

Interviewer: Teryn Phan

Method of Recording Interview: Audio

Name of Interviewee: Mai Phan

Location of Interview: San Antonio, TX

Date of Interview: March 12th, 2008

Relationship to Interviewer: Mother

Name	Transcript
Teryn:	What's your name Mom?
Mai:	My name is Mai Phan.
Teryn:	So, how old are you now?
Mai:	I am 44 years old.
Teryn:	Ok, and how long have you lived in the United States?
Mai:	27 years
Teryn:	So when you were in Vietnam... how long ago were you in Vietnam? It was twenty some years ago?
Mai:	27 years ago
Teryn:	Ok, and I guess where did you live in Vietnam?
Mai:	I lived in Da Nang.
Teryn:	Is that a pretty big city in Vietnam or is it a smaller rural town?
Mai:	It's a big city but it's not like Saigon.
Teryn:	Ok, is it around a lot of water or did you ever go to the beach and stuff like that? Just I guess tell about your childhood in Vietnam and what you did when you were younger?
Mai:	When I still in Vietnam I still at school and we just live not too far from the beach. We can driving there by bicycle... around 20 minutes. And I have a wonderful life when we live in there.
Teryn:	So when you left Vietnam how old were you?
Mai:	When I start left Vietnam in 1979 in November

Teryn: How old were you then?

Mai: I was 16 years old.

Teryn: What made you leave Vietnam? What were some of the reasons you left?

Mai: After the war in 1975 and they start in 1978 and they believe in... there start the Communist and everybody want to leave the country because they start like very control. When we don't have enough food...and working and everything we need. That's why everybody left.

Teryn: So, at 16 years old could you tell that your life changed after the war or did you see any changes in your family? Did your Mom have to work harder or get more jobs just to support the family because you have a pretty big family right?

Mai: Yes, my family, my Mom had 8 children and when the war start and everybody like have no job. And we all start moving different city. Then, we all left where we live in Da Nang then we went to a little... my grandparents have a little farm in Cam Rang.

Teryn: So you had to leave and kind of escape to your grandparent's farm. And did that change your whole lifestyle, like did you go to school there or what happened?

Mai: Yeah after we left we have no school and we just keep helping my Mom and my brother sisters all like... we had the farming working like we have the big labor truck and we have the rice mill and we do all the work and just surviving for everyday.

Teryn: Was your Dad with the family then? I mean, I'm not sure did he go to the farm too or where was he?

Mai: Some of them, like one of my brothers, work and went back to Vietnam and he stay in the old house in like Da Nang and all of us most of them like move into my grandparent's farm and we all working there.

Teryn: I guess... just some things that we want to know about your escape to the United States. So, who did you go to the United States with? Who did you leave with cuz you didn't go with your whole family right?

Mai: When I left in Vietnam in 1979 in November, me and my sister just know one of my friend and they introduce. We all go together like about 5 people. And we start take the bus and we left Vietnam to the Cambodia border. And then we stay there for about two weeks. After that, we you know, keep finding somebody to get to Cambodia and we stay in Cambodia like just everyday we have to find a way to get to Thailand.

Teryn: So you first escaped to Cambodia on a bus or was it on a boat.

6:00

Mai: Bus.

Teryn: On a bus?

Mai: Yeah.

Teryn: So after you stayed in Cambodia... how long did you stay in Cambodia?

Mai: Almost 1 month.

Teryn: Ok and that was just with your sister and a few friends? Were they all the same age as you... you were 16 you said? How old were the other people?

Mai: Some of them around 30 some of them around 25 and some of them around 40.

Teryn: Was it hard leaving with just your sister or I mean, you know, did you ... were you scared at all or did you miss your parents? Did you have any contact with your mom?

Mai: Yeah, when we left, like we are not sure where we are going but like one of the [pause] surgeon? And he used to like have a war, a war in Cambodia, that how he say he know how to get to Cambodia and we just follow him.

Teryn: And were you, did you write letters to your mom or anything during this time or did you get to talk to her at all

Mai: No, after we left we have no contact at all until we get to the refugee camp.

Teryn: Ok so after Cambodia you stayed there for a month and then your whole group went to Thailand from there? Or did you try to go to Thailand? Where was the next stop?

Mai: Oh it's not everybody we go together but like when we get to Cambodia we all like separate and some of them get caught and the police send back to Vietnam and only me and my sister so lucky and we know one of the like... Cambodian people and they so nice and they bring me and my sister you know go back to his house. Like went to his house ten stay there for like a week and he just know how to get to Thailand border. He can drive all the like... some tractor and just follow him and just get to the border of Thailand.

Teryn: Was it scary... did you see the people getting caught? Like when they were caught in Cambodia, did you see the police catch them or like how was that for you, being 16 and seeing all of that?

Mai: In that time, lots of people been kidnapping and get lost and some people like don't know where they going. Most of them they went back to Vietnam like we so lucky and we follow the person and take us to the Thailand refugee and that's how we get there.

Teryn: So after you got to the Thailand refugee camp, what happened there? How were you treated or who did you stay with?

Mai: When we get to the Thailand refugee, and they had the Red Cross they interview you and ask you who take you and how you get here and they ask a lot of questions and we just answer them you know, how we get there and some of them get missing and some of them can not follow all the people to bring them to the refugee and they all get lost.

Teryn: So the Red Cross was nice to you? They were like helping you or were they like...

10:00

Mai: Yeah when we in the refugee and first they just starting like the camping like the tent they use the plastic like the raincoat, how you say.

Teryn: The plastic.

Mai: Yeah, the tent like you're camping and we live there like we stay in the floor and we just have all the vinyl plastic to you know. Everyday the Red Cross they bring you some food they cook the whole camp and it very difficult when we live in there.

Teryn: This is in Thailand? So, they fed you and everything or were there a lot of people sick? Were there people dying or anything? Or was it just really hard?

Mai: Yeah, when you live in there if people get sick and some people die in there too but they allow you have how much, you know lunch, and they give you lunch and dinner and in the camp like 2-3 family. In one camp is very crowded

Teryn: So, who were the people you stayed around? What type of people were they? Were too...

Mai: Some come from Vietnam and they escape like me and most of them is Cambodian. That's how you know when the war in the 1978 the Cambods, all the people get the war over there and all the Cambodians get killed. 2 million people in that time, and most of the people have no house and when we get there and some of them Cambodian they refugee too and they waiting for the paperwork and get to another country.

Teryn: So how long did you stay in Thailand for?

Mai: Almost 2 years.

Teryn : And was it the same conditions? Like you stayed in the same tents and just ate very little food the whole time for two years?

Mai: Yeah, at first we live in the like vinyl tent then after for a while we transfer to a different camp and they start like all the Red Cross people they bring like all the material. Bring all the wood and for the refugee they build a big camp just like one section they have like 2-3 family in a section. It's almost like 2,000 people in the same camp.

Teryn: And the whole time you were still with your sister right?

Mai: Yeah.

Teryn: When you finally left Thailand where did you go from there?

Mai: We live there for like almost one year and we left to another camp called Transit Center. Like that time you already have the paperwork and they interview you and you can go to America... United States. Then we have to transfer from the war camp to the Transit Center camp and almost waiting for 1 year.

Teryn: Then who sponsored you from America?

Mai: First, my uncle they left Vietnam before us, they went to Columbo in Malaysia and they have a refugee camp there in 1979 and they get to America in 1980. And that's how they get to America first, and they sponsor me and my sister.

Teryn: So, you came to America in what year?

Mai: In November 23rd 1980.

Teryn: So the whole time you still hadn't spoken to your parents at all. When was the first time you spoke to your mom after you escaped?

15:00

Mai: Yeah, when we live in refugee you can write the letter and every week the Red Cross people would bring you mail. They give you two envelope and you can write and they bring you mail and send to your family. We can contact with mail.

Teryn: So how come it was just you and your sister that escaped? How come none of your brothers did? Like why didn't your mom let them go?

Mai: Because in that time, my sister just know one of her friend and they just introduce us ... just you know we go with them, just me and my sister.

Teryn: Did you want to leave or did your mom make you?

Mai: That time a lot of people want to left Vietnam we just want to do exactly like what happened.

Teryn: Ok, so after you stayed in Thailand for two years you flew to the United States? Did you go on a plane?

Mai: Yeah, we flew on a plane. First they flew us to Philippines and they have a camp there and we have to waiting for another paperwork from United States and we have to study over there and get ready and they teach you ESL school in the Philippines.

Teryn: How long did you stay in the Philippines for?

Mai: 6 months.

Teryn: What kind of language lessons did they teach you? Was it an American that taught you or was it like a Vietnamese person?

Mai: Filipino teacher and they teach ESL.

Teryn: Did you think that helped you a lot when you came to the United States or...?

Mai: Little bit. Just not much we can speak just a little bit.

Teryn: What kind of things did they teach you? Like your name and how to say...wait what kind of things did they teach you how to say, or did you just try to write and stuff too?

Mai: Yeah they teach you how to make American/English like, "What's your name; what is this," all little basic language.

Teryn: After you came to the United States, how was your experience in the U.S.? Was it a shock to you or was it really different from what you expected?

Mai: First, we just came to United States like we can have welfare and the government pay for you like 300 dollar a month and me and my sister just went to school from there. Like the community.

Teryn: Community college?

Mai: No, like community church school.

Teryn: So, when you first came here you stayed with your uncle right? Your uncle and his family? Was it like an apartment or a house or was it cramped?

Mai: My uncle sponsor me and my sister here we live in a apartment only have 2 bedroom and very crowded. Like he have 9 children and total is 11 people and me and my sister is 13 people in the apartment.

Teryn: Where was this? What city and state was this?

Mai: In Sacramento.

Teryn: Sacramento, California? So what did you first do besides going to the community church school when you first came here? Did you get a job or what did you decide to do from there?

Mai: We just help my uncle and they just bring the you know, sewing and we can help them sew make shirts and make some money.

Teryn: So that's his job in California, did they all work for the sewing company or factory or something?

Mai: Yeah, sewing factory they sew all kind of dress and blouse and trousers

Teryn: So what did you do after that? I know you moved right... afterward to Reno, ,Nevada.

Mai: Yeah after almost one year, and we have to looking for a new job that's how I move from Sacramento to Reno, Nevada.

Teryn: So, your first job was sewing at the factory.

Mai: My first job in sewing in the factory in California.

Teryn: So, you and your sister decided to go to Reno or was it just you?

20:00

Mai: In that time we had a friend from Sacramento and we went to Reno, Nevada and she have a job first, and we just stay with her when we get to Reno, NV

Teryn: So it was both of you... you and your sister? Or did you just go on?

Mai: Yeah, both.

Teryn: So, in Reno what did you do there? Was it hard for you to stay with friends? What was your experience...?

Mai: At first, we looking for the job and we start the job. We cleaning the house and you do it all like clean the hotel and do all the casino job. Like you can do bus boy and bus girl... and I am the one like clean all the hotel and clean the room.

Teryn: You worked at the casino hotel? Is that the MGM hotel?

Mai: Yeah, it's MGM hotel.

Teryn: So how long did you do that for? I guess what were some of your memories of working at the casino hotel?

Mai: Everyday we have to follow the... we waiting for the people go work the same place and carpool. And from 1982? Yeah.

Teryn: So was it were you just living with friends at the time? How many of you were staying in the same place?

Mai: We rent the apartment like have two rooms around 6 people in the same apartment.

Teryn: Was it hard for you...were you getting better at English at the time? What was the hardest thing about living in a different country and trying to work your way through?

Mai: Always very difficult and have to try hard and work everyday.

Teryn: Did you experience any racism or anything of the sorts with managers or co-workers at the hotel? Or did you work with a lot of Asian people too?

Mai: Yeah, in that hotel we have a lot of Asian people and they very nice... we work together.

Teryn: That's good. Well, I guess so after that you went on to have me after that. Kinda know what happened after that, you met dad at the hotel right?

Mai: When we work together we both met each other in the same casino and we live not too far from different apartment and we all met each other.

Teryn: That's good. So after being in America for twenty some years, like what do you think, how do you think your life is here than in Vietnam?

Mai: Now we are very successful and my husband he have a really good job. We all got a good life, and we thank you for can get to America and glad to live in America.

Teryn: Do you sometimes wish you stayed in Vietnam or been with your family longer because I know a lot of your brothers and sisters didn't come over until really recently. How hard is that after not seeing them for a long time and then bringing them to this country?

Mai: After we live here and we can sponsor them and ten years later now most of my brothers sisters live in California. They all very successful.

Teryn: I guess when you see people who come from Vietnam, even today what do you think would be your advice to them on how to survive in a different country? What's something you wish you would've known when you first came here that you would want to tell them?

Mai: Keep working hard and you will have everything you want to do and that's how you survive.

25:00

Teryn: Do you ...I know a lot of people including you, did nails for a living. And you were like a nail manicurist and things like that so I guess just, is that

something you ever saw yourself doing? Or did you just kind of pick that up and go with it, your job?

Mai: Most of the people you can learn so fast from when you doing manicurist and you like it. Everybody working and they make very well... very good money and that's how they like the manicurist job.

Teryn: That's good. So I guess just going back since there's a little more time, what are some things you find funny about when you first came to America and you just didn't really know, but now you look back and it's a funny experience that you had. What did you think were things that really stood out in your memory about America? I know you talk about riding the roller coasters at Disneyland or eating Big Mac at McDonalds or something like that or seeing a burger for the first time. What are some memories like that that you have?

Mai: First, when I first come to America, and my cousin they bring us to McDonald and we don't know, " What is McDonald?" and after we eat and total different and very special.

Teryn: So, it wasn't like anything you had in Vietnam now or...

Mai: In Vietnam they don't have McDonalds like hamburger French fries and they all have different when people over there eat lots of vegetables and seafood they all different foods.

Teryn: Just to wrap it up, I guess why do you think, how do you think you've benefited from coming to the United States, and things that you would want your children to remember about Vietnam and going back to Vietnamese culture and things like that?

Mai : I want my children to go back to Vietnam with me and see all the different cultures in Vietnam and hopefully you know and they will learn what Vietnam culture and eat all different kinds of Vietnamese and some of them is different and some of them is very very spicy and taste different.

Teryn: I guess as far as some, are you a citizen now, when did you get your U.S. citizenship?

Mai: Five years ago and I get American citizenship.

Teryn: Did you have to study hard for the test or was there something that you weren't familiar with on the test or that you didn't know about the United States?

Mai: They all have like hundred questions and you study and when you get to there they interview you and it's very, very hard to get into the citizenship.

Teryn: So, how do you feel now, do you feel any different just being a United States citizen or is pretty much the same?

Mai: When you be a United States citizen and you have very, very easy to get everything to go out to get a passport or you can go out to do something like all the contract paperwork more easier.

Teryn: You haven't been back to Vietnam, right? Do you hope to go back soon or how do you feel about going back? Do you miss Vietnam or do you want to see how much it has changed?

30:00

Mai: I never went back to Vietnam since I live in here 1980, and someday we like to went back there and visit; most of people went back they said its changing a lot and total different like all the shopping, the people working at farmer now, totally changed like all the company, and they make it big right now.

Teryn: I guess in just in going back to Vietnam War, I didn't get to talk to you that much, what do you remember about the war in particular and do you remember when the U.S. soldiers came in, did you hear bombs and stuff, how was that when you were growing up?

Mai : In 1974, they start having lots of bombing and different cities and you can hear at night. Before they bomb in they give you alarm and you know the bomb coming to city and some people when they hear the alarm they sometimes the bomb already get to their house, some people not too lucky and just bomb right in their house and they all died the whole family.

Teryn: Did a lot of people you know die or people that live near you or were friends with your family or anything like that?

Mai: We are lucky we had no family, and the bombing look like not too far from our neighborhood, and all the people you know some of them just die.

Teryn: Did you have any friends that died from the war?

Mai: Well, in the neighborhoods and not too far from our house.

Teryn: Do you remember anything about the soldiers coming in, like American soldiers in Vietnam for the first time?

Mai: ...and that time I was around 12 or 13 years old and always see all the soldiers and they come to the restaurant and they eat the food and some of them cannot speak Vietnamese and they pointing the fingers to all the food that they want and they all look different they big and tall, look different, and not like you live in America you can see all different people. Asian and Chinese and American and not like in Vietnam, you only see American that's all you can tell you know they all different.

Teryn: I know in our class we talk about children that were born that were half Asian and half white, children from the war and things like that, were there in any of your classes? Were there any children that were bi-racial?

Mai: ...in Vietnam I see the people half Vietnamese and half American like most of the people where they have half Vietnamese and American children that live over there and that's how you can tell you know they have half American and half Vietnamese.

Teryn: Were there children, were there any of them in your classes or anything like that?

Mai: Just around the neighborhood and some people just have half American people children and they all look very pretty.

Teryn: Do people treat them differently?

Mai: Yeah, they always look at them and say they very cute!

Teryn: So, they weren't mean to them or anything like that?

Mai: They really nice with them, and in that time you know and not many American people they have the children they all so young they so little.

35:00

Teryn: I guess just during the war, you already talked about having a lot of hardships, to move out to the countryside and things like that, why did you have to leave to the country because of the war, why did you have to go the country were you hiding?

Mai: People have to go to the war and if you 18 years old they come to your house and they, all the boys drafted to the war, and most people went to the farmer and people like checking you into the war.

Teryn: So it was your brothers that were hiding, and you whole family just went, because your mom didn't want them to be taken?

Mai : ...and that time, I have 3 brothers age 18 years old that's why all hiding in the farm.

Teryn: Did most people that go into the war, did they die? Is that pretty much what was the case?

Mai : When you're in the war it always gets very dangerous, and that time like millions people all the soldiers working they all have injuries or they dying.

Teryn: Is there anything else that you remember about that time period when I guess you were growing up? What did your mom and dad do?

Mai : In my country when before the war and my family had a little business like a restaurant and we can sell food and we just working very hard take care of each other.

Teryn: Did you help out with the family restaurant a lot or was it mostly your older brothers and sisters?

Mai: In that time I was still in school and my older brother helping out that's all.

Teryn: What kind of things did you do as a child besides just going to school that you remember like did you play with your brothers and sisters? What places did you like to go the most?

Mai: When your family have a restaurant you have to helping them and clean up the table and wash the dishes, do all the work, and just helping each other.

40:00

Teryn: So, in a journey to Cambodia, you had to go through a lot of jungles and take the bus and you had to walk a while, so tell me some experiences you had with that.

Mai: When we get to the Cambodia and the borders, we had to walk from Vietnam border to Cambodia and almost take like 12 hours, a whole day walk to pass the border of the Vietnam to Cambodia. That time at night we had to lay on the grass and it feel cold and very dark and me and my sister, and seven other people were together and we just scared too, and in the morning. But when we try to continue walking it look like take like whole day and before that we have no food and in the border in that time one of the soldiers they use to have a war in Vietnam and Cambodia. And that's how they know how to get to Cambodia and at that time we were, and like we can find some banana trunks and suck its juice and sometime we have no banana tree and have to looking for water. And one day we find some very dirty pond, very muddy, most of people like in the farmer all the ox, like cow, and looking for grass, fresh grass around that area and they stay in the pond and they have all the pee in there and smell really bad, we still have to drink the water from the pond and just how we survive. And we just keep going and we get to the border over to the Cambodia city and when we get to there we so lucky and we just know one of the person he is Chinese Cambodian and that time we can speak Chinese and we just ask him how can we get to the Thailand refugee, he say if you go with the people, people will caught you and you will go back to Vietnam, okay he so nice, he say okay you can follow me just 2 of you me and my sister, and the rest of them he cannot take care of them, and we so lucky and follow him and he take me and my sister to his house and we stay for one week, and he want to take us to continue to get to the Thailand refugee and that is how he say he wants to escape to the Thailand refugee too and that's why he know how to get there and we just follow him and we so lucky and we get to the Thailand refugee.