not last more than three months, not because as a country Vietnam is poor, but the poverty is in the level of charity. I am very grateful for the help we get. Here, I interact a lot with the Vietnamese community. At present, I am getting old, driving becomes more difficult. The other day, the community asked me to join the parade, but I went home because I was afraid of getting lost.

Interviewer: Do you see any cultural difference between Vietnamese and American cultures?

Interviewee: There is a lot of difference between the Vietnamese and American cultures. Our (Vietnamese) culture tends to focus only on the family, we take care only of our families, whereas Americans take care of society. They help the disadvantaged, the poor, they establish charity organizations like the Red Cross, other charity and sponsoring agencies that helped us. These are set up out of charity,

Interviewer: Do you have any family photo or souvenirs you can share with me as documentation?

Interviewee: When I was in Vietnam, I had a lot, particularly because I was head of the Psychological Warfare Office. When the communists came, I lost everything. When they came to take over my house, I had burnt or buried all, and I left with two empty hands.

Interviewer: I mean photographs or souvenirs of your present life

Interviewee: Plenty. My children took pictures of all occasions.

Interviewer: I would love to have the photograph of your 50th wedding anniversary. If you need it, I will make another copy for you. My last question is whether you have any advice to give to the younger generation of Vietnamese in New Jersey and the U.S?

Interviewee: I would not dare give advice to the young generation. However, I have some observations. We Vietnamese, particularly the younger generation, are very intelligent in academic endeavors, but we are not equal to others in inventing things. We follow the school training and excel. For example, like in my family, all my children follow the family tradition in excellence in school. In the old days, my parents were very poor and illiterate. They saw that other people sent their children to school, they wanted

us to follow suit. Schooling is one way to help our parents to take care of our siblings. In my family, I was fortunate to follow through with my studies, my younger and oldest brother did as well. The rest of my siblings could complete only the lower elementary level in the village. I was sent to study in the local seminary, then the regional seminary. When I had had enough foundation, I passed the Baccalaureat, then the Bachelor's degree, and taught at the Binh Minh School until I was drafted. I had time in the army to study both Eastern and Western philosophy. It was not difficult because I had a good background. Once, I attended a class, and the professor told me: "you know a lot, you can teach, you don't need to learn anymore."

I replied: "No, I am just a student." The fact was that in the seminary I was taught both Eastern and Western philosophies, all in French, but very much in depth, therefore, I had enough knowledge to teach. I taught for two years, then was drafted into the Military Officers Training Academy in Thu Duc, and stayed in the army until I was caught by the communists when South Vietnam was lost. I believe that my schooling has helped me in my life, both economically and socially. I encouraged my children to continue their studies, as compared to many American youngsters, they are fluent in English, but they don't want to stay in school.

Interviewer: In your opinion, the younger generation should be educated to improve their knowledge and to help make their lives easier?

Interviewee: Vietnamese youngsters are known to excel in school, I have to admit. More than a month ago, I read in the Vietnamese language paper, that the percentage of Vietnamese with a college education is the highest, higher than that of the Chinese. Among the Asian immigrants, the Vietnamese hold the most number of college degrees.

Interviewer: This interview is completed here at 12 noon, and on behalf of the project, I thank you for your time.

Interviewee: Thank you. I may miss a few things, since my memory may betray me with some details, particularly specific dates, for example, the 20th of the month, I may say the 18th, but they are not too far apart to be totally inaccurate. My children remember their stories very well, particularly my wife because she was the one who organized everything. My family did well thanks to her organizational ability.

Interviewer: Thank you. It's true that Vietnamese women are known for their dedication to their husbands and children.

Interviewee: She worried too much about us.

Interviewer: Thank you very much

Interviewee: Thank you too