

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Southeast Asian Immigrants Project

Personal Experiences

O. H. 761

HUNG NGUYEN

Interviewed

by

Porncharas Arirachakaran

on

April 15, 1981

## HUNG NGUYEN

Hung Nguyen was born on October 21, 1960 in Can Tho, South Vietnam, the son of Wong and Dang Hai Nguyen. Hung was attending Can Tho Technical School when the Communists took over his country in 1975. After finishing his school in 1976, he was forced to work as a mechanic with the Communists for four years. Disliking the Communist doctrine and their way of life, he tried to escape from his country three times. He finally arrived at Malaysia and was sent to the United States because his brother-in-law who had escaped before was staying in Youngstown. Sponsored by the Rescue Mission, Hung started his new life in the United States. Hung plans to keep on studying more English so as to go to collège, majoring in mechanical engineering. He is trying to find a job to send some money to his family in Vietnam. To bring his family to the United States seems to be a dream for him.

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INTERVIEWEE: HUNG NGUYEN

INTERVIEWER: Porncharas Arirachakaran

SUBJECT: Vietnam War, Communists, refugee life, adjustments,  
language difficulties

DATE: April 15, 1981

A: This is an interview with Mr. Hung Nguyen for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on Southeast Asian Immigrants, by Porncharas Arirachakaran, at 120 Illinois Avenue, on April 15, 1981, at 7:36 p.m.

Mr. Nguyen, can you tell me where you are from?

N: I am from Can Tho, South Vietnam.

A: Can you tell us a little bit about your family life, like your parents and what they did?

N: My father passed away in 1972. My mother is still living.

A: How old is she now?

N: I don't remember.

A: How many sisters and brothers do you have?

N: I have two sisters and two brothers.

A: Did they come with you?

N: Only my older sister came with me.

A: What is her name?

N: Nga.

A: What does she do here?

N: Nothing.

A: Did she get married?

N: She is married and has three children.

A: What did you do during the wartime?

N: I kept on studying.

A: Where did you study?

N: I studied at the Can Tho Technical School.

A: Can you tell us a little bit about your school at that time?  
What year did you study?

N: I don't remember much because that was a long time ago. The first time I came to school was in 1965.

A: Did you finish your studies?

N: Yes.

A: What do you remember about that period of your time at school?

N: When I studied in school I had a lot of friends. I can remember that my teachers taught me a lot of things. They taught me writing and helped me a lot.

A: What year did the Communists come and take your country?

N: The year the Communists took over my country was 1975. At that time I was still a student and I had to study with them one year. After I finished my schooling I got a job with them. That seems so terrible.

A: How did you feel? What did they teach you when you studied with them?

N: They taught about Communism. I didn't believe what they said, but I had to study.

A: Were you against them?

N: Yes.

A: What made you finish your studies?

N: My mother told me I had to study.

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

N: I didn't decide to come to the United States. When I escaped from my country I thought I could end up anywhere. My brother-

in-law came to the United States first and he was a sponsor for me; that's why I came over here.

A: How did you come here when they didn't allow anybody to go out of the country?

N: When we decided to escape from our country we bought a boat.

A: What country did you stop at first?

N: Malaysia.

A: How did you come to the States?

N: After I came to Malaysia I was interviewed by the U. S. Immigration. Then they gave me permission to come over here. I got on the plane then to come here.

A: Had you ever heard about the United States before?

N: Yes, when I studied in my high school I studied a lot of things about the United States.

A: What about?

N: The people.

A: Where in the United States did you enter?

N: In California.

A: How did you come to Youngstown?

N: Before I came to Youngstown my purpose was to stay in California two days and catch another plane to come here.

A: What was your first impression when you entered America?

N: I was glad to come but said we couldn't live here because it was too cold.

A: What do you think about life here, your language? How long did you study English?

N: When I was in high school I studied English and then when I came to the refugee camp I studied three months. When I came over here I studied with Americans; that's your best way to study.

A: Have you ever worked before?

N: First I worked with my sponsor.

A: Your brother-in-law?

N: No. He is a pastor of the Rescue Mission on Federal Street. His name was Pastor Wood.

A: How did he help you? Did he pay for you or anything?

N: The government pays the pastor and the pastor pays for you. They paid for my expenses, my plane ticket.

A: How about when you first came here? Where did you stay?

N: The first night I lived in the Rescue Mission. They gave me some food.

A: Did you have to find a job for yourself?

N: Yes.

A: How about your brother, did he stay there too with you?

N: Yes.

A: Why did you move here?

N: Because I think I am old enough to find a job and I don't want to bother my sponsor anymore. I want to live by myself.

A: What are you doing now?

N: When I was in my country I was a mechanic, but when I escaped from my country I left all of my papers. That's why it is very hard for me to find a job around here. I keep on trying though.

A: What do you fix, engines, cars?

N: Yes.

A: Do you work in a gargae now?

N: No.

A: How about your living conditions here, do you like the food here?

N: Some of it.

A: What kind of food do you like?

N: I like hamburgers.

A: Who cooks for you now?

N: My sister.

A: Vietnamese food?

N: Yes.

A: Is it hard for you to find ingredients?

N: Yes, very hard. We go to Ok-Soon's Store.

A: How about your religion, are you Buddhist?

N: Yes.

A: In your life have you ever gone to temples and become a monk?

N: No, I just went to the temple.

A: In your country did they believe that the guys have to become a monk at least once in their life?

N: Some of them.

A: Your mother never asked you to become a monk?

N: No, never.

A: Do you like to watch television?

N: Sometimes.

A: What do you like to do?

N: I like to play guitar. Sometimes I listen to music. I like to dance, and drink and smoke.

A: Can you tell us about your desire to adjust your life here by yourself? Did someone make you do it?

N: No. When I escaped from my country I had to study English because that's the living language. I had to study and keep on studying.

A: Where do you study?

N: I study at the International Institute.

A: What is the name of your teacher?

N: I can't remember.

A: What time do you study there?

N: At 9:00 a.m. to 12:00.

A: Do you want to learn more about English?

N: I want to understand better.

A: What do they teach there?

N: They teach about English only.

A: Do they teach grammar and speaking?

N: Yes.

A: Do you have exams out there?

N: Yes.

A: What do you get if you pass?

N: My teacher just wants to know who pays the most attention.

A: Do you have homework to do?

N: Yes. I have to write a letter to her and tell her something I do.

A: Every night?

N: Yes.

A: It's like a diary. You keep a lot of good stuff. What do you plan to do in your future?

N: Now I want to study more about English and then I will try to go to college.

A: What subject do you want to study?

N: I want to be in engineering.

A: What kind, mechanical?

N: Yes.

A: Do you plan to have a family here?

N: Yes. I think it is very difficult to bring my family here, but I try to send some of my money to them.

A: You can send them money even now?

N: Yes, the government lets them take it. They change American dollars to Vietnamese dollars.



A: Do you try?

N: Of course. I go to school and tell someone about it and they try to help me.

A: What do you think you would like to see happen looking back at your country?

N: I hope the Communists leave my country. At that time I will go back to my country. I really miss my country and my family. I don't think the Communists will ever leave my country though. They took it and want to keep it.

A: Have you ever heard about your parents? Does she write to you often?

N: Yes, every month I get a letter from my family. They tell me about how they are doing.

A: Are they doing fine?

N: Yes.

A: Do they want to come here?

N: Yes, but I can't bring them here.

A: Why not?

N: The Communists don't want people to leave.

A: It is hard now to escape?

N: Yes.

A: Can you recall a little bit about how you escaped?

N: I escaped from my country three times. The first time I missed the boat.

A: Where did the boat come from?

N: We paid some of my money to buy the boat.

A: Did everybody share?

N: Yes.

A: How much money did you pay, can you remember?

N: Free of charge. They didn't take money from me.

A: How did you do that? You said everybody had to pay money to

share the boat.

N: I went with my uncle and he paid.

A: Do you know how much money?

N: I think one person had to pay about \$5000.

A: Where is your uncle now?

N: He went to Switzerland.

A: Why didn't you go with him?

N: Because my sister lives here and because he started a job over there and had to go with his family.

A: What about the second time?

N: I escaped from my country and after two days a storm came and we had to come back.

A: Where did you escape?

N: In South Vietnam, in Can Mau.

A: Did the government know about that place?

N: Yes.

A: What did they do?

N: They tried to capture us, but they couldn't.

A: Why not?

N: Because a lot of people tried to escape from my country. They couldn't control the whole place. They tried to kill someone who tried to escape from my country and put them in jail. I was in jail fifty days when I escaped from my country the second time.

A: After fifty days do they set you free?

N: Yes, because my uncle gave them a lot of money and they let me go.

A: What did your uncle do that he had a lot of money?

N: I don't know. He is a businessman.

A: So then you tried to escape again after they set you free. What happened the third time?

- N: The third time I escaped from my country I got in a boat and started to leave my country. I didn't realize at that time that I was leaving my country. I went to Malaysia first. There were sixty-two people in my boat.
- A: Did most of them come to the United States?
- N: No. Very few people came to the United States. They went to other countries like Canada and Thailand.
- A: You decided to come here because of your brother-in-law?
- N: Yes. Otherwise I couldn't have come here. I would have had to choose another country.
- A: Do you think it is better for you to stay in the States?
- N: Yes. A lot of people that wanted to go to the United States, that's where they took them.
- A: Did you have to have family here?
- N: Yes.
- A: What about the guy who gave you permission, how did he give you permission?
- N: Because the government of the United States accepts somebody who had their family in the United States. They can come over here
- A: Do you plan to get a Green Card and become an American citizen?
- N: After I lived here five months I got my Green Card.
- A: How long have you been here?
- N: Almost six months.
- A: You speak English well. Did you escape from Vietnam in 1980?
- N: Yes.
- A: When the Communists took your country in 1975, during those four years what did you do?
- N: I spent one year studying and two years getting a job with them. The last year I quit.
- A: How did you feel when you worked with Communists?
- N: I had to work or otherwise they would put me in jail or do something wrong to me.

A: How much did they pay you as a mechanic?

N: They paid \$50 a month.

A: Did you have to pay for your own food and clothes?

N: Yes.

A: What kind of food was it, Vietnamese food?

N: Of course.

A: Was it cheap, like no meat?

N: There was some meat and rice.

A: How about clothes?

N: Once a year everybody who worked with the Communists received five meters of cloth.

A: Did you make a shirt, skirt, or pants by yourself?

N: Yes.

A: What color did everyone wear?

N: Someone who worked with the Communists had a blue shirt.

A: What about someone who didn't work with the Communists?

N: They could wear whatever they like.

A: Did the government punish them?

N: Yes, they put them in jail.

A: Did they beat them?

N: No. They would tell them something about Communism.

A: How about the person who didn't believe in the Communist doctrine?

N: If someone didn't believe they were put in jail and shot. When the Communists took over my country they killed lots of people. I saw that.

A: How did you feel? Did you want to fight with them?

N: Of course, but I couldn't. If you spoke against them and they found out they would put you in jail.

A: The government takes everything you have. Does this mean

your house too?

N: Yes.

A: Where did you live?

N: If someone had a little house that was all right. If they had a big house they would take it.

A: Where did the family live?

N: They went to some near place that was very poor. They would find a place in the forest.

A: Like huts?

N: Yes.

A: Do you have electricity in your country?

N: Yes. They decide to cut off electricity to one part in a month. Maybe in the next month they decide to cut it off somewhere else. That means they divide cities into four parts. If they shut off electricity you have to light candles.

A: What about the cost of living down there?

N: It's very expensive.

A: When the Communists came the price of everything went up?

N: Yes.

A: What about cigarettes, how much did you have to pay for them?

N: I got my \$50 salary from the Communists and I had to pay \$30 for a pack of cigarettes.

A: How could you survive? Didn't the government want the people to smoke?

N: No.

A: What did you do during the day? What time did you start to work? What time did you come back home? What did you do after you finished your work?

N: I started work at 8:00. I had lunch at noon and then I went back to work until 5:00. Then I would go home and take a bath and go do something relaxing or read the newspaper or take a walk.

A: Did they allow people to have entertainment too?

N: Yes.

A: How did they propagandize the doctrine?

N: Every show that was on television, they tried to give us some idea of Communism.

A: Did you pay attention to it?

N: No. I watched, but I didn't keep anything in my mind.

A: How about the person who accepted the Communist doctrine?

N: They tried to become Communist.

A: Did they get promotions on their job quickly?

N: Yes.

A: How about the ones that just worked, like you? Did you have the same position all your life?

N: Yes.

A: Your life has changed a lot here, right?

N: Yes.

A: How do you feel about it, do you want to stay here and become a mechanic?

N: I couldn't study anymore in my country because the Communists took over my country. In this country I have the opportunity to study.

A: Do you have anything to add?

N: I just want to tell you how I feel. When the Communists took over my country it was so bad I thought I couldn't live with them. I had to do something for them though. Then I tried to escape from my country. That was very hard and a lot of people were caught by Communists. The more they tried to shoot them the more they wanted to escape. When I escaped from my country I didn't realize I would come to the United States. When I lived in the United States I had to adjust at first and study a lot. I have a lot of things to do. Most importantly I have freedom. When I have freedom I lost my family, friends, everything I have in my country. If someone wanted to escape from my country it was with the permission of the Communist government. They had to pay about \$10,000 and they had to give the Communists everything they had. They took a lot of money from somebody who tried to escape.

A: Do you mean if a person paid the money they could come to the United States?

N: No, not to the United States, but to refugee camps.

A: Where?

N: In Malaysia, Thailand, or Hong Kong.

A: It was just to escape from the country?

N: Yes.

A: Did each person have to give \$10,000 or the whole family?

N: They counted everybody. Each person was \$10,000. With that kind of living maybe they were killed on the boat. The Communists took money from them on the boat and killed them. That was very dangerous.

A: It was dangerous to escape by permission of the Communist government?

N: Yes.

A: Maybe you died on the boat instead of going anywhere.

N: Yes.

A: Do you know someone that this happened to?

N: Most of the people living in Saigon had a lot of money and they tried to escape from my country that way. I think about fifty percent died on the boat.

A: Do you know when this happened?

N: Three years ago.

A: If you had a family here do you think you would have difficulties with the generations?

N: I think if I had my family right here I think it would be difficult but not really. When you have your family right here you are very happy and you take care of them. My family is still in my country and I have to worry about them.

A: Would you like to return if the Communist government left?

N: Yes.

A: Do you have anything else to add?

N: I think most of the people that tried to escape from my country died on the sea.

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A: Why?

N: Because they had a small boat with a lot of people usually.  
It was very easy to die if you didn't have enough water or  
something else.

A: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW