

Name of Interviewer: Tuong-Vi Vivian Mai-Tran

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Name of Person Interviewed (or pseudonym): Tam Pamela Tran

Relationship with interviewer, if any: Mother

Name	Transcript
<i>00:01</i> Vivian	What was it like where you grew up?
Tam	It's a lot of challenges. We have to be on our own most of the time. You have. It is. It's just a lot of work.
Vivian	What was your life like as a child?
Tam	Always been creative. Always have to be on your own because my mom and dad is always busy, working. My daddy always go to work. My mother is busy with her own business, so after work, we kind of help her but we have to be very creative. We have to be on our own most of the time. We have to go to school and be on our own, independence.
Vivian	How were you disciplined as a youth?
Tam	I think we be so busy with work and helping around the family, you actually don't have time to go and get into trouble or do anything different. So we basically been disciplined by working in all different kind of things around the house to help out so you don't have time to go out and get in trouble. By working, that mean we just helping take care of brother and sister, go to school, do your homework, and helping around the house by helping my mom run the restaurant and feed the animal. We're just too busy, we don't have time to be disciplined.
Vivian	Along with that, what was a typical daily routine in Vietnam?
Tam	We wake up in the morning, go to school, and then we go home and my mom have a restaurant, so we helping her cleaning, cooking. And we have some pigs. We raise pigs, we feed the pigs. We get the, we going to the, like the cafeteria to pick up some food for the pigs, so we get home and then we just do our homework and go to sleep.
Vivian	What occupations did you have in Vietnam?

Tam I'm a student.

Vivian Where you involved in any cultural organizations?

Tam I'm too young to get into any cultural organizations. When I was in Vietnam, we had in school some clubs like girl's scouts, like the scouts! We just hang around the school.

Vivian Did you practice any traditional arts?

Tam Traditional art, let's see what kind of a traditional art. We sewing. We make handkerchief, everything, we learn how to sew in the school. And we learn how to get together, we camped out and we camped out in our school and we practice cooking and singing and that's basically it.

Vivian What about dragon dance?

Tam Oh we don't do that unless it's a new year.

Vivian Next, are some wartime experiences. Where did you live during the war?

Tam I live in Pleku and we left one day before its fell, one day before the north taking over the south. We left and then I went with my mom back to, from Pleku we flew back to Saigon and then my mom taken a road trip to Vung Tau. She taken a boat to get over to (Phang Rang) to see where is my father because he never come back with us. And then we taken a road trip from. I don't know what that area is and then we take the road trip over to Phang Rang and then we find out that my father had already gone back to Saigon. So we had to flew down to Nha Trang where we flew back to Saigon.

4:51

Vivian What occupations did you have during the war?

Tam I'm just student.

Vivian Were you involved in the war?

Tam I'm too young to involved in anything!

Vivian Were any family members involved in the war?

Tam My father was involved in the military. He was in the Air Force. He do a like a security force for the airport. Security services like. I think it's in security like higher than the police. But I'm not sure what it is but he, he was in the Air Force. And he have to taken a road trip back from Pleku back to Saigon, that's much I know.

Vivian Did you ever come into contact with American Soldiers?

Tam Well, I guess I was too young to get into contact with anyone. When we first come to Guam, and they, we lived in the military base. I guess it's an American

military base. We get out from Vietnam with the military aircraft to Guam. And we stay in the military base where they helping us to wait to come to the States. And they pretty nice people. I think I been adopted by too many generals as a step daughter as an adopted daughter, but I never ever get in touch with any one of them because I was so young. They take me to party every night though.

Vivian How did the war affect you and your family?

Tam Pardon me?

Vivian How did the war affect you and your family?

Tam Well, my father try to keep everyone together so I was too young to see how it affect. It's just we have to move from one place to another. And I guess we just moved from one area to another and we don't have anything with us. We came to the states with just one pair of clothes on our bodies. And we have to start all over again. And the only thing my father carry with us would be pictures, picture and documents. I don't know what happened to all of them now but my father passed away.

Vivian So when exactly did you leave Vietnam?

Tam We left Vietnam like one week before the North taking over the south on the 24th of April, 1975.

Vivian Who left Vietnam with you? And who was left behind?

Tam My mom, my dad, my brother and sister, my uncle, my father older brother, my father younger brother, younger sister, two younger sister. And we left back all of my mother brother and sister, one of my father sister, and one of my father brother and my grandparent are all back in Vietnam.

Vivian So you don't know where the items are that your father brought over?

Tam He brought over picture and I think it's birth certificates, a bunch of documents, just family information.

Vivian So where did you go, you said you went to Guam? What was that like?

Tam We live in a camp in Guam. We live in the camp and every day we go into this building and we have lunch, dinner, breakfast, lunch and dinner provided. And they give us clothes, and they give us all the personal needs and we... I was just helping out with the cooking and at the cafeteria. So I always eat good food. And since I been adopted by so many generals, they took me to a place with a lot of toys and a lot of clothes and all different kind of personal stuff but I select out a doll. My mom got upset. [Laugh]

Vivian Why'd your mom get upset?

9:27

Tam She said why didn't you get some clothes? I said I don't, I don't know what to get. So...

Vivian Did you see any other places?

Tam We live in Guam, we going to the beach everyday. And then after Guam, we get over to Arkansas at a camp called Fort Jeffy, We stay there for like a month and then we get people, a church sponsor us and we get to Houston, Texas ever since then.

Vivian So you were in a refugee camp?

Tam Yeah.

Vivian What was that experience like?

Tam It just like another military camp, where they have building and we have a lot of bunk bed, and everybody have a bed. And they have a cafeteria and they have again? We live and we just go there and they provide breakfast, lunch, and dinner and they brought us all our needs. And they provide us with the classes that teach us English. So people provide everything. Schooling. And I was just, they have a, the medical place is offered by the Red Cross. So I went and volunteered for the Red Cross. Instead of going to class, I volunteer. Just go hanging out all, everyday. At the eating cafeteria or the Red Cross.

Vivian Why did you choose to come to the United States?

Tam I don't know, I guess we actually get sponsor by one of the guy who working for the American Company who sponsor us, otherwise I don't think my father be able to get out because he is in the military. But since we get sponsor by other people and they working for the American Company so they get us out to America.

Vivian How long were you under the refugee status for?

Tam How long were we...

Vivian In a refugee camp?

Tam In the camp, we stay in Guam for like about a month, and we stay at the Fort Jeffy camp for two month. And then we come to Houston. We come to Houston sometime in August.

Vivian Was the Church in Houston or just...

Tam Yeah!

Vivian Did you decide to come to Houston?

Tam The church is in Houston. It is Methodist, Methodist church. It located in Greenbay somewhere, I find out it's in the Greenbay, somewhere in Memorial.

Vivian What kinds of questions were you asked when you immigrated to the U.S.?

Tam I don't know, I was so young, I never been asked, I guess they ask my parents but I don't know.

Vivian Were you required to have a health inspection?

Tam I guess everyone have to go through the health inspection, for check up. Everybody.

Vivian How do you feel about your decision to move to the U.S.?

Tam I have no decision, my parents make a decision.

Vivian Okay, these are questions on a new home in America. What was the hardest thing in starting a new life?

Tam I guess it must be hard for my parents because they don't speak the language and actually my father been in America before, for military train, for educational purpose. But my mother it's just another world to her. She doesn't speak the language. She doesn't know how to drive. So it kind of rough on my mother but my father been taking care of the family even in Vietnam so he go to work, he take care of all of us.

Vivian Who helped you find a home in the U.S.?

Tam Well when the Church sponsor us out, they brought us out to this apartment, they have everything established, they have our bed. They know how many children that my parent have, so they get us a 3-bedroom apartment. And they, I enjoy, I'm so happy. When I come to this apartment, they have our beds already, there's a dresser with all our clothes in there. And they even have food ready for us. We have my mom's rice and the fish sauce and utensils and all the kitchen-ware, it's all ready!

14:21

Vivian How did your parents find a job?

Tam The sponsor who brought us to, to the apartment. They took my father out and help him find a job and they show him around and he finally get a job with I believe, they take him to a job where he have Brown and Root?

Vivian What are some occupations you have help in the United States?

Tam I have always been in school and then once I finish, once I, while I was in school, my father got killed in Houston, so I started to get a job offer at like YMCA, so I been working with all the non-profit organizations for some time before I land my job with Continental Airlines which I am now currently working with.

Vivian What are some similarities and differences between your old community and your new one?

Tam I don't know. I never, I always been living in Vietnam with my parents and then we stay in the military and we live in the military camp, so I just know how to go to school and then, well now I'm in a community in America. It is different in educational, it's different in cultural, different in the way of raisin' children, different mentality. There so many different because our culture is more to family, family-tide, family support. And versus America, you have to go on your own; you have to be out there. Basically, I'm sure the schooling system is completely different. The school in America doesn't teach the children how to respect an adult. They just teach the children all the, I think, it's just educational and cultural are so much different. But I have been adapted to taking in what is the beauty of another culture and blending it in with my own.

Vivian Do you have a funny or memorable experience of culture shock?

Tam Yes there is a culture shock because you don't have a lot of respect for the senior in America. That is a big shock. And they don't really care who you are. They just care who they are. So they just taking all the people who live in this country, they very nice and very nice and in a way only help out for other people when they ask, but they don't even look internally that they need to take care of their elder and the people before you helping other.

Vivian Are you a citizen, why or why not?

Tam Yes, I am a U.S. citizen. This is my second country and the country that been raised and take care of me and I want to be part of and help out and take care of it and I want to be part of it to give it back to the society for what they have taken care of me so I want to take care of them back.

Vivian Do you think of yourself as an American or a Texan? Why or why not?

Tam [Chuckle] The American, the American and the Texan is the same thing. I consider myself as a U.S. citizen, who been living in America, doesn't matter where I live, I'm still an American in general as a whole. So it doesn't matter if I'm American, I could go to New York, I'm still an American. It doesn't matter whether I live in Texas, I'm still an American.

19:13

Vivian As opposed to Vietnamese?

Tam And in, in Vietnam I still think that I am Asian American.

Vivian What do you think of U.S. policy during and after the war?

Tam I'm not sure about the policy before the war or how does that affect after the war because I'm not here to tell the different but I think the American is very generous, very nice people, very sincerely nice and they don't mind who is who but they, they always there to help people when they need help and I think that's a very blessing to live in a country, where everybody really care for each other.

Vivian Are you involved in politics? Why or why not?

Tam I'm not involved in politic. I'm not a politician. I just, I don't know if I even like politicians because I like to live, this is the reality in life, this is the real world. I like to live in the real because politician. There's a lot of people who saying something. I'm not even sure if they even do anything, but I guess in a way everybody have a blood of politician within themselves, whether you like to admit it or not, because without politician. There some people doing politician with their heart, some people don't care, but I'm sure everyone of us have politician within ourselves, because if you still thinking of yourself as a, if you think because American is blending with too many culture and if you don't, in a way you have to put politic to bring out your voice, how you want to make a change to this society. Without a politician, nothing going to be happen. So I guess somewhat, I am a politician myself. If I have to raise my children in the right way, and if I teach my children in the right format, then I'm somewhat a politician myself with my whole family.

Vivian And now are some questions about remembering Vietnam. Do you keep in touch with family or relatives in Vietnam?

Tam Yes, I do keep in touch with my family in Vietnam because living under the, the society as Vietnam right now, either you extremely rich or you extremely poor and most, if you not in the government system, you going to be in the poor and you not be capable of doing so many things, so I still keep in touch to see what I can assist in, in a way, even if I'm not there, they still be able to survive, they still be able to live but they be much in suffering than if I am able to capable of helping them in any way I would. You live in a country where you have so much stuff to give, and too much stuff to waste, why can't you use that waste and help other people even if they not my family. I still want to share with those, with those less fortunate than myself right now.

Vivian Who do you still keep in contact with?

Tam I still keep in contact with my aunt, uncle, grandfather, and my great aunts and my cousin, everybody.

Vivian Have you gone back to visit Vietnam?

Tam I was very blessing to work with the company that, that give me the flexibility to take care of my children and flexibility for me to be able to get in touch with my family in Houston, in America along with Vietnam. So yes, I do give them a visit at least several time a year.

Vivian And what are those experiences like?

Tam The first time I come back to Vietnam, I look at my own country. It is very sad. For me to be capable of working with a company that allow me, that give me the opportunity to travel all over the world. By looking at that and I'm going back to my own country. It is sad to look at, look at the country where, you see that there is so much, so much beauty, but seeing that people taking advantage of one another. You just look at it and you feel sad about it and I don't know what I can do to help, but it is different now than in the past.

24:54

Vivian What was the year that you went back first after leaving?

Tam The first year I went back to Vietnam was in '93. I believe that was in July, in July, of 1993.

Vivian Why did you wait until 1993?

Tam Because when I was in school and I was so young, I don't have the capabilities to have travel.

Vivian How does your family celebrate important holidays like Tet?

Tam We get together. We cook our traditional meal, we get together, we celebrate; we mingle with each other. We chat and we talking about the past. And we play, we get together and we play all the game. Just, just remind us as a child.

Vivian Does your family keep an altar for its ancestors?

Tam Yes I do, I do have an altar in my home and I, I keep in touch with my ancestor everyday. Basically, pretty much everyday. And for, for the New Year come around, we invite everybody back to celebrate with us. And we go to, we do celebrate, we do get together and we talk about everything, so we keep then in the loop with us. But to myself, I do keep my ancestor within myself and generate because they do generate to us by gene so we do relate it and we do carry on that, that bloodline.

Vivian What kinds of traditions or celebrations do you maintain for them?

Tam We, we visit their, well we visit normally if we visit their cemetery and then we clean, that is the culture we normally go and visit the burial area and we clean their cemetery area and then we bow to them. The night before the New Year we cook and invite them back to, to celebrate the New Year with us for like three day and then we send them away.

Vivian Do you burn incense everyday?

Tam Yeah, I burn my incense to bow to my ancestor everyday.

Vivian Can you name a song or music that reminds you of Vietnam?

Tam Yes there's a song. It called Ly Ruu Mung. [Singing] Well that is something that we celebrate a song to remind us for the New Year.

Vivian What does that mean?

Tam That mean the glass of wine celebrate for the New Year.

Vivian These are some questions about the new generation. In your opinion, what will become of Vietnamese culture in the United States?

Tam I think that some of that I believe that one of the, the proverb that been told but we don't speculate the children will keep every, everyone will keep the culture because sometime we tell the children, but they say it's just too old-fashioned. But once out of every four or five, they still keep their tradition to carry on to celebrate, to give out the red, to bless the young, the youngster with the red bag to tell them, to motivate them to keep the tradition and go on because some thing is just a blessing. The older people bless the younger generation with all the happy and happiness and healthy and peaceful life. And that is all the nice culture to keep. It nothing but all, wish everybody, good healthy happy life and carry on that goodness.

29:47

Vivian Is it important to keep your cultural identity?

Tam Everybody should keep your cultural identity because without your identity you will lose, you will lose yourself. You don't know what is all this is all about. As you can see, if you have the, the tree growing, if you don't bend them from the beginning the tree will be slant and finally it's not going to last as long as the tree that grow in straight line. Don't you agree?

Vivian Yes. Are there any other memories you would like to share?

Tam Oh memory, well I have a lot of memory. I have a lot a lot of memory and it is, everything you going in life. You learn so much. Every stage, every step that you move, you always learn something new, but doesn't mean that you learn something and then you forget what you have learned in the past. You just add on to your knowledge. The beauty of it, you keep on add to it, but keep to know where you coming from so that you can blooming, fulfilling the beauty of, of fulfilling the beauty of everything as a whole. That make sense?

Vivian Yeah. Well you said that you moved from place to place in Vietnam, what time span was that, like how long did it take for you to find out that you were going to be leaving and then for Grandma to go to Saigon and all those different places to go look for Grandpa.

Tam How long? The time frame? It take about, maybe like a week.

Vivian So you found out April...

Tam Like, we left Pleku like on the, on the first, no in the middle part of the, in like the first week of April. And then we come back to, to, to Saigon and then in the middle of April, we going looking for my father, and then when my daddy get back to Saigon and then we, we take like less than two weeks and we left Vietnam.

Vivian Did you see any of your other friends on the plane? Who was on the plane with you when you left to Guam?

Tam No, I don't see any of my friend because I grew up in Pleku and most of my friend, I don't believe that they went back to Saigon at the same time as myself. I

don't know where they are. I don't think that many of my friend family are in the air force base like my family so I don't see any of them.

Vivian Did you go on the boat with Grandma? Or was that her by herself?

Tam Yes. I went on the boat with my mother and my sister, my younger sister.

Vivian Where was your older brother?

Tam Stay back in with your great grandmother.

Vivian Why didn't our grandparents come over?

Tam Because they don't know. In order to get on the flight to get on the flight out of Saigon, we have this person. He sponsor us because he working for the American company, so they bring those people out, they did not bring out the military people, so we kind of like escape. Go in a different way to get out.

Vivian When you got to Guam, were there any other families there?

Tam There's a lot of people there.

Vivian How did they get out before you?

Tam Because they working for the American company. Because the American have send in all the aircraft to take the high-ranking officer out. And all the people working for the American company out. So some of the people believe that they just go on a trip for maybe for several month so that the can come back unrealizing so they took other people rather than their family.

34:33

Vivian And then in Guam, why were you there for a month? Did a lot of other people come right after you?

Tam There's a lot of people. There's a lot of people coming every day. It's a big camp, we have, I don't know a lot of people have like. Each building, I think I'm not sure how many. There's a lot of people, a lot of people. After so many people come, we have no more building there, they have to camp in a tent.

Vivian And then when you came, did you take flight straight to Arkansas or did you stop in California?

Tam We flew to, I'm not sure. I think we flew straight from Guam, I guess we must have stop by somewhere, but I was just too young to remember. And we going straight to Arkansas to stay there.

Vivian Was it hard traveling with so many siblings?

Tam At that time, my mom and dad doesn't have that, only have like maybe six of us, but we just tag along. We have only one younger brother, Cau Thy with Trang with Truc. They're young but they're not [pause]

Vivian So you got to Guam and you had only one pair of clothes. Did they give you clothes there to bring to America?

Tam Yeah, they give us some clothes and all the all the amenities. They give us clothes, toothbrush, toothpaste.

Vivian How did you hear about the fall of Saigon?

Tam Well my father was working security like the, kind of like the secret service, so he know.

Vivian So while you were in Guam, you found out?

Tam No, no, no. Well while we were in Guam, Yeah! We listen to the radio and they say Saigon has been taken over.

Vivian How did you feel?

Tam I was too young to feel anything. I said, oh really?

Vivian How was it around you?

Tam Everybody pretty sad. Everyone try to get themselves, I guess. I was just too busy down at the cafeteria [laughter], and I was just too busy having fun with all the stuff that I been running around having fun with going to the beach and stuff, swimming and coming back up, and I mean just like a normal little kid. After, I having fun picking on people, having fun going to the cafeteria, seeing what's the good food to eat today.

Vivian Was it Vietnamese food or like American food?

Tam It's kind of American food but it's not bad. I forgot what we eat. We have chicken, but they try to cook something that we can eat, it's edible. Yeah I forgot what it was, but I was having fun at the cafeteria. I guess I'm not worry about whatever. I'm just busy swimming and coming up seeing what we have to eat and go home and sleep.

Vivian Did you make a lot of friends at the camp?

Tam I have too many brother and sister. , I guess everybody trying to be going to at night we went to watching a movie. While people watching a movie or we going to listen to they have show have singer sing the song but I'm too busy going and mess up people, so I never pay attention what some people do.

Vivian Had you already taken English in Vietnam?

Tam Yes, I have took two years of English when I was in school. I was in seventh grade. I learn English when I was in sixth and seventh grade. Just a little bit.

Vivian Was it helpful talking to your adopted general father?

Tam I think I spoke to him just and they pick me up and they carry me around to the party every night. And they ask my father to give me to them to adopt me. And I call them, "Daddy daddy". And they give me a lot of address and they tell me to come and visit them. I thought that when I come to the state that just like in Vietnam, the little town, you can just get away, get around with everything, but when I landed down, when we arrive in Houston, I said boy this is this is just too far. How on earth am I going to talk to this people, how am I going to get in touch with them. I cannot just walk that far. So I never get in touch with them. Not only that, they not even living in Texas. They live in North Carolina or somewhere, I look on the map and I said oh my god! How am I going to get there? So I never write. I said if I get my English well I'm going to write to them, but when we move, we, we live in the apartment too little and I don't know what happen to all the stuff. I couldn't even write to them, so I lost all their address and phone number and I don't know when they coming back and how long they're going to be. So I never get in touch with them. I completely, I don't know their name either. It's just, I was too young and their name was too long and hard. So I never keep in touch, I never contact them, but they're wonderful people.

40:16

Vivian Was Houston a shock compared to Arkansas?

Tam Houston it was nice, we have a three-bedroom, we, we having fun in the little apartment because we have our own room, we have our own bed, we have our own clothes that is already set there. I love this little dress, look like a country girl.

Vivian Did grandpa's family live with y'all too?

Tam No, we all get sponsor at different everywhere. It just my father here, my uncle get sponsor too, my aunt get sponsor to San Antonio, my uncle get sponsor to Dallas, and my other aunt get sponsor. She went to school in Oklahoma. So we kind of spread out. And then my other uncle get, two of them get sponsored to San Antonio.

Vivian Who lived around you in Houston? Did anyone?

Tam No, there's a couple of Vietnamese family. Yeah but we don't know anybody. And then because I speak some English, when I went to school, they let me be an interpreter for all the new student. I kind of help out a little bit. I guess I just wandering around. Instead of going to learn English in class, I learn English in the cafeteria and at the Red Cross. [laughter]

Vivian Did you go straight to school when you moved into your apartment? How was that?

Tam Yes. We going to school. I have a dictionary. So I hunt down for the word every night and I say boy that take too long. Why don't you just talk and forget about the dictionary. I just learn in...

Vivian Did you have a funny story about how your teacher told you to write sentences?

Tam Oh, that's when I skipped school.

Vivian Why'd you skip school?

Tam I don't know. I just. Well when I was young, when I was really young, in Vietnam they ask me to wearing a short, like a short for like study physical education. I was embarrassed in shorts so I keep skip school for the whole year. And then I come back, like I pretend to go to school in the morning, but I hang out with a bunch of kid and play game. And then, and then when school is over and the time is over then I go back to my grandma. And then my father, and then my grandmother one day my teacher come around and ask why didn't I have been seeing you in school. I said I been in a different class. So my grandmother find out and tell my father. And then they find out that I been skipping school. So they took me back and they put me in my great-aunt's class. It's okay. Then I go to that school with a higher class too. With a higher level. And then other people get spanking, but I did not get spanking because I get spanking at home.

Vivian Oh.

Tam But they never spank me because I catch up pretty quick. Yeah, but I went to school in America. I skip class. I skip school senior, second, the last part of my senior year. So I went and took some course of English to get my graduation, to get my diploma. Even I skipping school, I was still top ten percent, top twenty-five percent in school. Not bad! Yeah!

44:24

Vivian Were the kids nice to you when you first came over to America, like in school?

Tam Oh I fight with them all the time too.

Vivian Why?

Tam Because there is one boy, because you know what? They discriminate; they laugh at me because they laugh at the way I pronounce my name, they laugh at me so I smack them.

Vivian Did you get into trouble?

Tam Yes! My teacher have asked me to write like 400 sentences, "I do not speak in class no more." And I would get so mad I would cry and I tell her what happen and she say okay, now I don't have to write I can go home. But they point a knife at me too and I say you want to play karate chop chop?

Vivian And what did they say?

Tam They say naw, you're just too beautiful. I don't want to get you hurt. I said okay, bye.

Vivian Were people mean to grandma and grandpa?

Tam I don't know about that because my mom never work so. Only my father work.

Vivian I thought they owned a restaurant.

Tam After several year, my father have, my mom have a restaurant at home. And she build little by little. And then she...

Vivian Did you have any other stories you wanted to tell that are memorable, funny, sad.

Tam I have all funny story, even if it's sad it's still funny.

Vivian Do you want to say any of them?

Tam No it's okay. I can talk with you for ages and it's still not going to get over it.
Okay.

46:08

Vivian Thank you!