

**Name of Interviewer:** Ai Vuong

**Method of Recording Interview:** Digital audio

**Language of Interview:** Vietnamese

**Location of the Interview:** 2509 Gayle Dr.  
Garland, TX 75044

**Date:** October 12, 2008

**Themes:** Personal Story: Pre & Post War Experience up to 1991

**Name of Person Interviewed** (or pseudonym): Minh Vuong

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Ai Vuong

Transcript

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00:01

Ai                    How was your experience, your story and memory of Vietnam?

Minh                From childhood or from teenage years?

Ai                    From your teenage years leading up to the Vietnam War – this is your story, whatever personal story.

Minh                Well, from my teenage years, when I was about 10...1954...was when I was 7 years old. I started to understand a little more about the way of life in Vietnam. Vietnam, it had, in 1954 – was when the North invaded the South. I began to understand a bit about life society and I couldn't imagine the millions of Northern Vietnamese invading the South. I didn't know why ... I was a little interested, all of a sudden, the North came – they were still Vietnamese but their accent, their culture, mannerism were different , but at that age I just didn't understand, [con biet khong?] – and from there the Vietnamese had just...I just knew Vietnam was split in two – Half Communist and the other was South was when King Bao Dai, the last king of Trieu Dai Phong Tring Vietnam, he was still king of Vietnam, but they invited Ngo Diem Dien to be interim president.

Ai                    More than the history, please emphasize your personal experience.

Minh                Well, experience was the beginning of seeing differences in life of the South Vietnamese people. I was seeing Vietnamese, but their mannerisms were different from outs, was when I began to notice. I didn't pay much attention to society and just grew up but around 1963...1960 From...from 1954 – 1963 life in Vietnam was calm. There was no war. But starting in 1960 Communist started – from there, the civilians experienced war – you hear gunshots, explosions, life in war. There were two fares, Communist and South Vietnamese. Civilians began to taste war. Guns, bullets, this person or that person died. But it wasn't as bad. Around 1960, to 1963 Ngo Diem Dien, the first president of Vietnam Cong Hoa ...when I was 16, I began to pay attention to politics...they attended schools ....I began

to understand more about what's going on society, They posted pictures to overturn that man. As a child I just went to school normally.

05:00

They pulled students to support this fare, or that fare. From then... Vietnam Cong Hoa, when the king got overthrown – life ...Life got overturned, it wasn't normal anymore. War became worse and worse – battles became larger, more deaths, walking out on the street, you saw more deaths, murders, the situation was no longer good. Life wasn't good anymore. It was more dangerous. Death could happen to anyone – it spread. They shot bullets from far away. It spread through the whole country.

Ai

Please clarify, where did you go to school?

Minh

From small to big, I grew up in Tra Vinh, My family and I were from there. I attended up to high school there. The biggest change was in 19...6...1960 when I graduated high school, con biet khong? I attended college in Can Tho. I taught middle school - here it's called [Middle School], for one year. 1968 a battle occurred that changed the lives of teenagers Thach Mo Tan. They attacked every city of... Vietnam Cong Hoa. That battle affected everyone. Forgot to mention was when they asked America, when they overturned the king – they brought up to 500,000 American soldiers to Vietnam. Then, 1965 to 1965 there were many American soldiers, and other foreign soldiers. Korean, Thai, China? Foreign soldiers from here to combat Communist, you know, The American influence spilled over. There was complete change.

Ai

Where did the American soldiers stay?

Minh

Oh they were everywhere. They formed many places. Con biet, now in Iraq there are but there were 5-6 hundred thousands soldiers over there. The biggest affect for teenagers like me was when they came

10:00

Right during Tet, called Tet Moi Tung, they violated the law and fought during Tet. Both sides had many casualties, con biet khong, After that Vietnam Cong Hoa made Thong Dong Vien – they called all teenagers to become soldiers, when I was drafted to go to army school. I went for 9 months, left school, and I started service... My active duty 1968 – 1975, until the collapse of Vietnam Cong Hoa. About 6.5 years. I was in the cavalry. When I was there, many battles, but when it ended, I traveled to many different areas, but South area

Ai

Did you have many friends as soldiers?

Minh I had many friends, many died, but there are a number who are still alive, in America under the HO program. A majority are left in Vietnam.

Ai During those 6 ½ years, do you have any personal stories that you have found too difficult to discuss with me?

Minh Concerning life, or prison, or what?

Ai Concerning your life during war.

Minh Well life was still plenty, there was enough to survive because I was an official – I had sufficient means to survive because I could. Around that time, the most significant memory, was when I had to go to Cambodia for two years. Yes, when the war moved there, I had to be displaced to an area where they stored artillery. I lived from 1970 – 1972. So, probably 2 years I lived abroad. But I had permission to visit home but it was fighting abroad. My memories were that I fought abroad.

15:00

Ai Well, life for your family, [Ong Noi] – how did they handle it? Did you have communication with them?

Minh I had communication regularly. Every 2-3 months you had permission to visit family. The distance wasn't far, it was only about 100 k. So every 2-3 months I went home to visit family. [Ong Noi, Ba Noi] had a small business so they all had enough to survive.

Ai 1975 was when the war ended.

Minh Yes, when the war ended.

Ai What happened after that?

Minh In 1975 when the North won against the South, and the South Vietnamese president surrendered. Defeat. We dropped arms, thought everything was over. We were just going to go home. Others – by plane, boat... The people who predicted the ending left early where Americans waited. About 95...no 98% of soldiers went back to their homes. We heard of a lot of people leaving for America, but for the most part we didn't know life abroad. Vietnam is our home. We didn't fully understand the purpose of war – that it was Communism or Freedom – it was out of obligation [emotional], according to my understanding, we couldn't really differentiate between the philosophies – it was our civic duty to fight, according to the request of our nation. Me, I knew of people who left – My sentiments, just like that of many others, I thought now that war was

over, there would be [hoa binh], meaning peace, that we could go back home. We would just return back to our homes. There would be peace.

Ai Did you realize that our side lost?

Minh Well, we knew we lost. We surrendered but even though we lost, we thought since we were still Vietnamese. At the end of war, we thought they would just forget everything. We didn't think they would resent us – there were two sides, were they going to just kill off one side? We were just going to return home and never thought we'd be prisoners.

20:00

They took us to prison – we would just return to being regular citizens. We didn't think they'd take us to prison or anything [laughs] No one thought they'd be a prison – that was the mentality. That's how we really felt – if we thought we'd be going to prison, everyone would have found some way to escape... No one would've dared stay to be prisoners. War was obligation. We thought we'd just return to ordinary life. No one could have imagined how they could've treated us like that. It was just so sudden, [con biet khong?]

Ai If that was the Vietnamese sentiment, then after that...

Minh Well, after that, about a month - during the war there were two sides. They developed something – They said Southern Vietnamese were rebellious, that the Northern Vietnamese stood up to fight, but in reality it was just an image that they were independent and they stood up for something. It was unjustified. During that negotiation time, about a month or two, they came and told us to register – like where we lived and such, like a census. They focused on who was involved in the war – they said you just had to go to camps to learn about the new way of life, philosophy for a few weeks, only 15 days. You just had to learn about the new ways.

Ai They called those reeducation camps?

Minh Yes, reeducation camps, but in reality they were like [jail].

25:00

They said on the radio that you just had to go for 10 to 15 days. But once they gathered you, they kept their secret. They didn't let you out. You would just have to go to camp for... a few months but you never got the chance to go home. It's not like here. You get sentenced, they keep you for a year or two and you get to leave. You never know the day when you'll be able to leave.

Ai Could you describe to me a typical day in prison?

Minh Well in prison... You were concentrated into old jails – 70, 80 people concentrated in a small room, about twice the size of this room. You sleep, you eat. It's called...Nong Truong – in villages where not many people lived, the jungle – they took us there to work. They forced us – One large house was about 200-300 people. They had fences, stood guard. In the jungle you planted corn, planted potatoes. Meaning the not fertilized land. Daily..Daily...they forced you to do labor – You planted corn, potatoes, planted trees. You did this or that, a day would be about 8 hours. Morning we'd work until evening then they took us back to the camp. They gave us rice, a small bowl like this [demonstrates] – I mean, they did feed us. We did work from day to day.

Ai How long were you in jail?

Minh I was in jail a total of...from 1975...to month 9 of 1981. A little more than 6 ½ years

Ai Was anyone able to visit you while you were in jail?

Minh [Ong Noi] was the only person to visit me. Monthly...I went to many places, I was transferred...Well, because they didn't feed us nearly enough there, so they gave family members, relatives permission to bring us food. [Ong Noi], every month, brought clothes, rice, food to me.

Ai How many times a month?

Minh Once a month.

Ai Did they only allow visitors once a month?

Minh Yes – once a month.

30:00

Ai Well, in 1981 – how were you able to leave?

Minh Then, I didn't really understand everything that was going on...in jail they forced us to claim our physical health...our [biology] and our activities involved in the war. They called it – [No mau nhan dan] – if you were considered too dangerous or not - I was only a lieutenant so it wasn't that high but other people who were major or general, or even higher, had to stay longer. I was, then, in the lower ranks...so they set up a time limit – once every 3 years they checked up on us – if after 3 years we couldn't leave they threw us back in jail for another 3 years. My time limit...because my rank was lower – my time cap was 6 years. So after 6

years they started releasing others of the same rank as me. Other people, some were 9 years, others were 12 years... So after 6 years, according to my lower rank, they started releasing those of my same rank. 6 years, 9 years, for generals even 13 to 16 years. Around 6 ½ years they released me.

Ai How did you feel in jail? Did you just wanted to survive and live day to day or did you have some hope of escaping?

Minh Prisoners' sentiments were really disturbed. Confusion. The way of speaking of the Communists was really good. They bred this hope that we'd be released one day. They would encourage us just to study hard and we'll be able to leave. They fed us hope – it was propaganda. One thing they did was during the large holidays such as [Tet or Le Doc Lap], they'd release a few prisoners at a time to feed us that hope. They soothed us – all you have to do is study hard and you'll be released sooner than others. That's why everyone...at the beginning...They just coaxed us...after a while, I knew, the secret was out. Then – I just felt really discouraging, hopeless. No one could escape.

35:00

We realized we were prisoners without hope ... It became difficult. We just lived day by day [emotional]... We didn't have guilt... We just settled. It was just [an phan] – We did have a little hope that maybe the next year...or the next year... We just settled to live because we didn't know when we'd be able to leave. Because you didn't know exactly when you'd return home.

Ai After they released you, where did you go?

Minh I went back home to your [Ong Noi] in Tra Vinh.

Ai How was your life post-jail?

Minh Life after prison...In 1978 Vietnam had a flood...”flood” really grand. Vietnam's economy has collapsed. We couldn't harvest rice. People were very poor – we had to beg for food. Then, 1981, we were better than Korea. Thailand, too. Japanese were only better than Vietnam by a little bit...our average GSP [\*he meant GDP] was higher than that of Thailand's but after the Communists came, economy went according to Communism...Everyone was equally poor. When your brother was born, etc, we didn't even have enough money to eat. We couldn't raise our children. It was really difficult. So difficult. we didn't even have enough rice to eat.

Ai So 1981 you returned home...

Minh I returned home.

Ai What kind of job did you do to survive?

Minh I couldn't do much. I returned in...1981...the first few months ...during that time ....[pause] when I returned I met with friends in order to discuss how to be "boat people" – to use the canoes to go to the oceans

40:00

Ai What compelled you to want to leave?

Minh After 6 years of living in prison, you learn a lot. I learned in the prison about what's going on – their way of life and mentality was completely different from ours. They viewed us as others outside of society. They saw us as enemies, not as fellow members of society. So when we got out of prison we have to find a way to escape because they didn't view us as a part of society. You couldn't go find a job, we were always pushed to the outskirts of society. They didn't accept us, my children, children of others, they wouldn't even let you in college.

41:22 \*Original audio deleted second half of interview

That's when we realized we can't live here. If you can't find a job, how can you survive? When I went home – People found any means necessary to leave.

Ai That year 1981...

Minh Oh, well this is me telling you my story. 1981 I came home, and 3 months later I met your mom. Your Ong Noi wanted me to develop a family. Month 12 I developed a family with your mother and we tried to escape. But the motor of the boat

Ai You had escaped for a day already?

Minh Yes. We had to return...but there were a number of people who were caught by the police. Luckily I escaped and I didn't get captured. When I returned I tried several other times but ...I couldn't do anything

Ai According to your sentiments, did you have hopes that one day you'd be able to leave?

Minh Oh during that time I kept meeting with friends. When you were there

Ai Dad, did you have hopes of going specifically to America, or somewhere else?

Minh I found any way necessary. I met a group of friends, and I made several small boats – During then ...troubles...[Cau Bay, Dung Ba, dad of Chi My, Cau Dung, Anh Phong] – all those people, because of me, were able to escape. During the trips your mother was pregnant with Anh An so I didn't want to leave – I let your relatives go.1983...then 1986...when your mother was pregnant with you was when the secret was out...I got captured in jail again. Your mother gave birth to you and – that was the fourth time I was in jail – 1989 I was released. You were about 3 years old. Did you read several newspapers a few weeks earlier...

Ai That program was called HO?

Minh Humanitarian Operation

Ai What was that?

Minh An American sponsored program. If you had the qualifications – if you were in the reeducation camps, then you could leave – your [Co Nam] had applied to sponsor us but I [qualified for this program]. [Ba, Me, Con and Anh An] left.

--End of First Half--

### **Excerpts**

Subject: War Abroad

Name Transcript

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14:30

Minh Well life was still plenty, there was enough to survive because I was an official – I had sufficient means to survive because I could. Around that time, the most significant memory, was when I had to go to Cambodia for two years. Yes, when the war moved there, I had to be displaced to an area where they stored artillery. I lived from 1970 – 1972. So, probably 2 years I lived abroad. But I had permission to visit home but it was fighting abroad. My memories were that I fought abroad.

Subject: Post-war

Name Transcript

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20:00

Minh They took us to prison – we would just return to being regular citizens. We didn't think they'd take us to prison or anything [laughs] No one thought there'd be a prison – that was the mentality. That's how we really felt – if we thought we'd be going to prison, everyone would have find some way to escape...No one would've dared stayed to be prisoners. War was obligation. We thought we'd just return to ordinary life. No one could have imaged how they could've treated us like that. It was just so sudden, [con biet khong?]

Subject: Re-education camp

Name Transcript

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29:00

Minh [Ong Noi] was the only person to visit me. Monthly...I went to many places, I was transferred...Well, because they didn't feed us nearly enough there, so they gave family members, relatives permission to bring us food. [Ong Noi], every month, brought clothes, rice, food to me.

Subject: Re-education camp

Name Transcript

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35:00

Minh We realized we were prisoners without hope ... It became difficult. We just lived day by day [emotional]...We didn't have guilt...We just settled. It was just [an phan] –We did have a little hope that maybe the next year...or the next year... We just settled to live because we didn't know when we'd be able to leave. Because you didn't know exactly when you'd return home.

Subject: Escaping Vietnam

Name Transcript

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44:00

Minh I found any way necessary. I met a group of friends, and I made several small boats – During then ...troubles...[Cau Bay, Dung Ba, dad of Chi My, Cau Dung, Anh Phong] – all those people, because of me, were able to escape. During the trips your mother was pregnant with Anh An so I didn't want to leave – I let your relatives go. 1983...then 1986...when your mother was pregnant with you was when the secret was out...I got captured in jail again. Your mother gave birth to you and – that was the fourth time I was in jail – 1989 I was released. You were about 3 years old.

### Summary

“We didn't think they'd take us to prison or anything [laughs] No one thought there'd be a prison – that was the mentality. That's how we really felt – if we thought we'd be going to prison, everyone would have find some way to escape...No one would've dared stayed to be prisoners. War was obligation. We thought we'd just return to ordinary life. No one could have imaged how they could've treated us like that. It was just so sudden, [con biet khong?] Then we realized we were prisoners without hope ... It became difficult. We just lived day by day [emotional]...We didn't have guilt...We just settled. It was just [an phan] –We did have a little hope that maybe the next year...or the next year... We just settled to live because we didn't know when we'd be able to leave. Because you didn't know exactly when you'd return home.”

When I asked my dad whether or not he'd prefer to speak in English, he refused to speak in any other language than Vietnamese because he knew he could not fully describe his experience. In the process of translation, his words, his emotions, his experiences felt stripped away of his personal touch. However, this oral history meant more to my dad than sharing his story to the world – he was sharing it to me, his daughter. As

demonstrated by his consistent question, “con biet khong?” – he was really teaching me about himself and really hoped that I did understand the full impact of his words. Even though I could not fully express his words through English, at the core, I hope to present his struggle as part of a grander story of courage and hope.