

## **The Flight to Freedom**

### **By Xuyen Nguyen**

I still remember my parents talking about their days when we were in our native village in North Vietnam. It is extraordinary how their generation and mine have so much in common. In 1955, they fled Communism from the North to the South, and I, in 1995, from the South to another far away country. Communist revolutions have always caused mass exodus from wherever they started.

In 1945, the Communist government took control of the northern part of Vietnam and claimed independence from the French. Their employment of the Marxist ideology was nothing but terrorism and sabotage. Their targets were the rich and upper class people. Rich people whose properties were confiscated would face a trial for the exploitation of the poor and would end up in prison for at least one or two years. Eventually they would end up in hard labor or concentration camps. High ranking officials from the former government would face death or a life sentence, being judged by the People Court. The People Court was the most terrifying thing in those days. It consisted of a group of villagers who were told in advance what to say when they were asked to be present at the Court and to testify. Everything they said must be in favor of the authorities even when most of the time the defendant was innocent. The poor and lower class people became powerful authorities overnight.

In 1954, our family encountered a big change in the course of our lives. I was old enough to understand the well-being of my family at the time. My parents had worked hard day and night in the fields most of their lives until eventually they owned about one hundred acres of rice paddies. There were always at least two servants in our household and a few farm workers to work in our fields. My father was an honest hamlet chief who helped the villagers overcome the 1945 depression and the hunger that went along with it. My parents often talked about those days when dead bodies were found scattered along the village's roads. Hunger had killed about one million people at that time. Our family was lucky to have some rice stashed away, thanks to the previous year's good harvest. Every morning my parents would cook a big pot of rice soup at the village meeting house and

hand it out to those unfortunate people. The harvest of our family that year was all given to the villagers. They came to reap the rice right on the fields and hastily grind it for a full meal. Some people died as the result of eating rice that was not carefully cleaned. My brother often complained about not having enough to eat in those days. Each meal my parents would measure two bowls of rice for each one of us in the family. Those who worked in the fields would get an extra bowl of rice at each meal. Each time the subject was brought up, my parents would say that we were lucky to have something to eat. The poor needed help and we should spare some food to help them. Their Good Samaritan acts later brought them to the Communist People Court for poisoning the villagers with rice soup.

Ironically, the judges were our servants and those who we had saved from starvation. The court was held in our huge tile front yard. Standing inside the front door I could see both of my parents, hand-cuffed and knelling in front of the judicial team. After the verdict was announced, both of my parents were put in jail, separately. All our properties were confiscated, including our clothing. We were ordered to move into the backyard barn with nothing except a few old personal belongings and broken pots and pans to cook our meals. My oldest brother was fourteen at the time; too young to be the head of the household of three – himself, my eleven year old sister and myself.

Without our parents, my brother led all of us to the rice fields where we would gather the few strands of rice that were left in the fields after the harvest. Often we did not get enough for one meal. There were certain kinds of weed we could pick to cook with the rice. Our meals usually consisted of more weed than rice. Occasionally we were lucky enough to find a half dried puddle where we could catch a few small fish to supplement our nourishment. One night my brother decided that we should go to our chicken farm and steal a chicken to make chicken soup. It was a big risk as all our properties were strictly guarded by the Communist cadres. If we were caught we would likely be put in jail. Our attempt was successful somehow and the taste of the chicken soup that night was the best.

Our parents were released after one year in prison. It was amazing how the three of us survived until our parents were released. The plan for fleeing to the south was made shortly after that. South Vietnam at that time was free from Communist control. Food was in abundance and there were better opportunities for jobs. The only problem was how we could make it there without being caught on the way. Any attempt to flee to the south at that time would be considered an act of treason. My parents decided that we would rather take the risk than remain in the north.

Our family was divided into two groups; my father and I were the first to go. We pretended to go for a visit to my aunt and from there we would walk on foot twenty miles to a destination where we would meet my mother and my two siblings. We begged for food on our way and for shelter we would stop in some open markets to spend the night. There were days when we could not get any food and had to walk miles on an empty stomach, and there were nights when we slept out in an open field and were soaking wet in monsoon season.

We were halfway to the territory not under Communist control when we could no longer beg for our food; the risk of being caught was more intense at this point. There were more security checkpoints for it was closer to the border. We slept during the day and walked at night. We were without food for several days and the thought of us starving to death along the way horrified my parents. One morning we took a risk to go to an open market to beg for food. Seeing our half-starved group a man dressed in rich clothes approached us and offered to help. He asked if he could keep my sister in exchange for one basket full of rice. His request was immediately refused by my parents. They said that we would rather die together than be separated. My sister was only twelve, she looked tiny for her age, but she insisted that she wanted to go with the man. It was a heartbreaking decision for my parents. However, in order to keep the rest of us alive to reach our destination, we needed food. After that day, we never heard from my sister again. We tried every possible source to find my sister after we arrived in the South a few months later, but without success. The loss of my sister haunts our family until this day.

After twenty years living in the South, the Communist revolution repeated itself. In April of 1975 the Communists took control of South Vietnam. I was twenty eight years old and it was I who was imprisoned at this time; not for being rich but for being affiliated with the US Government. My elderly parents had to live without any support for three years while I was in prison. They had to survive on whatever they had; clothes and furniture were sold for food and medicines. By the time I returned home there was not much left for the family to live on.

It was now my turn to make the plan for an escape. The difference this time was that we must go out of the country for there was no place in this country where we could go. Due to their ages, my parents could not manage to escape by a boat like most people in that time. We compromised and decided that I would go along and perhaps, if I made it, I could send for them later. One attempt after another failed and each failure meant five to six months in jail. The last attempt cost me everything I had including my parent's house. The Communist authority claimed the house right after they captured me when I was on the boat. I made no more attempts after that.

My father died eleven years after the revolution. His dream of being free from communism was not fulfilled. I still remember him saying, "I thought we are safe here in the South, where could we go now?" My mother died five years after my father's death. I know from the very depth of her heart that she too wanted us to be in the world where there was no Communism.

In 1995, under a special program of the US Government, my husband and my four children were relocated to the USA. The memory of the day we fled from North Vietnam came back to me as I boarded the plane to the USA. How similar it was to my trip this time, only this time it was to a faraway place, the USA.