

Interviewer: Steven Dandridge

Interviewee: Son Le

Thank you so much. Okay. Really, I guess to start off: when did you emigrate originally from Vietnam?

Actually I came to the United States in 1982 in California. But I lived in Vietnam until 1981. So I have 6-7 months living in a gypsy camp in Thailand.

In a gypsy camp?

Yes, in a gypsy camp in Thailand. Into the Philippines.

What were the conditions like in Thailand?

Well, conditions were very bad, but we expect that anyway. We don't expect to really have, beneficial...but we expect that anyway. And we do our best to overcome that.

Why did you leave Vietnam in the first place?

Why did I leave Vietnam? That's should be a very long story –

We have time.

A lot of reason why, but I would like to let you know about a story I face, I see, and the fear that I had when I was in Vietnam.

Sure.

When the communists took over our country in 1975, and my own eyes see the war. I was living in Central Vietnam at the time. Okay, and when the communists attack the highland Vietnam, we try to escape our hometown to Saigon. And during the from central Vietnam to Saigon, I saw the people, the dead people on street, I saw so many things that uh it's hard to forget. It's hard to forget. And, uh, to make it short, moving from central to Saigon, and, but, unfortunately, we stop right on the track because it was cut off. So I was going to stop right there, and the communists took over right before the collapse of Saigon. So the March of 1975.

The Saigon Collapse.

Before Saigon Collapse. And we go back, before we move to the south, and now we're going back north. So we're going back to my hometown, well not my hometown, but my friend's hometown we stay in his house. Okay, and three days later, we try to escape to the boat. From to Saigon.

Was it safe in the boat?

It was not safe. No. First of all, we had to ask permission from the government. To move. To leave.

Why?

Well, we asked them from Netrang to our hometown. But on the halfway to my return, we had to carry their with us, as well as our flag. So their communist flag and our flag at the same time.

Was that the South Vietnamese flag?

South Vietnamese flag. And on the halfway, on the return, and it was very dangerous, and we take our own risk. Because I, this is very scary with the communists./ IO was sixteen at that time, I was just 16, and my brother 14, and my older cousin 6-7 years old.

Was it the three of you or the whole group?

Well it was larger group. Our family, but all boy, all men. Women stay home for us to take a risk to go first. If our rip is successful, then we send a message to them to make a second trip. Then we came to Jun Pao, is a small town about a 125 km away from Saigon. And we came to there, and we realize that we are, we are leave. We take a bus from the to Saigon.

What's in Saigon? Why were you going to Saigon?

Saigon is our capital. So, at that time people panic. They go from Central Vietnam and go to Siagon. We just get out of the house and go that way.

It was safer?

Safer, people take ba government and stay away fomr the communists. So you see a mass of people going. You see a cow on the streets, on a highway, on a bicycle, any way they can go. And go toward Saigon.

A cow.

Yeah. And I saw people with a cow, and they sit on top of a cow, just living, and they go toward Saigon. For to stay away form the communists. And when I came to Saigon a month later...

It took you a month?

No, when I came to Saigon. A month later, after I come to Saigon. Okay. And my grandfather is very scary. Because he had a bad experience with the communists. He was almost killed in 55, 54, around that time. They bury him in the ground with his hat off,

and they use their, they use their machete to cut his head off, but in the last minute, they stop that. So he is so scary, and that makes us, a young kid amnd the baby of the family, which makes me, the baby of the family, scared for him.

Of course.

And then, at that time, I don't know what the communists did, but they have me, a kid my age, 16-year old kid, we facing a lot of things that I don't want to remember.

Of course.

I have to go to, to go out of the city, and they have a program called a New Communist program. So they assign us some job for us to do, and for some it could be good work, but it was over my ability. I had never done work before like that in my life.

Because you were young.

Yes, because I was so young. If I see a friend at a coffee shop, they would come over and they would ask for our ID. If we don't have a student ID, then it would be illegal to cgo to the coffee shop.

Just to be out?

Just to be out. If you don't have work to do, you do not studying, then you must be plan something. You must plan something. And I saw so many people go in jail...

For not having their cards?

Yes. And with my own eyes, I See, 1975, I see the Saigon, the way they surround the city. We don't have enough food to eat. A lot of women, if you were a man, if you go out that far, then you have a problem, but women could go out. So I send a woman out of the city, try to get some food for their family, with my eye eyes, I see a woman. Over 65 years old. To carry about 2 kilos of rice on her leg.

Like, taped?

Yes, taped between her two legs. And she got caught by the communists. They took it out, cut off the bag of rice, and scattered it onto the street. And she just crawled in the street and cried. So I guess her family had been hungry at that day.

Wow. So they just laid siege to the city and let nothing in, nothing out? You didn't eat?

If you live in the city, then you eat and live under their order.

What did you eat? What did they give you to eat?

Actually, they give, they sell, a standard, one family would have a certain amount of rice they could buy from them. At their price. But a family have to eat. Let's see my family: we have four sisters, one brother and myself, so 6 people. 1 egg. So we'd have to put a lot of water in there so we could fry that egg. So we would have enough to share.

Wow.

And the reason I, I think, was that they wanted us to leave the city.

You think they wanted you to leave?

Yes.

How long we you in Saigon?

I be in Saigon until 1981.

Wow. 6 years?

Yes. 6 years with them. And my brother try to escape from Vietnam so many times, and each time he be caught by the communists. Back in 1872, when I was 13, the communist attacked my hometown at that time and my family was killed, and my father was an officer for the army, and he is missing in action. No one knows where he is.

When was this?

1972. We have to leave our home, and we have to leave everything to go to Saigon. And my mother, understood that the risk to leave, but still the risk that the communist attack and take over the city. She gave us a little bit of food to carry with us. In case we're not together, so we could take care of ourselves.

So you left your mother?

No, we all go, but in case we go apart, each person would be able to divide the food. Each person would care for themselves. So in 1972-75 a lot of people left Central Vietnam to go to Saigon to escape the communists.

And I imagine that Central Vietnam was the most dangerous part?

Central Vietnam was very intense, yeah.

And so when you got to Saigon, it was crowded and there was no food for anybody?

No, not until the communists took over the country. Because we leave in 1972 and that's when our our military attacks them and gets our city back and so we moved back to our

hometown in 1972. So that's in '72, but then in '75 we go the second time, and when I moved to Saigon that time, I decided to stay.

And then you finally left to Thailand?

Yes. I left to Thailand.

Was that difficult, getting to Thailand?

Oh. That was a big risk, you life. Imagine a boat measuring 13 meter, carrying 136 people.

36 people?

136 people.

What was it made out of?

Wood.

Wood? There were 136 people in the wooden boat?

Right.

And you just went down a river?

Just going down, actually, they go differently. That boat, they call the big boat, and they stay away from the shore. And they carry a small group of people, a group of people out, and it takes a few days, maybe a week for that. 136 people on a boat a little less than 13 meter. And on our way from Saigon to Thailand, we can be caught by the government, the communist government, or we can be killed by Thai pirates. You know that? You hear about that?

The Thai...

Thai Pirates.

Thai pirates, yeah, we learned about that in class today, actually.

Yeah. Can be killed. We know it's dangerous...

Did you have valuables on you? Did you take anything?

Well we had to place lots of money. At the time it was 5,0000 English dollars to get into that boat. If you are caught by the government, you can lose that money and be in jail for

several years. My brother was in jail for long time. 10 years. YOU can be killed by so many ways. We knew that, but we have to leave.

That's risk. That's everything. That's your life...

But we went to Thailand. And I stay in Thailand for three months, and I be interviewed by the American agents to accept me to go to here...

Did you intend to go to the U.S. the whole time?

I intend to go to the U.S. all the time, okay. And Thai. It's just a harbor place. Just a place to come from. This is my wife and daughter.

(introduction)

There are some things I share with my daughter, and there are some thing that are so deep in my heart, and so hurt, you know, I wait for her to get a little older to take it.

Of course. We learned a lot about families and about how things like that are passed down when the family is old enough.

So, do I answer you why I have to leave Vietnam?

Yes. Very good. I understand. What was it like when you got to America? Was it difficult?

It was very difficult. Especially I am here with no relative, no friends, nothing. But at the same time, I feel safe in here.

Where did you land in America?

Oakland, California.

Oh, Oakland. I was born in San Francisco. And so you would come alone?

I had nobody here. I was by myself. I start making friends and start searching for distant relatives that I may know or just heard about them. And I start making some contact with people in community.

Do you feel like the community really helped you when you got to America?

They are, they play a big important role. They have us to understand more over here. And to adopt to the customs over here.

So did you go about finding a job? What was your first job?

What was your first job? (Turns to daughter.) Want to tell this one? You know this one?

She knows?

It was selling flowers on the streets.

In Oakland or San Francisco?

In Orange County.

Oh, Orange County. How long did you do that?

I do that about, just a couple of months. And deliver the newspaper in the morning and going to school at the same time.

Where did you go to school?

I start going to Fordham community college.

Oh, Fordham?

You familiar with that area?

Yes, I'm pretty familiar with that area. And were you able to get into contact with anybody from Vietnam?

At that time it was very hard. At that time the communist system in Vietnam was very tight. Let's say we sent a letter from here to Vietnam, it may take a couple of years to reach the family.

Because of the government?

Yes. It may take several months, but it may take several years. So you just take a chance.

So, were you blown away by Americans? Was it weird? Do you feel like being a part of the Vietnamese community helped you?

First of all, I know that living in different country, I have to learn to understand their system, so I can adapt with the system here. So of course a lot of things were different, but I have to learn and to adapt to the system.

Were you afraid of anything we offered? Like people, or things you saw?

What do you mean?

Well, I don't know. I'm trying to think of a specific thing. Like, Oakland, Oakland isn't the safest place.

Well, Oakland, I don't stay in Oakland that long. I came to Oakland, but was only there for 3 days before I transfer to Los Angeles.

Okay, Los Angeles is home to some of the most dangerous street gangs. Youth standing out on the street, I mean, did you ever have to deal with any crime?

No, I do not have to see anything like that, but I know that, first of all when I came over here, I feel, in my heart, I appreciate the people over here to open their arms, so always in my heart I feel what I should do to give back is give back. So I don't ask much, and when you don't ask for much, you don't feel you're short.

That's a worldview I wish more people held.

And to go back to your question, if I saw any crime in LA, I heard about that, but I feel well and have no reason to worry. And if I have to face with that, then I will handle it.

So were you happy when you got to America, but...

Well I was happy for myself. But I worry for my family in Vietnam and for my friends in Vietnam. Still, I feel bad for them and I know a lot of friends, that if they had the opportunity that I have here, they could do a lot better with their life. And I feel bad for them. And so I worry for their safety over there.

So when did you start finding a permanent job, and when did you meet your wife? I guess that's a lot of questions.

Yeah, the first few years, I do a lot. I go to school, I find any kind of work I can have. It was very stressful, but I always fight to get the best I can.

How did you know when you got to America to go to school when you got here?

First of all, I already knew we have a good school system in the US. So I dream to be here to go to school.

Even back in Vietnam?

Yes. So when I came to Thailand, I came to research the school system over here. SO I do some research and ask some friends, and when I came to the country I ask some people here, they tell me the school and I ask some people at the school. And I come to school and talk to people here.

You were 22, 23?

I was 23 at the time.

So you graduated in 2 years?

Actually, at the community college, it takes two years. It take me 2 and a half. And I transfer to the University of Pacific, but I did not complete my degree. Civil engineer.

I was a civil engineer my freshman year.

Plus he needed money to send to grandma.

So that's when you started working?

Well that's when I took a break for myself. The last semester. I want to go to work and help friends and family in Vietnam, and then go back to school.

So you had kept in contact with relatives?

Yes, made contact, but it was very hard. We didn't speak on the phone at all. The letters, we had to know what to tell them because the government reads the letter.

Did they allow you to send money back?

No, you had to find some other way to send money back over there.

So where did you find work?

Finding work was very from friends, they interview us to work anywhere to match schedule for school, so I could do almost anything.

First of all, at that point, it was a job. So I said whatever, I can learn whatever so I could graduate whenever. I meet with the teacher of the professor who teach the static, and I go all straight A in my class, so he said, this is the first time someone got straight A's in my class. So what is your major? And he said no, I think you should go civil engineer. So I doubled majored. Eventually I couldn't handle it. And I become a printer, so first of all, I love to write. I write in some Vietnamese newspaper, and I happen to know a lot of people in the community. And my uncle had a print shop so I could help him at the print shop in Orange County. And I become a professional printer, because I had my own magazine, and I didn't have enough money to print my own magazine so I ask the people over here, give me a break so I can get my magazine down. So that's where I learned to be a printer.

When you got here, was it hard for you to continue your Vietnamese culture? Or did you start eating fast food.

Well I struggle with that. people think I'm very conservative man, so it's hard to change the way I live, I believe, so I do struggle with the customs, but I do not fight, I try to get along with the system, I did not fight, and I realize the value of the system. But at the same time I want to keep the same value.

Yeah, we learned a lot about traditions. I'm half Mexican, and we have a lot of traditions were follow from that culture. So I understand. What brought you to Texas?

That's her.

It's a girl?

Yeah!

Always a good story. Did you move here to Austin?

No, back in 87, I go to see one of my cousins. In Houston. After we came to the United States, I locate where she is, I make a trip to Houston and see her. She is my cousin's friend. So I meet her over there.

Were you able to make contact, or meet up with anyone in America from Vietnam? Did anymore of your friends of family come over?

After me?

Yes. In general.

--He ended up sponsoring his family over.

They just came, after a long time, they just came. 3 years ago.

--My family came first then his family.

Were you able to do that because the government regulations had relaxed, or was it still dangerous?

No, if you don't ask, they won't give it to you>W ith the communists, I don't believe they just give it to you. That's why you have to fight. We have a community here, and we start a fight with them, to get something like that.

And this is through an association?

To get his family here, it is a very long and painful process that his family have to go through? They have to fight. They hide the papers from you. They don't give to you. So

you have to bribe them to get anything. Our organization here just does education and preservation.

--Didn't you start the paperwork a long time ago?

There's a program called ODP.

--It takes a long time to get over here.

It took 14 years from the start of the paperwork for them to come over here.

The US has a program called the Order Departure Program. Through it we applied –

In order for us to have that program, it's not because the US has the program, we had to ask for it. They had to negotiate with the Vietnamese government and somehow we are allowed to leave.

There was a story where too many people had to walk through Cambodia to Thailand and so many people died in the ocean, estimation from 500k people to 700k people died on the way as they seeked freedom>S o there was a Geneva conference where 24 countries sat down and found a way to improve the situation. No matter how dangerous the ocean, they went however they could go. No matter in a boat, however. So the international law stopped that. And also we got a flood of people from the Souteast Asian country. Thailand, Malaysia, Cambodia, Hong Kong, Indonedia. All the countries flooded with Vietnamese with boat people and walk people.

500k people?

One month, June of 87, there were 54k people get into the refugee camp. We don't count the people who died in the ocean. Highest month. That's why they come up with ODP.

Were you a part of a refugee camp in Thailand?

Yeah.

Were the conditions better or worse than what you lived in under the communist government?

Who stayed in camps? Me? My family?

Just you.

Yeah, so how do I compare?

Was it worse than the...

I spent like 3 months in Thailand. Of course in the camp, you know, we don't have good conditions there, and after that we transfer to the Phillipines and there were have better donctions. And we stayed there for 4 or 5 months.

And did you take a boat to the US?

No, we flight. After we were approved by the government here, we learn to live the syetem here, and we fly.

So as a whole, do you feel you've been treated fairly? By the government, by the people?

I'm very proud to be a part of this country. And I know the peop[le over here are very friendly. And they opejns their arms for us.

Do you consider yourself an American?

Vietnamese American.

Are you still a part of the community here in Austin?

I'm still a part of my community, and I'm very proud to become a part of American life.

Well, if you don't have anything else. That was more than adequate. You hear stories and you go through history classes, and obviously I'm in a Vietnamese culture class and I'm learning a lot of things I didn't know, but it's very humbling to know a person who had been through so many things in his life and has gotten here. And to hear you talk about being so proud to live here makes me proud to live here. Because I don't think about how we're generally nonviolent and that we welcome immigrants, but I should.

Like I started earlier, just to leave Vietnam, it was a very big risk of your life, and when you come to the country, it's a long process, and sometime a very painful process, but I could not imagine I would have to face that. You asked much about my life after I came to the United States, but during the time I spend in Thailand, there is much to tell.

I wasn't sure how sensitive the material was. Refugee camps were the greatest places. But if you have any experiences you'd like to share, I'd be happy to hear them.

I feel sorry for many people after the communists took over the country and we have to risk our lives to leave the country. And at the time, I saw so many families been broken. I saw a father lost their daughter and a husband lost their wife because of the pirates.

Would the Thai pirates, did they come to the camps?

No, they caught us on the sea. And they make take some away, they may kill us, they do whatever they want to because they're lawless on the sea. I consider myself a very lucky man compared to other families.

Were the camps run by the governments?

They were.

Did they regulate that, did they have security to protect the refugees?

They do, but I don't know if they protect us.

How much did you deal with, whenever you started the process to come here, what was that process like? Did you have to interview?

First of all we have to get a permit and meet an American agent and meet certain conditions. Then we have to meet conditions.

What sort of conditions did you have to meet?

We have to prove to we couldn't live under the communist government.

Couldn't everybody prove that?

Everyone had a reason to leave the country. Like I told you. It's very hard for us to live with them.

Was it difficult to come here, as far as talking to the US?

They were very open compared to other countries. So it wasn't that difficult, but you had to meet certain requirements.

Did you start learning English when you got to America?

I started when I lived in the Phillipines. And when I came here, I started learning.

And you were fluent by the time you got here?

I start when I get to US.

How hard was college without being fluent?

College was very difficult for us, especially for those who didn't speak English. We were needing to spend sometimes twice, sometimes more than twice amount of time on work. Of course we studies. And I went to college in Vietnam already, so I was just something...I stayed away from things like reading. I did stuff like math. And at the same

time we learned to speak the language. My first year I don't exactly understand what the teacher said. I'd make a note, go home, open the book and figure it out. And the second year, I cannot stand in the class and ask a question because I bother other classmates with the way I'm asking. So I'd make a note and come to his office and ask him.

That's a lot of time. The whole immigration experience, from start to finish, sounds like it would be unbelievably tough.

My point is, I would like for you to see that I am very blessed to come over here, and so we accept that.

Summary

With my own eyes, I see, in 1975, I see Saigon, the way they surround the city. We don't have enough food to eat. A lot of women – if you were a man, if you go out that far, then you have a problem – but women could go out. So some send a woman out of the city, try to get some food for their family, and with my eye eyes, I see a woman. Over 65 years old. To carry about two kilos of rice on her leg. Taped between her two legs. And she got caught by the communists. They took it out, cut off the bag of rice, and scattered it onto the street. And she just crawled in the street and cried. So I guess her family had been hungry at that day.

If you live in the city, then you eat and live under their order. They give, they sell, a standard. One family would have a certain amount of rice they could buy from them. At their price. But a family has to eat. Let's see, my family – we have four sisters, one brother and myself, so 6 people. 1 egg. So we'd have to put a lot of water in there so we could fry that egg. So we would have enough to share.

I chose to use this story from Mr. Le's interview because, though it doesn't portray some of the violence and tragedy that dominates much of the transcript, it has a quiet sadness to it. The communist party that took Saigon did not murder its inhabitants, but they revoked their rights as humans and forced them to live by logistical rules that were impossible to survive by. Mr. Le's story of the woman's rice also holds and almost literary effectiveness, too, as rice has always represented in the East what bread represents in the West – sustenance.

I corrected some portions of the interview in order to make it understandable, but for the most part I left it untouched. I think it's necessary to capture the difficulty of telling such a story, but emotionally and literally.