

Name of Interviewer: Michelle Ly

Method of Recording Interview: Digital audio

Language of Interview: Vietnamese

Location of the Interview: Friendswood, Texas

Date: February 9, 2008

Search Key Words: Immigration, Pride, Deception, Hopelessness, Adapting to America

Name of Person Interviewed (or pseudonym): So Bo Ly

Relationship to the Interviewer, if any: Father

Name **Transcript Translated from Vietnamese**

00:01

Michelle: Describe the journey and any obstacles you may have encountered.

So: My name is So Bo Ly. After the communist government took over South Vietnam, we could not do things at our own will. So I had to find my way to escape from the communists so I could do things as I pleased. I waited until the year after I married my wife in 1977. I wanted a good future for my child so I decided to escape. In 1978, I went into hiding with my family and was eventually caught and imprisoned. After a couple weeks, the women and children were released. I was held back for six months during which I could not understand why I was still in jail. When I was finally released, I learned that my family refused to provide the money and gold in order to have me released and that's why I remained in jail. The day I was released I was confused as to why I was released yet no one from my family was at the jail to pick me up. Since I was being released I gave all my money and belonging to the friends I had made in jail. I only did this because I thought my family would be waiting to pick me up when I was released. Once I was released and did not see my family waiting for me I had to walk home because I had no money to pay for a cyclo*. Not only did I not have money but I also did not have any shoes because I had given away both to the friends I had made in jail. I only had the clothing on my body. I managed to run the distance home only to find that my house was empty and no one was there.

(02:35) I asked one of my neighbors where my family had gone only to find that they had left to escape. I was in a complete state of confusion because my family had not relayed any of this information to me and I had no idea where to begin to look for them. After asking some more of my neighbors I found that one of them knew the location where people were meeting before escaping I went to this location by foot in the hot sun. I did so much walking and running around bare foot that day that my feet were all swollen and blistered up. The entire time I was running to the bridge where everyone was meeting to wait for the boat to escape, I still could not figure out why people were meeting at this location or how people were going to get to escape. Once I arrived I found that each person was either paying with money or gold in order to secure and register a spot on the boat. We loaded into smaller boats that would take us to the larger boat that would hold about 300

people and would take us to escape. (04:02) At this time my wife had just had a baby girl (a month or two old). Since I was in jail, I didn't know the exact age of this tiny little baby girl but she was my little girl.

(04:14) It took us a day by small boat to get to the bigger boat. After a day or two on the big boat somehow we managed to be going in the wrong direction and the captain did not know how to get back on track to Malaysia. Eventually, we ran into another boat and thought that the other boat could provide us help only to find out the boat was full of pirates from Thailand. These pirates raided our boats and took all of our gold and money and everything. They caused a ruckus all over the boat. But then they let us go, they didn't cause any harm they just wanted our valuables and they left.

(05:22) Our boat continued on for another day or two before the boat was raided again by Thai pirates. This time around the pirates rummaged much more for valuables than the first time around. They caused all sorts of trouble and they pushed people around to try and find valuables. As if twice wasn't enough, our boat was ransacked a third time. The third attack was during the night and everyone on the boat was much more scared this time around. The pirates shone bright lights on our boat and were much more forceful than the previous two attacks. They demanded money and gold or else they would not leave. The people who did still have valuables hidden gave them up, just so they would leave already. These pirates did not get as many valuables since the boat had already been robbed two times but eventually left our boat. We floated the seas for a couple days before we were back on the right track and were able to see land. Once people on the boat saw land, groups of people began to jump into the water to wade into shore to find out where we were. We did indeed reach Malaysia.

(07:59) The army let us come to shore temporarily and provided us shelter, food, and water. They allowed us food to eat because we were on the boat for many days and we did not have enough food to eat. They let us stay there but we didn't know what to do or what was going on: they gave us food, we ate, we got water, we drank, we just didn't know. The actual time we spent there is still up in the air since we did not have any means of tracking time much less the days and weeks we spent there. We ended up staying there for about two or three months before we were relocated to another area. The Malaysians took us to the new area by car. We did not know where this new area was but it was not far from where we were coming from. They told us it was no where far, somewhere close by.

(09:30) At this new camp, they were still providing us with shelter, food, and water. We stayed here for about another three months and then at this time we were told we were going to another camp. The navy loaded us back onto our original boat that we came on and they towed the boat back to sea. Once we were at sea, the navy demanded that we provide them money for getting us to another Malaysian island. We gathered what little we had and gave it to them only to have them cut the rope the boat was being towed with. We were left just floating at sea. The motor of the boat had been broken over the months it was left ashore. The boat continued floating and floating to where the sea would take us. We had limited food and water that we had brought onto the boat but these supplies only lasted a few days. While in Malaysia, some people had hidden food and water and eaten only enough to not be starving in order to save and bring with us on the

boat for the small children but even this did not last long. The adults had no choice but to be thirsty and hungry.

(12:42) At this point we had been floating at sea for ten days. A few men volunteered to go look for help. We just floated along, hoping for help to arrive. We kept looking for other boats and waiting for help. A few days past and still no sign of the men returning with help. People on the boat began to die from the conditions. The first was an elderly lady and we had to throw her body over because we did not want the boat to begin to smell. For the children, adults had saved water for them to drink. People were beginning to come to desperate measures in order to stay alive. Some were drinking their own urine just to stay hydrated while others were just soaking in the sea to feel hydrated. We were thirsty, and wading in the water helped. It was still not the same as hydrating your body. It just made you feel better and to help you survive, but there was no nourishment for your body.

(14:40) By the fifteenth day, a giant boat managed to rescue us. It was storming and raining that day. This boat was really big, I don't know what kind of boat it was but it was really big. The giant boat let down a rope and sent people down to our boat to ask us who we were and why we were floating in the middle of the ocean, and we told them our story. After hearing our story, the giant boat agreed to tow our boat to safety. Once we began to be towed, the storm had worsened causing the water to be so choppy and it was so windy that even fish were being thrown into our boat. The people on our boat were becoming very afraid since there is a superstition that fish flying onto a boat is very bad luck. So many people were gathering the fish that landed on the boat and throwing the fish back into the sea to prevent the fish from dying on the boat. By the next morning the storm had cleared and we could see land. The giant boat cut us free and told us to go into shore to ask for more help. Everyone began jumping off of the boat and running in to shore.

(17:30) Once on shore, we asked some locals where we were and found we were in Indonesia. They called the Indonesian army to see if we would be able to stay. We stayed there for along time however we were not provided food and water. It was not like Malaysia, people here did not help us or give us any food. People in our group had to go out into the jungle and search for food. Some people even went and found jobs to get money to buy rice and fish to make soup and just any food to get by. People were beginning to get sick but did not have money to buy medicine. Money was tight and people were stealing money and there were people fighting. There was just lots of trouble. My daughter ended up getting very sick here and passed away because we did not have access to doctors or medication. She was only about nine months old. [gets a little choked up, but strives to continue] I also got sick from drinking the water. Others were sick with various illnesses. We were only here for a few months but it was such a hardship. It was so difficult, 2 or 3 people even died.

(21:30) Luckily after four months, a French boat that was going from port to port looking for refugees came to where we were. They could not understand why no one had come to where we were and began to bring the sickest people onto their ship. After realizing that most of our boat was sick he decided to tow our entire boat to safety. He treated all of our illnesses and allowed for us all to bathe. We were given food and medicine to help us get over all the illnesses. Once we were

healthy, we were released into the new camp he brought us to. But those who were still really sick stayed on the boat until they felt healthy. I was fortunate to regain my strength after being rescued and having access to food and medication. This new camp was also in Indonesia but was specifically used for refugees. It was still hard; we were provided the bare minimum for survival. Some people began to seek work in order to buy clothing and other food. Although I was better I did not have enough strength to go work and relied on what food was provided by the government. My wife was able to make various pastries and sold them for money so that we could have money to buy food and things. I also was able to make sandwiches to sell on the weekends. With this money we were able to go buy chicken and noodles. We were just living day to day. While we lived here we were able to take classes where we learned English. In our free time we went to learn English, but it didn't stick and we just didn't know. [giggles at the thought] We were just trying to get by and waiting to see when someone would come and take us to freedom.

(25:30) After a couple months, we found that America had begun the refugee interview process to select persons to come to America. Since we did not have an occupation in America we were not on a prioritized list. People that knew someone in America did also have an advantage. One of my oldest sisters was already in America, but we did not have any contact information for her. We did not have this contact information because she left only a few months before we left Vietnam. My sister had been writing back to Vietnam to ask where we were, but we did not know of her information. Telling the Americans that we had a sister in America but we did not know her contact information was next to pointless. They said we need a phone number, contact information something, but we had nothing. If we had children, it would have given us priority, but we lost our daughter, so we had nothing. We were one of the last people to leave the camp. Once we got to Singapore to wait for our flight to America we found that my sister in America was able to get someone to sponsor our family over.

(29:29) We arrived in Salt Lake City, Utah. We handed over the information my sister had provided us to the representative picking us up from the airport who contacted the sponsor to ensure that they would take the family in. We stayed in Salt Lake City for a night. After the representative got all of our paperwork done, we boarded a small-propeller plane to Logan, Utah where my sister was currently living. When we first arrived in America, we were very unfamiliar with the modern amenities America had to offer. People had to show us how to purchase drinks from vending machines or even how to use money. The first night in the hotel in Salt Lake, we didn't even know how to turn the water on to bathe much less make the water hot or cold. We didn't even want to bother with it, we were scared. [laughs at his own story] Simple things like using the toilet were foreign to us because we did not have these things in Vietnam. In the morning we boarded the plane to go to Logan. The sponsor provided a home for our family to live in and renovated the house so there would be enough room for all of us. There were six of us that came, my three sisters, my mother, my wife, and me. Plus my sister that was already living in Logan was there with two other sisters. Our sponsor said he would build some rooms in the basement to provide us with a little more room. We all lived in the same house together and managed as we could. My sister had to show us how to use the shower, toilet, and other things

that we did not understand because in Vietnam we didn't have things like this. It took awhile but we got used to it and slowly started picking up on things.

(33:58)

If was difficult at first because we did not know English. We went out of the house and we didn't know how to get around but we could not ask for help. No one knew how to drive and we had no car. If we wanted to go anywhere, near or far, we had to walk. Even going to buy food we had to go walk to the store and walk back with all the bags of groceries. It was very difficult. We had very little money at first. The sponsor told us not to worry about it and gave us some money to get started. He allowed us to pay as we got money. He said just worry about buying food and things and don't worry. You can live here and just pay as you can. He provided us many things such as a sofa and television. Although he bought it from stores where it was used and they refurbished it, he was still nice enough to provide us these items. It was much better than not having the items at all. He even found our entire family a job at his place of work, a sewing factory. All of us with the exception of my very old mother, who could not possibly work, began to work in the factory. We all had to learn how to sew the items the factory wanted. Even those who knew how to sew in Vietnam had to learn here because the things in Vietnam are not made like the things in America. We had to learn and just did as we were taught. We started at \$3.10 an hour and were all part time because there was just not enough work for us to be full time. We made enough to get by and pay for necessities. Our sponsor did not make us pay rent if we could not make it. It was not free but he allowed us to pay what we could. He said we could pay later. In a week, each person probably made about \$50-60 a week. After a month, the factory did not need us to work. Luckily my sister took care of us until we could find other work.

(39:40)

Another factory opened up soon after that. It was a factory that provided seat covers for car seats. We all started working part time and eventually made it to full time. In the beginning we were working at an hourly rate of \$3 and eventually went to working on a per item basis which calculated out to more than \$5 an hour. We had to work harder and faster to make more money but we were happy with this. It was at this point and this job that our lives began to look upward. Up to this point we had to rely on others to pick us up and drop us off every day because we had no transportation of our own. Other Vietnamese that worked with us and came over here before us were able to take us to and from work. Each family was allowed to have one person to obtain a drivers license first. Since I was the only male, I was chosen by my family. On a whim I also went and bought a car, that way I could take the whole family to and from work since we all worked together. From then on, I drove the family to and from work. Things were difficult at first, but over time we got used to how life in America was. We were able to make money, survive, go to work, to drive, to have money, and how to get by, pay rent, bills, electricity, heat. That is how life is in America. You have to manage your life to survive; it is not handed to you

(44:01)

After a year of living in America, we were able to get into a government program which helped immigrants purchase homes at a cheaper price. When my wife and I heard this we were excited. We managed to put \$2,000 down on a \$48,000 home. In this program, the government would pay half of the mortgage payment. Say, if your payment was \$600 then you would only pay \$300 and the government would pay the remaining \$300. It was fortunate that the area had

other immigrants that came over before we did so they were able to steer us in the right direction of doing things to be like Americans. We had to learn how to be an American and to live like and be like the Americans here. After living in the home for a little more than ten years, my wife and I had enough money in the bank and wanted to just pay off the entire mortgage, just pay all of it right now. Now this was our house. We even remodeled the basement and we had three kids. After coming to America we had our second girl, then our boy, and then our baby girl. My three kids [giggles] living in our house. Our living standards had greatly increased at this time and we were finally getting used to things.

(47:16)

A few years later the factory we had been working at all these years closed down. My wife said now's a good time to move and decided to move to Texas in 1993. We sold the house and were not at a loss. We sold our house in Utah and we purchased a new home in Texas in 1994. The following year my wife passed away. At this time, I was not sewing anymore I was working in a retail store called Burlington Coat Factory. After my wife passed away, I went to cosmetology school and now I took care of my three kids on my own. Cutting hair was good for me and then in 1999, I decided to get my license to open my own salon. Now, two of my kids have graduated from college and the youngest is in college, which is good. I have built a life here and I am very thankful that I was able to come to America to improve my life.

(49:48)

*Cyclo- bike/carriage thing where someone else peddles you around