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Oral History Interview with Son Ngoc Ta

For this oral history project I interviewed my dad, Son Ngoc Ta, a Vietnamese American refugee. My dad has spent more years in America than he has in Vietnam, but I had never learned about my dad's story before because we don't really have a close relationship. There is a communication barrier within our family; our family doesn't bond together often, discuss our emotions or how our day went, and are more disconnected compared to other families. There is also a language barrier because I don't speak Vietnamese. Interviewing my dad, researching his background, and putting together his story has been an extremely rewarding experience. It wasn't easy to do because my dad never really talks about his past out loud.

During the interview, I utilized an oral history technique I learned from a community member that hosts storytelling workshops with Khmer refugee elders in America. This community member says storytelling isn't a linear process, especially for those processing old traumatic memories: storytelling is like a constellation, with memories popping up from all over a person's life and connecting to each other in unexpected ways. In my interview with my dad, I started by asking him easier questions about his life in America, and eventually asked him about his life in Vietnam and his refugee experience. During our interview we jumped back and forth between his life in America and his life in Vietnam. As we got further into the interview, my dad felt more and more comfortable sharing details and interesting stories. This interview style put

more work on me because I had to spend a lot of time organizing these stories into chronological order, but it was fruitful and led to lots of great information.

In this paper, I'll be outlining my dad's early experiences as a kid in Vietnam in the middle of the Vietnam war, his reasons for leaving Vietnam and risking his life on a boat, his first experiences in America, and how he was able to stabilize his life in the years coming up to my own birth. Through this paper, I am piecing together the missing piece of history in my life, from 1964, the year my father was born, and up to 2000, the year I was born.

Life in Vietnam (1964-1983)

The Vietnam War between North Vietnam and its communist allies, and South Vietnam and it's anti-communist allies, started in 1954 and ended on April 30th, 1975. My dad, Son Ngoc Ta, was born on October 26th, 1964, right in the middle of this conflict. He grew up with 7 siblings, 3 brothers and 4 sisters, in District 7 of Saigon, the former capital of South Vietnam, and now known as Ho Chi Minh City. According to my dad, he didn't really experience anything super dangerous during the war. As an elementary school kid growing up, according to my dad, the conflict was "not exactly in my area, but you can feel it." I was surprised and didn't think he would have so little experiences of war, but this might have happened because he either lived in a lucky area, or because he was just a kid and he forgot a lot of what happened.

The worst of his experiences in Vietnam began when he was 10 years old, with the Fall of Saigon. My dad described the Fall of Saigon with an analogy, "Ok, so you remember Afghanistan and the U.S.? Same thing [happened] in Vietnam in 1975," referring to the U.S. withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan in 2020-2021, and the Taliban's re-establishment of their rule. My dad's experiences of the communist takeover of Vietnam are similar to everything else I've heard with others experiences in South Vietnam:

After they left, the communists take over. They control everything, they don't let you do anything. They don't believe nobody. They want you to do whatever they want you to do. Just be quiet. Do whatever they wanted you to do. They put all the soldiers in the houses; a couple of people in this house, this house, our house, everywhere. Yeah they control everything, they want you to know who you are and how you have money. If you [ever] eat good food, [it was] not good. [They'd wonder] how they have the duck? Where the money from? How he have duck for dinner tonight? Like Mao Ze Dong. And then they children, [when] they go to school, [they ask], 'What did your mom do [today]? What did your father do [today]?'

I was curious how conscious my dad was of the communist takeover at the time, as he was just 10 years old; did he really know what was going on? I asked my dad if he ever told the communists anything:

No, I was old enough. I said "No, they didn't do anything," but others, they told. They reported. The communists make you report your parents. "What did they do?" That's how Khmer Rouge did that with the Cambodian people. They want to know who you are. Are you against the communists or not? They control everything.

Both the Khmer Rouge and the communist forces in Vietnam came into power in April 1975, and had a similar approach to Mao Ze Dong's cultural revolution in China. These aggressive policies led the south Vietnamese people who weren't able to escape to live their lives in constant terror and supervision. Various groups in Vietnam experienced different degrees of persecution, with those experiencing the worst to leave at any costs, including leaving on a small boat and sailing to who knows where.

Boat People, Refugee (1983-1984)

The Cambodian-Vietnamese war started in 1979, leading Vietnamese forces into Cambodia to fight the Khmer Rouge as retaliation to stop them from taking Vietnamese territory. It was during this war that my dad turned about 18 or 19 years old and he was about to be sent to join the Vietnamese military and join the fight, but he didn't want to, "If I [still] lived there, I had to go to the army to go kill people for the killing fields. I had to go to Cambodia to kill them. And that's it. I just didn't want to do it. So I had to escape. The Killing Fields in 1983 was still active in Cambodia." I think that my dad used "killing fields" as a synonym for the "Khmer Rouge" here, or he was mistaken, because according to my research although the Khmer Rouge was active in that time, the Killing Fields and the genocide of Khmer people had mostly stopped by then. Nevertheless, my dad's story still makes sense. My dad didn't want to risk his life for the Vietnamese army and government, so he left.

My dad left and escaped by boat. I asked him how, and he said, "An American boat, American Navy." He didn't give me all the details himself, but according to the stories I heard from my mom and my sisters, he was able to get onto a small boat leaving Vietnam because his mom provided a jewelry bribe. This boat ended up tipping over or some tragedy happened, and my dad lost his brother. Eventually they were rescued by a U.S. Navy boat that had hundreds of Vietnamese refugees:

> You know how many people [were] on there? 221 people hahaha. How do I know? Because the U.S. counts people off, they say "1… 2… 3…" they have to know how many people [are] on the boat. They call that group based on the number of people. US-75 means 75 people. My boat was called US-222, but one baby died, so then there was 221. This big boat took me to the Philippines and I stay there for 1 year and that's how I go to America.

What my dad was telling me was exactly what I learned from the documentary *Bolinao 52* directed by Duc Nguyen. In this documentary, there was a boat filled with about 110 Vietnamese refugees that was stranded in the middle of the ocean for several weeks, turned to cannibalism, encountered a U.S. Navy boat but left stranded, and then eventually was saved by Filipino fishermen. I asked my dad if he knew about this story but he didn't:

> I don't know that story but I hear a lot like that already. You know how many people died? At least a million people. Because pirates from Thailand killed them, the boats sink, some of them even eat each other. Some people say "if I die, give my son a piece of my thigh." And then whoever ate people like that can't come to America. They had to go to Germany or Switzerland or something like that. Not America, they didn't want to keep them. Those boat people, I've been there, I saw it. When I arrived [in the Philippines], I had a million stories.

This matches up with what *Bolinao 52* explains for the leader of the Bolinao 52 boat, who led the cannibalism for survival purposes. Although other survivors of the Bolinao 52 were able to come to America, the leader was exiled from America and currently lives in Europe. Duc Nguyen and my dad had the same message for me: all the boat people suffered, but to different extents. Some people were rescued within a few days, others in weeks, and the others who were never being rescued, but everyone suffered and saw a lot. My dad's rescue boat came after 3 nights, and he was able to enter the refugee camps in the Philippines in about a week.

I asked my dad if he remembered which camp he went to, and he responded affirmatively, "Yeah! One in Palawan Island. Now it's a tourist country but before it was a refugee camp haha." And then after 6 months in Palawan, he was transferred to the refugee camp in Bataan (he pronounces it Batah-ann, the Filipino way). My mom said she went there too, and I

mentioned the coincidence, to which my dad responded, “Yeah before you go to America you have to go there. Doesn’t matter where [you came from], so people who landed in Hong Kong or Japan, they have to go to Bataan. They call it, ‘you have to learn American culture’.” In Bataan, there was the Philippine Refugee Processing Center that checked out refugees for health conditions, figured out paperwork, and taught refugees about American culture so they would be able to adjust to America better. I asked my dad if he remembered anything he was taught in the camps, to which he said, “Just the culture in America.”

Arriving in America (1984-1990)

My dad explained that the camps taught you the basics, but it was a whole different ball game once he actually came:

> They just show basics, but once you come you see, you know, too much looloo [crazy] people. Hahahahaha. When I came here, I first arrived, my sponsor was a white old man. [He sponsored] me and my cousin and then another friend, hahaha, and then he molest me [when we arrived]! I say “What the hell?! Is that American culture??” I don’t know. I ask my friend, “Did you learn this in the camps?” He said, “I didn’t!” I said, “Me too! Maybe the culture huh! Hahahaha,” I don’t know, just keep moving on. He picked me up at the airport to take us to our house.

Tom was a leader of a church in Seattle that did work to sponsor refugees from Vietnam and help them acclimate to America; he was part of a VOLAG, a voluntary agency. My dad explained that he helped find them a place to rent and support them with their paperwork. He helped my dad and his friends, but they got away as soon as they could, “later [Tom] came to visit. Me and my friend run away. His church over here in Seattle, King Street, but no more. Maybe he’s dead, it was a long time ago.” Vietnamese refugees to America had a lot of resources

available due to America's sympathy and guilt they felt for the Vietnamese people. My dad was only 19 years old, coming to a country he's never been to before and barely able to speak the language, and happy to get any help he could get. He was enrolled in high school, but was soon kicked out because he was too old and didn't get enough credits, and never went to community college to continue his education. He didn't have an education, wasn't able to speak the language well, but at least he had some kind of help. My dad felt that he was better off compared to his fellow refugees from Cambodia and Laos.

Along with the help of Tom, my dad had the support of Asian agencies that would help refugees like my dad to find work and cheap apartments to share. My dad lived in apartments and rented houses with his friend and cousin in Everett, putting together money to pay their $500/mo rent. They found jobs through job agencies, "the job agency, they had in the old time to help refugee people. I see now Asian Counseling [ACRS] building looks like that, they help you look for a new job for refugee. They have Vietnamese workers too." These support systems for Asian immigrants and refugees were crucial back then and are still crucial resources today.

Through the help of support agencies and job agencies, my dad found lots of small jobs. He worked in factories making mattresses, T-shirt printing businesses, and other small jobs for a few months at a time. They paid only $3.50/hr which wasn't a lot back then, but according to my dad, still good, "$3.50 was not a lot, but better than now. You know what I mean? Well, only $3.50/hr but everything was cheap. Now you can make $20/hr but you can't buy anything! Back then, $3.50 was good, you could buy a lot of things." The economic situation back then was a lot different from how it is today. By working low-wage manual labor jobs, my dad was able to pay for rent and food and survive, which is a lot harder to do today. He was even able to buy a car soon after arriving in America! Again with the help of support agencies, "I bought my first car,

maybe a couple months after arriving. [The person that helped me] was like an agent, helped me do paperwork, and [helped me finance the car].” With that support, he was able to buy a nice and big ’77 4-door Buick Skylark.

My dad also didn’t remember a lot of overt racism towards him. He says that back then in Everett, “not a lot of racist people. Well actually there were racist people on farms far away, [but] not in the city. When I just came here, there’s not a lot of Asians, so they [Asians] were welcomed. Also, when you have a family, they’re very nice to you because they like families.” My dad’s experiences with racism and his ‘approval’ from Americans reminded me of the experiences that Asian immigrants went through in the late 19th century and early 20th century. Labor contractors looking for cheap laborers took in Japanese laborers and their entire families because then they were less likely to do things like gamble and show up drunk to work. However, my dad was able to recall a time where he witnessed a lot of Asian-White conflict:

> Back then we would go rollerskating in Lynnwood all the time. Yeah that time, oh man, Asian people would fight with White people all the time. Until one day the owner went, “okay that’s it! Thursdays, Asians only! Monday, White people!”, and we said okay, and then only went rollerskating on that one day. I didn’t go much, but it was a lot of fun whenever I went. This was in late 1980s. They divide them out because the young kids with the young kids, they like to fight, they don’t care. I wasn’t very good at roller skating, just did it for fun hahaha.

My dad came to America with very little social connections. Going roller skating and meeting other Asian people at work was where he made friends and met new people, and eventually grew out his social network. My dad actually met my mom through his friend’s girlfriend, and he told his side of the story:

I was living here with a friend in Seattle, and your mom had only been in America for a couple months. She went to community college, Seattle Central, and then she made friends with another girl who lived me. That girl was my friend's girlfriend; we all lived together. And then that girl wanted to introduce your mom to another guy actually. See, I didn't know anything, I just came back from Alaska! But I told them, hey I know that guy! I'll bring you guys to look for him, and your mom said okay. We got to his place and were looking for him, but someone said he wasn't there, come back later. So then I go, "Well, what can you do? Maybe we can go eat something." So we went to go eat and then go home. And then the next day, or later or something, your mom went to go see him and have a date with him. And then later, yeah, she call me she say she want to go out with me! I said, "What about that guy?" and then she said she don't like him, and then I said, "well okay." And then that's it.

It was around this time where my dad met my mom, that he had just come back from working in Alaska. It was 1988 and he found a job up in Alaska fixing up fishing nets on the shore for commercial fishing boats for 3 months. It was hard labor, and there wasn't much to do up there, but it paid well. After moving back to Seattle, this job in Alaska introduced him to his first long-term job at Seattle Marine Supplies, where he worked in a warehouse and helped repair fishing nets at their Ballard location. After years of working short-term gigs, this became his first long-term job, going on to work at Seattle Marine Supplies for the next 10 years.

Stabilizing in America (1990-2000)

In the 1990s, my dad was living a relatively stable life. It was only 10 years earlier that my dad was fleeing Vietnam by boat, living in refugee camps, and trying to figure out his way in America. He had met my mom, was living in apartments with her, and in 1992 my older sister

Tina was born, and in 1993 my older sister Jessica was born. This happy family of 4 was living in the South Seattle area, in Beacon Hill.

Eventually, my dad bought his first house and I was curious how. My dad explained that he worked really hard to create his own opportunity. It was only 6 months before he purchased his first house in 2000 that he had no money saved. He had just started working at a new fishing supplies company, LFS, and found an opportunity to make some more money. There was a client looking for a special type of hand-tied fishing rope, and my dad told his boss to not worry about it, they should take the order and sell it to them. My dad told his bosses he would take care of everything; my dad told them how much they should charge, my dad would finish the order, and he would also find people to help tie these ropes for him too and figure out their payroll himself. He told his bosses at LFS to trust him and he could make them money if they gave him the autonomy. As a result, with lots of hours of work, probably 60+ hours a week, my dad was able to save up enough money to put a down payment on his first house. Through a combination of hard work, his own smarts and initiative, and a little luck, my dad was able to start building his life in America.

That small little house in South Beacon was the house I was born in. And it's only been in these past couple weeks that I've been able to finally learn the history of how my family came to own that house. Growing up, I had always seen my dad go to work at 8am in the morning, come home at 4pm, eat some food, and sit down and tie some ropes for the new few hours until it was time to sleep. This was, and still is, rinse and repeat for my dad for the entire 22 years I've known him. It's only now that I've learned my dad's story: the war, the surveillance, the fight to not kill, the boats and refugee camps, experiencing the 'American culture' for the first time, and trying to figure out life for himself and his future family in this new and strange place.