

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Southeast Asian Immigrants Project

Personal Experiences

O. H. 720

TIEP LA

Interviewed

by

Porncharas Arirachakaran

on

April 17, 1981

TIEP LA

Tiep La was born on March 5, 1949 in Ninh Binh, North Vietnam, the only son of Viet and Vuong Tran La. He and his family moved to South Vietnam in 1964. After finishing high school at Phu Tho, he attended Technical Institute at Phu Tho until 1969. His education was interrupted by the struggle between North and South Vietnam. He was assigned to serve in the Republic Vietnam Navy as a mechanical engineer in the ship yards. He received a Silver Medal for good service in the Navy in 1975. After the Communists came and took over his city on April 30, 1975, Tiep was captured and sent to labor camps at Tay Ninh, Phu Quoc Island, Long Binh and Phuoc Long (Bara). Realizing that he could not stay with the Communists, he decided to escape and made a plan by himself. In 1978, he successfully led a small boat, carrying 32 passengers from Qui Nhon to Hong Kong. During his stay at refugee camp at Hong Kong for about a year, he met his wife, Phung Tran and they got married in 1980 in the United States. He is employed full-time by Kessler Products and continues his studies which began in Fall of 1980 at Youngstown State University, specializing in mechanical engineering. His future holds two goals: One is to finish his studies and find a better job. The other one is to bring over his family to the United States.

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INTERVIEWEE: TIEP LA

INTERVIEWER: Porncharas Arirachakaran

SUBJECT: South Vietnam Navy, labor camp, journey to USA,
communist doctrine

DATE: April 17, 1981

A: This is an interview with Mr. Tiep La for the Youngstown State University Oral History Project on Southeast Asian Immigrants, by Porncharas Arirachakaran, at 1619 Florence Street, Youngstown, Ohio, on April 17, 1981, at 3:25 p.m.

Mr. Tiep, can you tell me where you come from?

L: I come from South Vietnam.

A: Where is your birthplace?

L: I was born in North Vietnam and in 1954 I went to South Vietnam with my parents.

A: Can you tell us a little bit about your parents and family please?

L: My parents are still alive and they are still living in South Vietnam with my three sisters.

A: What did they do?

L: I don't know exactly what they do, but it is a very hard life for them now.

A: What did you do during the Vietnamese War?

L: I have had to rebuild part of my life during the war. I served in the Republic Vietnam Navy for six years. When the Communists took over my country I was kept in the labor camps for over three years.

A: Did you work in the camp?

L: Yes, like everybody.

A: What did you do?

L: Labor jobs. I had to work ten hours per day and two hours every night to study the Communist doctrines.

A: Is that what they did to every official?

L: Yes, every official of the Republic Vietnam movement.

A: They kicked them out of the Army?

L: Yes. They called it reeducation over the labor of the old rule.

A: How long was this?

L: Over three years.

A: Do you remember any significant events during that period? What did you dislike or like the most?

L: I received one silver medal from the Republic of Vietnam for serving as a good officer. That was the good life when I was a Navy officer. I worked for countries around Vietnam like Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and the Philippines. I learned a lot of things.

A: Do you recall what years the Communists came?

L: The Communists took over my country on April 30, 1975. I was kept by the Communists in jail for three days. Then they transferred me to a labor camp far from Saigon, about 30 kilometers. After six months they transferred me to another camp on Phu Quoc Island, south of Vietnam. After nine months they transferred me to another camp in Long Binh. The last camp was in Phuc Long, Bara, which is far from Saigon near the frontier between Vietnam and Cambodia.

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

L: During this time that I worked in the labor camps I realized that if I stayed in my country I did not have any bright future because I was a Navy officer for the last four months and I couldn't find any job. I couldn't live in that condition with the Communists. I decided to escape out of my country.

A: Just to turn back a little bit, what about your education at that time? Do you remember your school life and how it was?

- L: I graduated from high school in 1969 and spent two years at the technical institute at Phu Tho, Vietnam as a mechanical engineer for two years. During that time I had to go into the Navy for service for six years. My education was interrupted then at that time.
- A: Do you recall your journey, how you escaped?
- L: When I lived in the labor camps I had contact with some of my friends who lived on the outside of the camp. They were in some kind of business like the black market. So they had money and they wanted to escape. I wrote a letter to them and let them know that I was ready to let them pilot a small boat from Vietnam to some foreign country near Vietnam. They sent back a letter to me that they contacted each other and bought a small boat with a small engine, one cylinder, ten horsepower. The length of the boat was 30' X 10'. It carried thirty-two persons to escape out of Vietnam from a city near the seaside.
- A: Did anybody have any problems with seasickness?
- L: Most of them had trouble with seasickness. On the third day I met a big typhoon on the South China Sea and I missed my direction. Also in that time we didn't have enough food and fresh water. The wind blew me to the north so I landed in Hong Kong after eleven days.
- A: Did you have a lot of difficulties on the boat?
- L: I never used a small boat without safety conditions like that. I had to use that boat though because I did not have another one. I tried with my experience how to use that boat without a compass, without a sextant.
- A: Who were most of the people on the boat?
- L: All of the people on the boat were businessmen. They had some kind of private business so they could still live in Vietnam under the Communists.
- A: Did you have any maps or anything to help you go to Hong Kong?
- L: Yes, I had one map that I took from the geography table of the high school and I used that.
- A: How did you meet your wife?
- L: During the time that I stayed in the refugee camp at Hong Kong I met her. She was also a Vietnamese refugee. She was there three months before me.
- A: When did you get married?

L: I got married after I arrived in the United States, two months after.

A: Where in the United States did you first enter?

L: I entered in Seattle, Washington.

A: How did you contact and come here?

L: I didn't do anything. The war service gave me a sponsor and my sponsor helped me out. The United Nations paid for me to get here and I had to pay them back.

A: How much?

L: \$600 for the ticket.

A: Why did you come to Youngstown?

L: Because my sponsor lives in Youngstown.

A: What is his name?

L: Reverend Farkas at the Hungarian Presbyterian Church.

A: How did you learn about the United States?

L: When I lived in Vietnam I already studied with a teacher who came from the United States. A lot of the magazines and newspapers spoke of the United States.

A: Did you have any American friends?

L: Yes, I was working with the U. S. Navy for three years during the time that I served in the Vietnam Navy. I had a lot of friends.

A: Did you fight with the Communists when you worked with the U. S. Navy?

L: Yes.

A: Can you recall a little bit about the war?

L: My job during that time was to maintain the warships so I worked in the city working on the mechanics of the warship.

A: You didn't fight?

L: No.

A: Do you have any friends or relatives who sacrificed their life?

L: A lot of the members of my family did, like my uncle.

A: Can you tell me about him a little bit?

L: He was the captain of the special force Green Berets. They had a strong force in Vietnam before the Communists. He was kept in a labor camp somewhere in Vietnam and he is still there.

A: What were your first impressions of America?

L: My first impression was that there was a lot of freedom.

A: What do you mean by freedom?

L: You can do anything you like.

A: How do you feel about Communists?

L: I hate them.

A: Can you explain a little more why you hate them?

L: With the Communist government I don't have any freedom.

A: Did they take your property?

L: Yes, after they took over my country they took over the property of my parents. They chased them out of my house and wanted to send them someplace they called the new economic zone. That is someplace deep in the forest without the comforts of life; there isn't enough food or even water, no medicine.

A: How many years haven't you seen your parents?

L: Three years.

A: Do you still have contact with them?

L: Yes, by letter.

A: What about the rest of your family? Are they separated or are they still together?

L: They still live together.

A: Do they still work for the Communists?

L: Yes.

A: Do you have any other feelings toward them?

L: I don't agree with them about politics.

A: Do you recall anything that they taught you?

L: I learned it, but I don't remember it. If you don't live under the capitalist government you can easily believe what the Communists decide, but after you live half of your life with the capitalists and then you realize what the Communists say, you know that they are lies and not true.

A: What do you think about your life in America?

L: I would say that it is easier than in my country because we can go to work and look for a job and spend our money on what we want. Nobody takes your money like in Vietnam.

A: Did they pay you when you worked for them?

L: No, I didn't receive anything; I just worked.

A: How about clothes?

L: One year, one pair of clothes.

A: What did your clothes look like?

L: The first year I was in the labor camp they gave us prisoner clothes, brown colors with a red strip. The second year they gave us khaki clothes.

A: What about food?

L: There wasn't enough food at the camp.

A: How long did you have to work?

L: One day you had to wake up at 6:30 to look for food yourself.

A: Where did you get food?

L: We had to get a table around the camp and cook it by yourself and eat it before you started to work. At 7:00 you had to go with your group to the deep forest to cut trees down and burn the small branches. You would move the big tree outside of the forest. After that you had to dig the ground to cultivate food like corn.

A: How many hours did you work a day?

L: Ten hours. We worked from 7:00 until 5:00.

A: Did you have a break for lunch?

L: For an hour. Each hour working in the sun was very hard.

A: Did they have someone to control when you are doing your work?

L: Yes. They had two soldiers with weapons to take care of you.

A: Were most of the laborers officials?

L: Yes. All of them were officers of the Republic Vietnam government.

A: What did the soldiers do to someone who refused to work?

L: They beat them with the handle of their weapon and took them someplace to keep them, like jail or in some hole under the ground. For jail in the labor camp they dug a hole and covered it with branches.

A: Have you ever been there?

L: Two times.

A: What did you do?

L: I was in there with three of my friends because during the study time I didn't want to study. I was talking to my friends and the Communist guard saw and kept me in there two days.

A: Were most of the laborers guys?

L: Yes.

A: What about girls, what did they do?

L: I didn't see them.

A: They were separated.

L: Yes.

A: How long did they keep you in jail?

L: Two days.

A: Without food?

L: I had a little soup, rye soup.

A: How did you feel? Did you want to run away?

L: For sure. I thought a long time before I decided to escape out. I made a plan for myself before I did.

A: Tell us a little bit about your plan.

L: I decided what kind of boat would make it across the sea. My friends didn't buy the kind of boat that I wanted, but I had to accept it because I had no way.

A: How much did they pay for the boat?

L: My friends paid 30 ounces of gold.

A: Didn't you use money at that time? Why did you use gold?

L: At that time they changed money, so nobody wanted to keep money. Everybody wanted to keep gold or diamonds; that was better.

A: When you first arrived here where did you learn to speak English?

L: I learned it in Vietnam before, when I was studying in high school.

A: Do you find any language difficulties here?

L: Yes, it is very difficult. I study at Y.S.U. I started in 1980 with all the quarters.

A: How do you manage with language difficulties? Do you have a place to go and study English?

L: The first time I contacted the International Institute at Youngstown and they teach English as a second language.

A: Is it for free?

L: It is not free, but my sponsor paid for it.

A: Does he still pay for you now?

L: Yes.

A: Even though you still have a job?

L: Yes.

A: Would you like to tell us about your job or your first job when you came here?

L: My present job was my first job in the United States. I work for Kessler Products Company on McClurg Road in Boardman.

A: What do you do?

- L: Labor. I work full-time, eight hours. They have three shifts that change every week, but I have to trade with some of my friends so I can keep my classes at school.
- A: How many subjects do you study?
- L: I take twelve hours, but this quarter I have fourteen.
- A: What do you think about your living conditions here?
- L: My sponsor helps me a lot.
- A: What about your religion? Have you found a place to practice your religion?
- L: No.
- A: What was your religion?
- L: I am Buddhist. My family is Buddhist. There is no place here to practice my religion.
- A: Do you have any entertainment?
- L: I have a lot, but I don't have time now.
- A: Do you plan to have children here?
- L: Yes.
- A: If you have children here do you think about the difficulties between generations? How will you teach them?
- L: I will keep my background. I will speak my native language at home and teach them how to write and read Vietnamese. In school they will study English so my children will be able to speak both languages; I think that is better than one language.
- A: Can you tell us a little bit about your culture? What do they do during national holidays?
- L: The New Year is a very important holiday in my country. Every time they have it I feel so sad.
- A: What day is it?
- L: It is in February of this year.
- A: How long have you been here?
- L: I have been here one year and nine months now.

A: Do you plan to stay in Youngstown?

L: I will live here. When I graduate I will look for someplace where the weather is warmer, Florida or California or someplace like that because here it is too cold.

A: Do you look for a special job?

L: No.

A: What is your goal in life?

L: After I graduate I will look for a job overseas and go back to an Asian country.

A: Why do you want to go back?

L: I want to live near my country.

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

L: When I arrived in the United States I decided that I had to look for some kind of job and earn it by myself. I knew I had to keep studying in order to find a job more suitable.

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

L: I would like to see them change from Communist to Capitalist again. I hope life is easier for the people in my country.

A: Do you want to overthrow the Communists there?

L: Yes, that's what I want, but if they can't do that I wish they could be more comfortable in life there, and have more freedom.

A: Do you plan to bring your parents here if it is possible?

L: Yes, I tried. I made an application with the Catholic Immigration Service in New York. I hope one day they will be here.

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

L: Yes, any time.

A: Do you plan to apply for papers to become an American citizen?

L: I didn't decide that yet. I have a Green Card now and I think that is enough.

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A: Do you want to add anything?

L: No.

A: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW