

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Southeast Asian Immigrants Project

Personal Experiences

O. H. 660

THANH LUONG

Interviewed

by

Porncharas Arirachakaran

on

April 20, 1981

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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INTERVIEWEE: THANH LUONG

INTERVIEWER: Porncharas Arirachakaran

SUBJECT: Hai Phong, working class, North Vietnam, war,
freedom

DATE: April 20, 1981

A: This is an interview with Mr. Thanh Luong for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on Southeast Asian Immigrants, by Porncharas Arirachakaran, at 120 Illinois Avenue, Youngstown, Ohio, on April 20, 1981, at 8:10 a.m.

Where did you come from?

L: I came from Vietnam.

A: What part, north or south?

L: I came from North Vietnam.

A: Were you born there?

L: I was born in Hai Phong, North Vietnam.

A: How long did you stay there?

L: I stayed there for twenty-seven years.

A: Can you tell us about your family in North Vietnam? What did your parents do?

L: I stayed with my father and mother.

A: How many sisters and brothers do you have?

L: I have four brothers and five sisters.

A: Do you remember anything about your education?

L: I finished high school.

A: Just talk about North Vietnam. Can you tell us what it looked like? How did the people work? How did the Communists govern the city?

L: I can't talk about my job in my country. I was a mechanic and sometimes I had nothing to do. I had to look for another job. Everybody was doing the same thing in my job. I only found jobs for a short time.

A: Can you find a job for yourself in Communist countries?

L: Yes, but it's very difficult to do that.

A: You didn't get enough money so you had to find another job to work?

L: Yes.

A: And you're allowed to do that?

L: Yes.

A: What did you do at that time when there was war between the north and south? Did you have to go and fight?

L: No.

A: Have you experienced fighting between the north and the south?

L: I didn't go to fight but I saw it.

A: Did you hear bombing and airplanes firing around?

L: Yes, I saw it.

A: Did you work in the fields for growing rice? How did you get rice?

L: I made rice for myself.

A: Who was to grow the rice?

L: My mother because she is the housewife.

A: What did your house look like?

L: It was small.

A: How many rooms were there?

L: There was only one room.

A: What was the house made of?

L: (No response)

A: How tall was the house?

L: About twelve feet high. I lived in the city and there were many buildings along the street.

A: Did you have trees and grass in your city?

L: My city had many trees.

A: Were the roads small or big?

L: They were small.

A: Did people use cars?

L: No one used cars.

A: What did they use to travel?

L: Only bicycles.

A: Is there anything important in your life that you can remember that you would like to add?

L: In my building I saw many people die because of the war.

A: Did South Vietnam come and bomb your city?

L: Yes. My own mother and grandmother died because of bombings. My aunt died also.

A: When the airplane came and bombed your place did they have any signal? Did you have to hide someplace?

L: Yes. We hid under the building.

A: Could you distinguish between the South airplane and the North airplane?

L: You could not decide where it was coming from.

A: Tell us about your school, what the Communists taught you.

L: They only taught us about the Communist countries. They didn't care about the freedom countries.

A: What did they teach about the Communist countries?

L: They said that Communism was good. They said Communist countries have everything.

A: Did you ever see any students in the class punished? Did the students ask questions?

L: Sometimes they asked questions.

A: Did you have history?

L: Yes.

A: Why did you come to America?

L: I learned about freedom.

A: How much money did you get a month working in the Communist country?

L: Sixty dollars.

A: Was that enough for your life?

L: No.

A: Did they provide clothes for you?

L: No.

A: What about food?

L: You could only buy from the Communist stores. I could buy twelve feet of cloth a year to make clothes.

A: Is this from the Communist store?

L: Yes.

A: How much did it cost for a meter? Did you pick the color?

L: You had to take whatever color they had. Each year they gave a family a ticket to buy the cloth. You got a ticket for each person in the family.

A: What about food, did they provide any food for your family?

L: They gave families tickets to buy rice. You had to take another ticket to buy meat.

A: How did you get the ticket? Did they come to your house or did you have to go to the office and ask for the ticket?

L: You had to go to the office and take the ticket.

A: Every month?

L: Once a year. You got the ticket in December.

A: You got a bunch of tickets for rice, meat, and cloth?

L: Yes.

A: How about cigarettes, did you smoke?

L: I didn't smoke.

A: Is that expensive in your country?

L: Yes. With your ticket you got a half of a pound of meat for each person a month.

A: When you were a child and small who got your ticket for you, your father?

L: My father or mother.

A: What did you do when you were small, did you just go to school?

L: Yes. I started to work in 1971.

A: So that was when you were eighteen or nineteen?

L: Yes.

A: Why did you decide to come to the United States?

