

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Southeast Asian Immigrants Project

Personal Experiences

O. H. 812

SONG TAN LIEN

Interviewed

by

Porncharas Arirachakaran

on

April 21, 1981

SONG TAN LIEN

Song Tan Lien was born on June 2, 1950 in Baxuyen, South Vietnam, the son of Xieng Van Lien and Vihn Thi Nguyen. After graduating from Can Tho High School in 1968, Song entered into the Army and worked in the office for seven years. During his service in the Army, he married his wife, Ngu Thi Hong Hguyen and they subsequently raised three daughters: Phuong, Thuy and Nhung Hong Lien. When the Communists took over his country in 1975, Song escaped to Can Tho and stayed there for a year. In 1978, he and his friends shared the money to buy a boat. With sixty passengers, Song decided to escape from the country and left his family behind. He arrived at Malaysia and stayed in the camp. Finally in 1980, he was sponsored by John Wood of Rescue Mission to come to the United States. His wife succeeded in escaping from Vietnam with her three daughters in 1979 and came to Youngstown in January 1981.

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Southeast Asian Immigrants Project

INTERVIEWEE: SONG TAN LIEN

INTERVIEWER: Porncharas Arirachakaran

SUBJECT: South Vietnam, Army officer, communist government,
freedom

DATE: April 21, 1981

A: This is an interview with Mr. Song Lien for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on Southeast Asian Immigrants by Porncharas Arirachakaran, at 120 Illinois Avenue, Youngstown, Ohio, on April 21, 1981, at 10:50 a.m.

Where did you come from?

L: I came from Vietnam.

A: What part of the country?

L: From Can Tho, South Vietnam.

A: What do you remember about your parents?

L: They sold food.

A: Did you help your father garden?

L: Yes.

A: Did they take food from trees and sell it?

L: Yes.

A: What is your birthplace?

L: Baxuyen.

A: Where is that?

L: It is behind Can Tho.

A: Where is Can Tho, near the sea?

L: Yes. Baxuyen is near the sea too.

A: How many brothers and sisters do you have?

L: I have eight brothers and one sister.

A: A younger sister?

L: Yes.

A: Can you tell us a little bit about your education, school?

L: I finished high school in 1958.

A: At Can Tho?

L: Yes. Then I went into the Army.

A: What did you do in the Army?

L: I worked in an office.

A: Did you learn anything about the Communist doctrine?

L: Yes, everybody in the Army had to learn about Communism.

A: Do you remember anything about the Communist doctrine?

L: I don't think they are good because I lived with them for three years. When they took over my country I lived with them about three years. I had to escape so I know the laws of the Communists.

A: What did they try to teach people, do you remember?

L: They taught people about Ho Chi Minh. You had to know about him.

A: What did you do during the war, during the Vietnamese War? How many years did you work in the Army?

L: I worked in the Army about seven years.

A: Did you start to work in 1968?

L: Yes. I finished in 1975.

A: When did you marry your wife?

L: I got married in 1972.

A: How many children do you have now?

L: I have three children.

A: Do they go to school?

L: Yes, at Covington, downtown.

A: When you worked in the Army do you remember how much money you got?

L: I forget.

A: Can you tell us about the significant events in your life?

L: The year I cannot forget is 1975 when the Communists took over my country.

A: How did they take it?

L: I don't know that.

A: How did you know? Was it announced on the radio?

L: Yes. The president of my country, he talked about the Communists taking my country.

A: Why did you decide to escape from your country?

L: Because I couldn't live with the Communists.

A: Why not? How did you feel about them?

L: I did not have freedom if I lived with the Communists. Every day I was afraid of them because the Communists could kill any Army [person] at any time.

A: After the Communists took your country what did you do?

L: After the Communists took over my country I lived in Can Tho city one year.

A: Did you work as a farmer?

L: Yes.

A: How many years?

L: Two years.

A: Did you decide to come here?

L: Yes.

A: How did you come here? How did you make contact?

L: I had to get many people together to buy a big boat. We rowed a small boat and got to a bigger boat.

A: Who controlled the big boat?

L: I don't remember.

A: What did you do on the boat?

L: I helped people get food and water.

A: Can you estimate how many people were on the boat?

L: Sixty people.

A: How many days did it take you to escape? What city did you come to first?

L: We got to Malaysia first.

A: What did you do in Malaysia? Did you stop the boat completely?

L: I lived in the camp.

A: They had a refugee camp there.

L: Yes.

A: How could you contact to come here?

L: The Embassy of the United States had requirements in order to come here.

A: What were the requirements?

L: If you lived in a camp and you had a wife or husband or parents living here you could come here. The second one was if you worked with the Army in my country.

A: You got the second case. You were in the Army.

L: Yes.

A: How come you came here? Did you have to pay any money?

L: I had to pay half. I repay the government.

A: Did you come by plane?

L: Yes.

A: What place did you enter first?

L: I entered in Seattle, Washington.

A: How did you come to Youngstown?

L: I came to Youngstown by way of Chicago.

A: Who paid for you? Did you have any sponsor?

L: Yes. I forget his name. The Rescue Mission helped me.

A: What year did you come to this city, 1980?

L: Yes.

A: How long have you been here?

L: About fifteen months.

A: Does your wife stay with you now?

L: Yes.

A: How did she come here?

L: She escaped and came with me.

A: Did you escape with your wife and children in the same boat?

L: No. She escaped for the same case as I did. After one year she escaped after me.

A: What did you think of America, your first impression here?

L: I like to have freedom in this country.

A: You used to have freedom in South Vietnam before the Communists came.

L: After that I didn't have freedom.

A: How did you feel once the Communists took your country?

L: It was a bad thing.

A: Were you discharged from the Army and had to work as a farmer?

L: Yes.

A: How did you hear about the United States?

L: I didn't know anything about it. I came here because my sponsor lived in Youngstown.

A: Did they help you?

L: Yes. They helped with food and a house and finding a job.

A: What do you think of your new life here?

L: It is good. I have freedom here to do anything. If I work hard I will get money and it will belong to me.

A: Do you have any difficulties in speaking English?

L: Yes. This second language is very difficult for me.

A: When did you start to learn?

L: I started to learn when I came here. That means I started studying about a year ago.

A: Where did you study?

L: At the International Institute.

A: Do you still study now?

L: Right now I am busy.

A: Do you have to work?

L: Yes.

A: What kind of job do you have now?

L: Right now I work at Woodmere China.

A: What do you do?

L: Everything.

A: Is it a hard job?

L: No.

A: How many hours a day do you work?

L: I work full-time.

A: What do you think of jobs here?

L: They're good.

A: What about your living conditions, your housing and food?

L: There is enough for my family.

- A: Does your wife still cook Vietnamese food?
- L: Sometimes we cook American food; sometimes we cook Vietnamese food.
- A: Do you like American food?
- L: Yes.
- A: What do you like?
- L: Hamburgers.
- A: What do you think of the cost of living here? It is higher, right?
- L: Yes.
- A: Is everything more expensive in your country?
- L: I think so.
- A: What is the rate of exchange on the dollar compared to your money?
- L: Right now I don't know, but before it was 200 Vietnamese dollars to one American dollar.
- A: So everything must be expensive for you?
- L: Yes.
- A: Can you tell us about your religion? Are you Buddhist?
- L: I am nothing.
- A: Do you respect something more than that?
- L: I have my feather in my hat, and my grandfather.
- A: Do you mean that you respect your ancestors like your father and grandfather?
- L: Yes.
- A: What do you mean by that?
- L: Most of the people in my country do that.
- A: Are your parents still alive?
- L: Yes.

A: Where do they live?

L: In Can Tho.

A: Do you have to give a small amount of food for the spirit of your ancestor?

L: Yes.

A: When do you practice it?

L: Maybe New Year.

A: When is the Vietnamese New Year?

L: About February.

A: Is the food homemade? Does your wife make it?

L: Yes.

A: What about entertainment? Do you take your family out?

L: Yes.

A: What places do you like to go?

L: To the store.

A: What about your children's education, do you plan to send them to school?

L: I have one daughter that goes to school.

A: Does the government provide for you or do you have to pay for her?

L: No, it is a public school.

A: Can you tell us your desire to adjust your life here?

L: I have to learn everything.

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

L: Right now I think about the future of my children. I think I have to work hard to take care of my children.

A: What do you plan in your children's life? Do you want them to have the best education and everything?

L: Yes.

A: Do you try to keep Vietnamese culture?

LIEN

9

L: Yes. If I have free time I talk with them about the culture and about my history of my country.

A: Can you tell us a little bit about Vietnamese culture?

L: No.

A: Looking back, what would you like to see happen in your country?

L: I would like the Communists to go away.

A: If the Communists go away do you plan to go back?

L: Yes.

A: Do you have anything to add?

L: No.

A: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW