

Oral History of Vietnamese Refugees 1975- 1980

Interview with Mrs. Vo thi Thu Lan, by Hong Simon, 8/27/02

INTERVIEWER: My name is Hong Simon. Today is August 27, 2002, 6:30 p.m. Here is my interviewee. Please tell me your name and address.

INTERVIEWEE: My name is Vo Thi Thu Lan, residing at 14 Sarah Court, Edison, N.J. 08817.

INTERVIEWER: Let's go back to the past a little. Could you tell me about your life when you were in Vietnam, your town, and your family.

INTERVIEWEE: In Vietnam, I lived in the town Tuy Hoa, district Phu Yen. When I was young, I went to the semi public school Truong Vinh Ky where I completed four years of junior high school. Since my mother died, my father sent me to a catholic school run by the nuns. I then went to Trung Vuong high school in Qui Nhon. After three and a half years, I changed my mind and went back to live with my father. I got married one year after that. While I was in the catholic school, I helped with teaching young children. After I got married, I worked as a bookkeeper for an American cooperative. I worked for only a short time. When my first two children arrived, I stayed home to take care of them. In 1975, due to the fact that South Vietnam was lost, my husband escaped to the island of Guam. I was eight months pregnant and stayed behind with my four children. We were practically homeless because our house in Tuy Hoa was confiscated by the government. We moved to live with my in-laws in Cam Ranh, Nha Trang. I stayed with them for a while. But their house was located in a rural area, and I didn't know farming. So, I moved away to do some commerce to earn a living for my children. My earning wasn't enough, my children were still very young, and my husband . . . well, I didn't know where he was. A year later, I got news that he was in Guam, but he returned to Vietnam, yet I had no idea where he was. About 12 or thirteen months after that, the district police came to deliver a letter from my husband in which he said he was OK, he wanted to have news from me and the children, and he asked me to send him our photo. I sent him our photo and a letter via the police. Several months later, I was allowed to visit him. It seemed that was the last time I saw him. Due to difficult circumstances, the authorities did not allow frequent visits. I managed to send him food supplies via the post office. I lost contact with him after one year. Perhaps the police had taken him to the North. In the meantime, I had to find a way to survive by doing some commerce. We couldn't make it very well. One of my children was sick, I didn't have money to take him to a doctor or buy medicine for him. I had an idea of sending my child to escape by the sea hoping that if he arrived in another country, he might have a doctor to treat his illness. I sent off one child, and stayed behind with four other children, waiting for my husband to be released from prison. Life became extremely difficult after about 2 years, I couldn't visit my husband who was in the prison in Hanoi (North Vietnam). I couldn't have any money to make the trip, and my children were still very young. I thought about our desperate situation, life without a future. I decided that I would accept the risk of escaping, and the pain of leaving my husband, my motherland behind. Of course, I love my motherland, but for life and the future of my children, I decided to leave.

INTERVIEWER: Could you tell me about your experiences leaving Vietnam and your escape by sea as well as your voyage to New Jersey?

INTERVIEWEE: Once I made up my mind to leave, I asked my in-laws for permission. They didn't want to let me go because my children were still very young. They told me to send the children who were sick, and that I should stay to wait for my husband. But I didn't see much future for my children. I decided to leave, and I was willing to accept all the heartbreak of having to abandon my husband, my parents, siblings, and the motherland. I was very sad, but I had to go in search of a better future and life for my children.

Around July 21, 1979, I heard that the families of my husband's uncles were getting ready to escape by sea. I went to meet them and asked them to take me with them. They agreed. I was so happy, I put a cash deposit with them. We left Vietnam around noontime on July 21, 1979. Our boat was pretty big with a capacity for 100 people. The two uncles allowed only a total of 87 people. To get from my house to the port and the boat, I encountered some difficulty from people who looked like coastal guards. I gave them some money and they allowed me to pass. When we arrived at the shore, it was getting dark. The five of us, mother and children, went to wait at the edge of the beach. At the beginning it was dry. As time passed, the tide began to rise, first up to my abdomen. Then to my chest. My youngest son was only barely three years old, I carried him on my shoulder, I carried the twins with my two hands. By the time the water reached my chest, the twins were almost submerged. I carried the eldest on my hip. It was so dark, one couldn't see anything beyond 3 or 4 meters. There appeared three young men, I didn't know who they were. They asked me where I was going. I was afraid to say anything, feeling fearful and desperate. They asked me "Are you going to escape by sea?" I didn't dare say anything until they asked me "whose boat are you taking to escape?"

I answered: "I don't know whose boat. I just came back from the new economic zone. I was miserable. I heard tonight there was a boat taking people away, I took my children hoping to leave to find foods and a better life for them."

They stopped asking questions, and some guy who looked like a member of my uncles' team came to lead me to a small boat. My uncles came to meet me and these guys who questioned them: "Are you taking those people to escape?"

After talking to them, my uncles told me: These guys wanted to make some money. You need to give them some money or else they will notify the police to catch us."

I had some cash and gave it to them. They left. I carried my children onto the small rowboat which took us to a motor boat. We went on the motor boat into the open sea where we boarded my uncles' big boat. The boat pulled anchor at about 1 or 2 o'clock in the morning. I had never known the sea, but I could just guess that we managed to sail into international water by sun rise, and I became conscious that I was still alive. But there was a lot of anxiety and uncertainty, because we didn't know how calm the ocean would be, or where we would land. Luckily, my uncles knew how to navigate, heading towards the Philippines island. When we arrived in the vicinity, we didn't know which island was inhabited, we looked for seaweed and coconut leaves floating in the sea. Our

boat came to a small island, and people there signaled us to come up. We were afraid that they were pirates. So we did not go there. We encountered the next island which I think was called Cota, where we saw four Filipino coastal guards. We were not sure whether they were not pirates. The uncles told the women and children to stay below deck, and let the men deal with these men. These men put their hands together to bow to us, Buddhist style, and invited us to come ashore. When nobody moved, they made a sign of a cross, and showed that they were not armed. My uncles and the men on our boat suggested that the men come ashore first, while the women and children stay below deck. One of our men was able to translate and he explained that these men indicated that they wanted us to go ashore. There were many islands, if we continued our trip, it would be dangerous because of stormy weather, and we would get killed. After that, the uncles and our men called the women and children to disembark. We were quite fortunate, because it took us only three days and three nights to get to the Philippines. We completed our landing by about 3 or 4 o'clock in the afternoon. On my uncle's boat, there remained two barrels of cooking oil, one bag of rice and two water containers. On this island, there were only 25 Filipino coast guards. After two days, there was a big storm. We built some tents to protect us on the beach. In the next couple of days, the storm was over, we were relieved to see that we were still alive, we were not dying. We ate a lot of rice gruel, morning and evening, since we had to feed 87 people with one bag of rice. The weather wasn't stormy, but very rainy. The Filipino coast guards got in touch with the mainland for supplies. However, the supply plane or boat couldn't land due to the bad weather. We ran out of food after one week. The coast guards had to feed their 25 men, they helped us a little, but they were also short of food supplies. We ate some green beans, then we went to catch turtles and clams, and pick greens for foods. Eating turtle meats and without rice, a lot of people couldn't take it, they got diarrhea. It was miserable. After a couple of weeks, the weather got better, we got supplies dropped from the plane. Life got a little better, and our spirit improved. We roasted the rice to cure diarrhea. In about a month, we got some medicine to treat it. Several people contracted stomachaches, diarrhea, eye problems. Thanks to the supplies dropped by airplanes, we got foods and some medicines. About two months later, when the stormy weather improved, a Filipino ship came to pick up all 87 of us and transported us from the island Cota to Balawan. We passed many islands which were very beautiful. The weather in the Philippines was hot like Vietnam, but the islands were all beautiful. In Balawan, after a couple of weeks I was interviewed by an American official and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees. Since my husband was sent to the communist reeducation camp, I was authorized to go to the U.S. From the time I got the authorization to when I left for the U.S., I had to stay in Balawan eight months. During that time, to improve my financial situation, despite the assistance from the refugee authority in food and other necessities, I did some business such as tailoring to get more food for my kids. After 8 months, we were transferred to Manila where the U.S. Embassy processed our papers to go to the U.S. I had to wait four months before I flew to the U.S. We came straight to New Jersey. It was October 18, 1980, and it was thanks to the sponsorship of my husband's uncle who is Mr. Hoang Thong, currently residing in Metuchen. When I landed, my first thought was both sad and happy. When I found my uncle, I hugged him and cried. I knew then that I and my children were alive, have some support and we were in good health. But I was so sad that I had to leave my country.

INTERVIEWER: How long have you been in New Jersey?

INTERVIEWEE: I came straight to New Jersey from the refugee camp, and I have stayed on since.

INTERVIEWER: Did anyone help you to resettle in New Jersey?

INTERVIEWEE: The first days we stayed in the house of my husband's uncle. After two months, he took me to the refugee resettlement program of the U.S. Catholic Conference to obtain assistance. USCC gave me \$350. I registered for welfare assistance, and received \$650 for my children. With that financial assistance, if I continued to share the living quarters with my uncle's family, I might manage. However, his house had three bedrooms, he had 10 children totaling 12 people in his family. Added to that, myself and my four children, there was not enough room. But he and his wife continued to try to help me. I and my children lived in a small room in the basement. I stayed with them for two months. I felt unhappy because of the very crowded conditions. I asked my uncle to help me find separate housing. He went to the church to ask for help. Since my children were still very young, the youngest was three and a half, and the oldest was only eight, the church group felt that they couldn't sponsor us. My uncle really wanted help to get some housing for me near him, so he could be back and forth to help us. He went to Paterson, about one hour from here, to get the church groups to help. There were three churches who expressed an interest. At the end due to my situation, they felt that they were not capable to sponsor my family. I was discouraged. At the end, my uncle decided to rent a house to accommodate a friend's family of eight children. I and my children got one room, the rest of the house including the living room was for this friend's family to use as sleeping quarters. I felt a little more comfortable with this arrangement. Once I moved into the new housing situation, I wanted to find a job to keep busy so that I wouldn't feel homesick, as well as to improve my children's lives. The welfare office wanted me to stay home to learn English, because they didn't want to have to pay for babysitting for me. At the end I was allowed to go for a trial period. If it didn't work out, I would have to go back to study English.

INTERVIEWER: In New Jersey, what kind of work have you done to earn a livelihood for yourself and your children?

INTERVIEWEE: I got help from a cousin who introduced me to a job despite the fact that I didn't know English. His boss was a soldier in Vietnam, who was sympathetic to Vietnamese. In the job interview, I could barely speak anything but hello and how are you. On my job, I encountered some difficulty due to the language barrier. My boss had to use hand signals to tell me what they wanted. Slowly I learned on the job and from co-workers. I used the dictionary to learn new vocabulary. I worked there for 8 years, from 7 p.m. to 7 a.m. I wasn't used to sleeping during the day, and I cried, but I accepted the hardship. After two months on the job, my welfare payment was cut. I was determined to continue to work. My work shift is 12 hours long, alternating one month day shift, one month night shift. At the beginning, I relied on acquaintances to pick me

up and drop me off. I had to pay them for the transportation and pay an aunt for babysitting my children. After my 12 hours shift, at home I tried to earn extra by ironing sheets. One year later, I decided to move in with my uncle to be near my children's school. That was the hardest period. After work, I couldn't sleep in the basement because the children were noisy, I had to sleep in the car. Sometimes, the children played too noisily, I had to drive to another relative's house to find a quiet place to sleep. I managed to save four thousand dollars, and I dreamt of owning a house to have a quiet place to sleep.

INTERVIEWER: Did you encounter any difficulty in your life in New Jersey?

INTERVIEWEE: When I arrived in New Jersey, I encountered many difficulties. First was the language. I never had the chance to study English, so my English was nil, and I had to go to work to earn a living for my children. The second difficulty was the work shift that alternated one month day shift, one month night shift. I didn't have enough sleep. After a night shift, I couldn't sleep during the day. So every night I had about 2 or three hours of sleep. In addition, when I came home, my children were small, so I had to ask for help to take care of them. When I lived with my uncle, I got them to help. Later, when I got a house, I asked for help from others. For example, my children met this couple, whose names were Ed and Helen. They loved my children. They had met Ed and Helen a couple of months before. One day, on a holiday, they met me, and invited me to their house. I couldn't speak English, but I could understand their affection for my children. At their house, they invited me to eat sandwiches. I couldn't eat, but made an effort to eat to please them, since they were very nice to my children. When I bought a house to have some place to live, I had no curtain nor furniture. They got curtains from somewhere, and hung them up for me. My uncle gave me a table with two chairs. My other uncle gave me a table with loose legs which wasn't sturdy enough to serve dinner at. I had to use string to tie them to strengthen the table. One day, on the way back from work, I saw a neighbor throw away a chair, I took it home for my dining chair. Another time, Ed and Helen got a dining set donated for me to keep in the dining area. I relied a lot on the emotional support of this couple. Even though I didn't know much English, they managed to understand me, and they taught me a few sentences here and there. I also learned and practiced with co-workers. Despite my lack of English proficiency, in the workplace, whatever vocabulary related to the machines I operated, my co-workers helped me to learn. They loved me and were sympathetic that I had to raise four children by myself. They taught me sentence by sentence. If I didn't understand some words, I used the dictionary. I watched TV and read the newspapers, and used the dictionary to decipher new words. So I learned quite a lot. After work, often Ed and Helen invited me over, and they practiced English with me. They were so nice. Since I bought the house to date, I have always kept close contact with them. I met Ms Hong who was a friend. Her brother was a friend of my husband in Hanoi. Her brother introduced me to Hong, and we made friends. I was very sad because I didn't have my parents, and brothers and sisters here, but I was lucky to have good friends such as Ed and Helen, and kind co-workers who helped me to improve my English. I also have some Vietnamese friends such as Ms. Hanh, one of my best friends, who is a relative from my husband's family. My best friend is Ms. Hong. I and Hong meet often

on holidays, Tet, or weekend. We would go out together, and she was a source of consolation for me to forget about my sadness and hard life. My only dream now is to have my husband released from prison to come over here to reunite with all of us and to give me a hand in raising our children. I pray every day for my husband's release.

INTERVIEWER: Have you been back to visit Vietnam?

INTERVIEWEE: I have gone back to visit three times.

INTERVIEWER: Would you like to go back to live in Vietnam?

INTERVIEWEE: No, I only like to go and visit my relatives. All my children are here. They are all American citizens. I wouldn't want to go back to live there, I just want to visit.

INTERVIEWER: Do you feel that you are a member of the American society and that you are a Vietnamese-American?

INTERVIEWEE: I think that currently I hold American citizenship, so even though I am Vietnamese, with my nationality, I am obviously a member of the American society. I work like all Americans, I pay taxes, I am like an American.

INTERVIEWER: Do you see any cultural differences between Vietnam and the U.S.?

INTERVIEWEE: I see some difference between the two cultures. I like the liberty allowed in American society. It's more comfortable. I like the American lifestyle, but I don't care for its educational approaches in raising children. In the Vietnamese culture, there is the saying something like "spare the rod, spoil the child". Vietnamese people feel that to educate children, parents can spank, yell, punish the children in order to train them to be good, obedient, respectful and willing to study hard. In the American style, the parents cannot spank their children, and children are free to do whatever they want. So, American children are not well trained as Vietnamese children. I prefer the educational approach of Vietnamese. Parents have the right to advise, spank, punish their children, not out of hate but out of love to get them to succeed as decent human beings. In the old days, my parents spanked me for misbehavior in order for me to study and work hard. I owe it to them for my better days today. Thanks to them, I learned a little foreign language, and I have the fortitude to teach myself and work hard to rise above difficulty to raise my children to this day. In the American society, the parental authority was not strong, and the children are not obedient to their parents.

INTERVIEWER: Do you have any advice for the younger generation of Vietnamese?

INTERVIEWEE: I just hope that our young people living on the American land of liberty will make an effort to preserve the Vietnamese culture and tradition. In the Vietnamese tradition, there is always mutual love and support, as well as obedience to parents. These are elements that form decent human beings. I would advise young people to study and preserve the Vietnamese language and culture to pass it on to the next generation. Our culture and language have depth, and immense love expressed in parental love, that strengthens the families. In the American style, the children have too much freedom which dilutes family ties. I don't mean to criticize the American way, but I don't like its child rearing approach. Even if we love our children, we should be able to discipline them. Imagine, when an American child turns eighteen, that young person can move out. That is not good because living with the family, the young person can save money for the future when he/she gets married.. I would advise young people today to follow our tradition. It's good for the future generations.

INTERVIEWER: Do you have any photos or souvenirs that you would like to give to this project for documentation?

INTERVIEWEE: I have a couple of photos, but it was with my husband, not with my children.

INTERVIEWER: So you don't have any documents or souvenirs to donate. Thank you very much for your participation in this project.