L: Because I learned that America was a free country. I knew that all people were free.

I never thought I could come out of my country. In a Communist country it is very difficult to leave.

A: What made you decide to come out?

L: In 1975 a lot of people came out of the country. The Communists didn't make you stay then, so a lot of people left. I heard from a policeman that they wouldn't keep me; I could come out of the country. He told me I had to leave myself.

A: Did you just want freedom?

L: Yes, because in my country there was too much work. If you talked about good in this country the company would kill you.

A: Would he put you in prison?

L: They would keep you until you changed your mind.

A: Did they kill?

L: Yes, some they killed. You had to work very hard in my country, but you didn't get much food to eat. They would keep you in prison though if you didn't work. There were no windows in the prison.

A: Have you been there?

L: No.

A: Do you recall your journey to the United States? You said you and your family and some friends shared some money and bought an old boat. Do you remember the day you left your country?

L: January 3, 1979.

A: Who took care of the boat and how many people were in the boat?

L: There were seven people in the boat.

A: Did all the people in your family escape at the same time? Do you still have brothers and sisters over there?

L: All of my family left there.

A: How was your journey in the boat? Did you have any problems?

L: Before we came out of Vietnam we saved rice. All we had was rice and water on the boat. We didn't need anything else. Sometimes the water wasn't enough.

A: What did you do to solve the problem? Did you stop anywhere to get water?

L: Yes.

A: What did you do on the boat? Did you help them or did you just act as passengers?

L: The young men had to help.

A: Did you do anything like putting up the sail?

L: Yes. We took the water out that was coming in.

A: Did anyone on the boat die?

L: No.

A: Where did you arrive first?

L: Hong Kong.

A: You went to a refugee camp there. How long did you stay?

L: I stayed in Hong Kong ten months.

A: How did you come here? Did you contact anybody?

L: I looked at one of three countries in which I could stay.

A: What were they? One was the United States, what were the others?

L: I can't remember.

A: Why did you choose to come to the United States?

L: Because I liked the freedom.

A: How did you come to the United States? Did you try to find a sponsor?

L: Yes.

A: Who is your sponsor?

L: John Wolf.

A: Does he live in Youngstown?

L: Yes.

A: Did you come to Youngstown after Hong Kong?

L: Chicago.

A: Then you came to Youngstown by plane?

L: Yes. From Hong Kong to Youngstown I paid \$320.

A: Who paid for it?

L: Some organization in New York.

A: What was your first impression of America?

L: I thought it was the last city.

A: What month did you come here?

L: January.

A: That was winter! It must have been so cold. Do you like snow?

L: I don't like snow.

A: Did you think it was a nice city or did you think--this is my country I will stay here all my life?

L: I knew about America. I thought it was a nice city that I came to.

A: What do you think about your life in the new country? What about the language difficulties? How many languages can you speak?

L: I can speak two languages: Chinese and Vietnamese.

A: Where did you learn to speak English?

L: I learned to speak English here and write here. I stayed here for fifteen months.

A: How about your parents, did they come with you? Where are they?

L: My family is living in Hong Kong.

A: How many people in your family came with you?

L: Three people, including me.

A: Do they stay with you now?

L: No.

A: Where are they?

L: My older sister is living in Washington. My younger sister is living in New Mexico.

A: Do you plan to go and visit them sometime?

L: Not yet.

A: Will you?

L: Yes.

A: How about your jobs here?

L: Now I work at the Aloha Restaurant.

A: Do you like your job?

L: Yes. It is a hard job for me.

A: Compare it with your job in Vietnam?

L: It is the same. I must work hard in order to get money. I must learn English to go to work, so it is hard.

A: What about your living conditions here? Where do you live now? What is your address?

L: Rescue Mission.

A: Do you plan to move out and find another place?

L: In one month I plan to move out.

A: Do you like the weather here?

L: The weather is too cold for me.

A: Do you plan to move South, to move to New Mexico and live with your sister?

L: I haven't decided yet.

A: How about religion, do you have any religion?

L: I don't have religion.

A: Do the Communists have any religion?

L: No. Only the working class had a religion. Most of the working class people have religion, but most of the people in the city don't have religion.

A: What do you plan to do in the future?

L: I have to learn more English. I have to find a good job. I have to find a good place to stay also.

A: Do you plan to bring you parents here?

L: Yes.

A: Do you work hard to save money to bring your family here?

L: Yes. I will work hard to study English. I want to move from Youngstown and get a job.

A: What do you plan to become in the future?

L: I don't know.

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A: What would you like to see happen in your old country?

L: I would like my country to have more freedom. I want all people to have freedom.

A: Do you want to add anything else?

L: No.

A: Thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW