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Speaker key:

SM: Sarah McConnell, producer and host

AS: Audio Sample

MS: Marc Selverstone

PB: Pete Bondi

LN: Lieu Nguyen

PJ: Paul Jacobs

PN: Phu Nguyen

PG: Phuong Nguyen

PO: Phu Jo Nguyen

TD: Thuy Dinh

TO: Toa Do

TT: Thanh Tan

KD: Kim Delevett

UN: Unknown speaker

JS: Jason Stewart

Transcript:

00:00:00

- SM The following program was made possible in part by a major grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, exploring the human endeavour. [music].
- AS We couldn't tell anyone, the neighbors of anyone. My grandfather said, "when the time come, I'm gonna call home and I'm gonna give you a code. And you would know what that means."
- SM This is Thuy Dinh. She was 13 years old when the city of Saigon fell to North Vietnamese forces in a surprise attack, April 30th, 1975, 10 days before Thuy's family got that call from her grandfather.
- AS Each person get 2 pound. That's it. We cannot leave with more luggage than that. We were shuttered to this compound that's part of the U.S. army. And the next day we landed in the Philippines Clark Air Base. And it was in Wayman that we found out South Vietnam had fallen. From April 20th to May 27, we moved through 3 different places before we landed in Virginia, in an entirely different culture. I never traveled outside of Vietnam before that, and then, you know, within that one month, so many things changed. I mean, I lost a country. [music].
- SM From Virginia Humanities, this is With Good Reason. I'm Sarah McConnell. Today, leaving the Vietnam War. By 1973, the U.S. had been involved in Vietnam for more than 2 decades. President Richard Nixon was ramping up bomb raids, but the U.S. still wasn't winning. In January, Nixon finally signed the Paris Peace Accords, a peace treaty to end U.S. involvement. But the war between the north and south Vietnamese wasn't over. So, a new question emerged. After the Paris Peace Accords, what would happen to Vietnam?
- MS The Paris Accords allowed over 100,000 north Vietnamese soldiers to remain south of the 17th parallel at the signing of the peace.
- SM What does that mean?
- MS That means that there were over 100,000 north Vietnamese with their daggers pointed at Saigon and there was nothing short of resuming the war that the south Vietnamese could do to get them out. [music].
- SM This is Marc Selverstone. He's a Vietnam war expert, and the assistant director for presidential studies at the University of Virginia's Miller Center for Public Affairs. He spent years working with the secret Whitehouse tapes of Presidents John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, and Richard M. Nixon.

MS The Nixon administration wanted to leave the war with its honor intact, with its credibility intact, with a sense that the United States was still a powerful force for good, and leader of those free nations. And as much as the administration tried to suggest that the south Vietnamese would be able to stand after the Americans left, most people recognized that that just wasn't the case. The south Vietnamese were essentially signing their own death warrant.

SM He says President Nixon and Henry Kissinger had no illusions about what the accord meant for Vietnam.

MS So they urged this conversation in early August of 1972.

SM August 1972. This is months before the peace accord, and years before the fall of Saigon.

MS Kissinger says to Nixon, "Mr. President, everything is coming together, you will be able to get out. You will have achieved your goals. And then by 1974 or so, when south Vietnam falls, people won't care."

SM Do we have that tape?

MS Yeah, we have that tape.

AS [inaudible] Mr President. Vietnam [inaudible]. If we settle it [inaudible] no one will give a damn.

MS No one will give a damn.

SM Were they sorrowful?

MS There was a sense of resignation. But it was essential for Nixon and Kissinger to get the United States out. South Vietnam had become a distraction. The Cold War confrontation with the Soviets, the emerging recognition of the People's Republic of China. This is what mattered to the Nixon administration, plaguing the bigger game in the Cold War. And Vietnam really needed to be taken off the table.

SM Although U.S. combat missions had ended with the Paris Peace Accords, some American personnel remained stationed in Saigon.

AS I played tennis, and had no fear for my well being. Literally, four weeks before I had to be evacuated from Saigon.

00:05:24

SM This is retired admiral Pete Bondi. He was stationed in Saigon.

PB I was going for one year tour of duty. I was supposed to be there for a year.

SM Do you think even the higher ups in America fully thought you'd get your year?

PB I'll tell you one person who did think that was the ambassador to Vietnam from the United States,

MS Ambassador Graham Martin who refused to believe that Saigon really was going to fall.

SM This is Marc Selverstone again.

MS He was being told that in no uncertain terms by his aides in Saigon. But he himself had lost a son in the fighting, his only son. And he refused to give into the notion, the defeatist notion, that all was lost.

SM Saigon fell April 30th, 1975. What had been happening leading up to the overrunning of Saigon by the north?

MS A series of developments, not the least of which was Watergate and then fast forwarding to Nixon's resignation in August of 1974 and then Congress deciding to continue to winnow down the funding to south Vietnam. These combined with poor showing of the south Vietnamese army led the north to mount larger operations probing, would the United States come back in if south Vietnam's viability was really threatened?

SM Did we?

MS No.

PB The war was approaching Saigon. I did not know that through our sources of information but I knew that because you could begin to hear the guns from a distance. The flow of information, it was awful. Our principal source of information, until the last month, was armed forces radio. And I'd hear things about, they were going on in south Vietnam. I had no idea they were going on. You heard the guns in the distance and you knew trouble was coming.

MS The north Vietnamese were overrunning province after province from the north to the south.

PB It just moved like lightning moves on a storm at night. And they just kept rolling up one city after another. And south Vietnamese were disillusioned. They never dreamed that

this would happen. They and the civilians, they were leaving the city at the same time, jammed the highway, complete gridlock, I mean there was like shooting ducks. North Vietnamese, for the very first time probably, said to themselves, “my gosh we got a chance on taking Saigon.”

SM So as the north was closing in on Saigon and only days remained before Saigon itself fell, was the Pentagon, was the Whitehouse, were others saying, “Get those people out of there?”

MS Only at the very end did the Whitehouse recognize and give the signal that the final evacuation had to take place. No one could’ve imagined that the fifth largest army in the world would disintegrate as quickly as it did. These soldiers were shedding their uniforms, dropping their boots, trying to blend in with the tens and really hundreds of thousands of south Vietnamese trying to get to Saigon to figure out a way how to get out of the country whether by air or by sea.

SM So the people of south Vietnam were desperate to get out of there. But how? Huge lines formed at the American embassy. Many were hoping, pleading for the Americans to help them escape.

PB The embassy was so overwhelmed by the people that they set up a new office out by the airport. There was an airplane that came in every 30 minutes and we loaded, oh I guess, 100 or 150 Vietnamese on that plane. And we did that during the daylight, each day 7 days a week.

SM Lieu Nguyen, a 10-year-old girl was one of the thousands rushing to get out. In 2015, she was interviewed as part of an oral history project by Virginia Tech’s Masters in Planning program. Her father had arranged for his wife and 8 children to fly out on April 29th.

LN But my dad drove off of the side of some rice patties and we saw about 28 helicopters that were there so he pulled over, he thought that’s where we were supposed to meet, and when he come to each of the pilots of each of those helicopters and said the password, they did not know what he was talking about.

00:10:15

SM They spent hours searching for the right one and they missed it. But that didn’t stop them.

LN My younger brother, he is handicapped, so it was kind of tough for us to move around. We really couldn’t move quickly. We were scrambling to figure out ways to get out of Vietnam.

- SM There was a naval base nearby and they figured it was a good bet for transportation out. It took many hours and a dangerous effort to get their car through the gates closing in on them but Lieu and her family made it through. Inside the gates, they gathered next to a flagpole for the night.
- LN And it was nice, air breezy, it was like, "Ah, great perfect spot." Um, we had instant noodles for dinner that night and then we went to sleep and then, by midnight, the naval base got bombed. And we actually went from bomb shelter to bomb shelter in that naval base that whole night.
- SM The naval base was evacuated and the family was on their own again. The next morning they wound up with three other families on a small fishing boat that nearly sank. Passing ships were all too full to save them. Finally a tugboat took them to a small city south of Saigon.
- LN By the time that we go to the closest city, that's already the 30th. By then, Saigon had already taken over because we got there by early afternoon. So Saigon had already been taken over at 10.
- SM Lieu and her family had nearly died twice in less than 36 hours and they hadn't even left Vietnam yet.
- LN We were tired, exhausted, no food, and so my mother decided to have a vote, very democratic right? She said, "let's vote. We've been on the road now for 36 hours. Who wants to go home and who wanted to stay?" My dad said, "I understand that communists is bad but they probably just gonna take me to go to some concentration camp or they kill me. And that's okay. You know, but I don't want to see the kids have to suffer." He voted to go home. And my mother by herself decided that, "no, we're gonna be beggars in America but we're going. We're not going back. We're not going to live with the Communists."
- SM Her family negotiated their way onto a ship. Lieu remembers seeing flares go up in the city along with the north Vietnamese flag. The takeover was official. The ship took off.
- LN There was supposed to be some steel barrier out in the Pacific Ocean. And if we go through it, they say that most likely the ship is going to blow up. And either you crash and we all die or you crash into it and we're able to break that steel barrier and then we'll be able to be free. So, the captain decided that they're just gonna go right through it. And so, everybody was so scared, praying. All of a sudden we heard this loud, loud, loud noise, like boom! And then just dead silent. And then everybody just clapped. "Oh my god, we made it through that barrier." So that's how we got out. That's how we got out in the Pacific Ocean.

- SM But their voyage was far from over. From that boat, they moved to a barge. Her mother fell into the water but was later rescued. Later, her brother passed out likely, from dehydration and seasickness.
- LN Then my mother was driven now that we have to get into a ship to be able to get him help. So there was an aircraft carrier that came through—I forgot which one it was.
- SM Out in the middle of the sea, the only way to get on this aircraft carrier was by climbing a rope ladder. After many hours, they all made it on. But Lieu's father couldn't climb the hanging ladder with her brother and all of their belongings. He'd have to leave something behind. They'd been traveling with gold. So we grabbed that bag and left the rest.
- LN When we reunited, my mother finally settled down and finally, okay, counting all the bags. Where's the gold bag? My dad said, "you know, it's that one." She said, "that's not the gold bag."
- SM And she was right. It wasn't the bag of gold. That had been left back on the barge. What was inside this bag? Cans of condensed milk.
- LN That bag that contained the condensed milk actually was what saved us because, on the aircraft carrier, there wasn't enough food for everybody. I mean, I don't know, they must have had thousands of people on there. Each day, they gave us a plate of rice. That's not enough for 10 of us.
- SM Lieu's mother also brought a carton of cigarettes with her, and she'd bartered with the American soldiers: one pack for a bag of instant noodles.
- LN And so that's what got us through the five days on the aircraft carrier.
- SM The carrier finally landed safely in the Philippines where many refugees stayed. But Lieu's family was determined to push on to the United States where they'd ultimately settle in northern Virginia outside Washington D.C.
- LN Sometimes looking back, I just think, "Gosh, why? We were so lucky that we survived that versus the other people around us. And it was just amazing how we survived that."
- SM Lieu's story is harrowing but not uncommon. Thousands of Vietnamese people on boats floated out to sea. Sometimes never finding a port or the fuel they needed or another ship to take them to safety. Americans too were scrambling to get out of Saicon. Pete Bondi remembers wondering how he would escape.

PB No one said, "Gee, there's talk about us leaving," or anything. Our job was to get the south Vietnamese out. Needless to say, Sarah, at one point, when you do that enough, you begin to say to yourself, "Ehgads, am I going to be one of those people on a plane?"

SM By the morning of April 30th, the airport and surrounding roads became so dangerous that Pete couldn't even make it to a plane to escape so a plan was developed to run helicopters in and out dropping people off on ships.

PB Exactly and so I went in the helicopter with probably several other American civilians but I was the only military and then the rest were south Vietnamese.

SM Pete Bondi was one of the last American servicemen to leave Vietnam.

PB And I did not even know where we were going. I just knew we were leaving Saigon.

AS There were more than 80 helicopters shuttling people out to the carriers. Helicopters, transports, even fighter bombers, in an aimless whirling merry-go-round over the city. Although it seemed much longer, it took only 2 or 3 minutes to load the helicopters. And then it was farewell to Vietnam. But because there wasn't room to store their helicopters, the Vietnamese were forced to ditch their aircrafts at sea.

PB We had them stacked up there, you know, 4, 5 at a time, waiting to land. So we would ship anything that was worth saving and push it over the side.

SM Captain Paul Jacobs was helping guide helicopters like the one in Pete Bondi was on to his aircraft carrier, the USS Kirk.

PB The one that was really dangerous was a big CH 47.

SM The CH 47 was too big to land on board.

PB Right. If he tried to land on Kirk's flight deck, he would've impacted the ship and killed a lot of people.

SM How frightened did they seem to be?

PB Oh they were scared to death. If they hadn't found us, they would've—if they had to crash at sea, they probably would've lost the majority of the people.

00:17:40

SM So he came out, here was a giant helicopter hovering over you. What did you all do?

PB I said, "hey get under there and see if we can catch them when they come out."

SM What were they saying to you?

PB There was no communication because the noise was so bad. But we assumed they were going to jump. We all knew that. But we never expected the first one to be a baby, one-year-old baby.

SM The south Vietnamese pilot's wife dropped her one-year-old baby out of the helicopter hoping the sailors below would catch him. They did.

PB We caught 'em all. I think the only [inaudible] we had was somebody had a sprained ankle.

SM The guys on deck caught at least 15 people dropping 20 to 30 feet from that helicopter.

PB We took 17 helicopters and about 140 people.

SM Captain Paul Jacobs was then ordered back to Vietnam, just after the fall of Saigon, to rescue the Vietnamese navy from certain death. He and his crew went on to save thousands of people by carrying them on board and guiding or towing their boats to the Philippines.

PB And so we went back to see what we could do. If I sent them back, they would've all been dead. They would've all killed them all. It was the most horrible situation I've ever seen in my lifetime. That was the largest humanitarian effort ever conducted by the United States Navy.

AS Saigon, April 30th, 8 o'clock. The last American helicopter prepares to lift off the last of the evacuees. Scores of people still crowded on to the embassy roof in the vain hope of rescue.

Do you think the last ones have gone?

I think they're all gone.

I think these people are committing suicide staying up here, but what can you do?

MS The images of those last helicopters leaving Saigon with Americans and south Vietnamese aboard was a sad moment.

SM Marc Selverstone again.

- MS This is a really sad chapter in American history regardless of how one feels about the propriety of the war. The United States had failed in its effort to support a non-communist alternative in south Vietnam. It was not a failure on the part of those Americans who fought there. It was a policy failure. It was a failure of leadership. It was a failure of assessing global conditions. It was a failure of understanding the nature of communism and nationalism in southeast Asia. It was a failure of understanding the limits of American power and as a result of those failures millions of people lost their lives, we had a different understanding of leadership, of truth, we could never look on politicians again and believe what they were telling us. Vietnam changed so much with the fabric of Americans' lives. I think we're still trying to come to grips with the impact of the American adventure in Vietnam.
- SM While Americans began to deal with the aftermath of the war at home, the south Vietnamese began to deal with their new reality.
- PN My uncle got the news from the radio saying that you know that south has surrendered.
- SM That's Phu Nguyenn. He was 10 years old the morning Saigon fell.
- PN And I remember my aunt sitting right next to us and said, "well you know the communists now won but at least they're Vietnamese so I don't think they would be that bad. That's what she said.
- SM As the north Vietnamese tanks rolled in, 10-year-old Phu took advice from neighbors. He ran outside smiling and handed out noodles to show his support for the north Vietnamese soldiers. He was afraid they'd shoot him otherwise. It wasn't long after when some relatives from the north came to visit.
- PN Because they heard the news that the American and the south and Vietnamese were so brutal to us so that's why they rushed over trying to rescue us.
- SM And they brought food?
- PN Yes, and I remember one of my relatives, she had rice in her bag. And when she saw our house, she threw it away. She was so ashamed, feeling like she was being cheated because she saw how we lived. They thought that we were poor, we were dirt poor. That's what they thought.
- SM So why had they thought that you were being mistreated by the south Vietnamese and the U.S.?
- PN All this propaganda from north Vietnam, there was no outside media coming in. So they described our lives, a lot of hardship, mistreatment, everything they got was one sided.

SM For the next four years, Phu and his family stayed in Saigon under communist rule, and his new life?

PN It changed dramatically.

SM Loudspeakers were set up across the city and mass early morning exercises were enforced by law, as were short haircuts for boys like Phu. Books were burned, and even the way math was taught took on a new format.

00:23:08

PN It has a problem like, in the morning you kill five Americans and then in the afternoon you kill four more, so how many do you kill in a day? That's your math problem. That's nine. And I remember the books were like that, so anti-American.

SM But Phu's family resisted the onslaught of media depicting Americans and south Vietnam as evil. Phu's mother taught him not to give in to pretend to put on a happy face and follow the rules. Their new leader Ho Chi Minh became uncle Ho.

PN And we were forced to write essay that we love uncle Ho and we listen to the rules that he taught us and we would kiss—pardon my language—but kiss his ass, you know, all the times, just tried to pretend and then we would go behind them and do anti-government stuff.

SM As time went on, Phu's mother's fears about his future grew. So she devised a plan for him to escape. And one day in April of 1979, the 14 year old boy boarded a boat. No one, including the captain, knew exactly where they'd end up. Phu remembers having just enough room to sit but not to lie down.

PN Our boat got ransacked by the pirate 17 times.

SM [gasps]. How many days were you at sea?

PN I think maybe 20 days. I saw people taking out their watches, their jewelry, and put in that bucket. And I remember you know they took some of the young ladies from our boat over to their boat. They jumped on and just dragged them. One attacks after another, ransacking our boats, and we got used to it.

SM After almost 3 weeks at sea, Phu's boat landed in Malaysia where they quickly destroyed the engine to keep police from forcing them back out onto the water. He spent the next 9 months in a refugee camp before he was allowed to join cousins in southern California where he lives today. Phu describes the experience of his arrival in the U.S. in 1980.

PN One of the person welcoming Vietnamese coming over, he came out and he said, "welcome to San Francisco." And this is the place where the land is so golden that you plant an antenna, it will become a tree. I remember that distinctively. And I have the first best food in my life for a long long time. It was Kentucky fried chicken. Tastes so good, I mean, it was the utmost happiest feeling that you're actually in heaven as you got to America.

SM From 1975 into the 1990s, hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese people came to the United States in a series of waves. First those who evacuated in the fall of Saigon and then the boat people like Phu and later groups including former political prisoners and the children of American servicemen. As a result, we have a Vietnamese American population today of about 2 million people. Many many Vietnamese came here. Do you think America is stronger for having opened its arms to this particular population?

PB Sarah, I can't answer the question without dwelling on what's happening presently. And I won't get into the politics of it but I think America has progressed from its exception from its immigrants. And the south Vietnamese were the best and the brightest as indicated by their willingness to do whatever it took to progress and do well in the U.S., make themselves upstanding American citizens. I think the same would be true whoever they are, that the U.S. will be better for if we do it intelligently. [music]

00:27:22

SM This is With Good Reason. We'll be right back.

After the fall of Saigon, thousands of Vietnamese people fled the new communist rule. They landed in refugee camps in places like Malaysia, and Thailand, and eventually many of them made it to the United States.

PG There were approximately five waves of refugees that came between 1975 and through the 1990s.

SM This is Phuong Nguyen.

PG I'm an assistant professor at California State University - Monterey Bay and I recently published my first book called Becoming Refugee American: The Politics of Rescue in Little Saigon.

SM In those decades, hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese refugees came to America. The earlier arrivals were intentionally spread out all over the country.

PG It was a very old-school definition of assimilation.

- SM The idea was that they needed to be an English only community, so they could learn the language faster.
- PG Cause they assume that if you don't learn to speak English, not only will you not be able to find a good job, not be able to succeed in school, but you're going to almost justify the discrimination that you face.
- SM The government relied heavily on churches and religious organizations to help with re-settlement.
- PG Religious organizations handled about 75% of the caseloads in 1875.
- SM Sponsors would act as ready-made communities for the refugees. When Thuy Dinh came to the U.S., her family was sponsored by the Blessed Sacrament Church in Alexandria, Virginia.
- TD And they set up ESL class for us so we wouldn't be like, feel so lost when school started.
- SM The Blessed Sacrament Church at the sponsorship thing down pat. Different people were assigned roles to help with every little aspect of re-settlement.
- TD One would take us to the concerts and one would take us to the store. One would take us to doctor's appointments. So each of them would just do one thing.
- SM Overall, adjustment for Thuy Dinh's family went well. But still, they got some unexpected reactions from the church families who were helping them.
- TD They had this impression that all Vietnamese grew up or lived in the jungle and that we didn't know a lot about modern life.
- SM Take driving for example. Thuy's father immediately wanted to get his driver's license so he could start working.
- TD And the church members were very surprised and said, "you drove? I thought everyone rode bicycles." And he said, "No, I had a car." And they would tell us how you pour water in the ice tray and how you freeze it, and my dad would say, "yeah, we have ice trays."
- SM Other refugees didn't just face misunderstandings. Not all the sponsors had good intentions, which meant some of the new American suffered.
- TD You know, they were treated like servants and made to do like chores on farms and it was like indentured servitude.

- TT You know, there were letters coming from people saying, "I'm looking for a wife." There were people who were looking for cheap labor and they thought that they could find it you know with these refugees.
- SM This is Thanh Tan. She's the daughter of refugees and grew up in Olympia, Washington.
- TT I have friends who grew up in very secluded areas and their parents just sort of you know they kind of left Vietnam behind them but they were expected to just basically move on and become as American as possible.
- SM But all across the country other refugees were finding that becoming American didn't have to mean leaving Vietnam behind.
- TT Eventually, we learned to congregate anyway and create communities.
- SM Despite the effort to spread the refugees out, the new Vietnamese Americans were finding each other. And instead of hurting their chances of success, it helped.
- PG People who were normal professionals in the marketplace but who spoke Vietnamese now lived among a critical mass of people who would go exclusively to them to buy insurance for example.
- SM This is Phuong Nguyen again.
- PG People who wanted to have careers as singers or entertainers now had a critical mass of people who could attend their shows. People did migrate, they did learn to live around each other and actually they wound up succeeding economically because of ethnic community, not in spite of it.
- SM In the Clarrington neighborhood of Arlington, Virginia, a little Saigon grew, and there were all sorts of services owned and operated and catering to the Vietnamese population: a restaurant, a tailor, an accountant, a photo shop. Thuy Dinh, whose family had settled in northern Virginia, shares what it was like.

00:32.45

- TD There was one store, it's called Saigon market. And that's where we went and got our fish sauce and all the spices, the things that we needed to cook.
- SM One of the major adjustments to American life and connection to their homeland was food. Thuy spent time in a refugee camp before moving to Virginia and she remembers the U.S. servicemen trying very hard to make them feel at home.

- TD So they tried to make rice but the only rice they knew how to make was Uncle Ben. And they could never make it right and one of the servicemen behind said, "Is it good today?" And we said, "no." And he was very disappointed. So it would go for weeks and then one day he got it right. Still not quite but still we didn't want him to know, to disappoint him. So we said, "yeah, it's great today." It made him really happy.
- SM They couldn't get rice quite like home until Vietnamese shops began to open. Lieu Nguyen's family escaped Vietnam in 1975 and opened a grocery store in Virginia the next year. They banked on the idea of catering to the burgeoning Vietnamese community.
- LN And also that would create job, you know, for both of my parents, they'd be working there, and the kids. I was 10 at the time, baking beans and vegetables and whatever, name it.
- SM As the little Saigon neighborhood in Virginia built up, carrying these seemingly small provisions: rice, herbs, fish sauce, made a real difference.
- TD I mean now, you go to Whole Foods. Even the Safeway. You can find a basil or certain herbs. Back in 1975, even those herbs, you could not find at the local store, things that you would find fairly common today.
- LN In the morning, when you get there at 8:30, there's already a line of people from other states coming in like North Carolina, people from Florida would drive up and they would bring vans and station wagons and they would buy for everybody in their town for like a month.
- TO You know, there's a coffee shop that's selling coffee with condensed milk.
- SM This is Toa Do. He came to Virginia in 1980 from a refugee camp in Thailand.
- TO You know, my family, my wife and the 2 boys were still in Vietnam at that time, so I went to Little Saigon, and then, if you sit there and you listen to the Vietnamese music, and drink the coffee, you feel like you're back in Saigon again. If you close your eyes.
- SM The story of Vietnamese resettlement in America is largely a success story. And it was successful because there was a complex web of assistance. Refugees got help from well-meaning sponsors. They found comfort and support in ethnic enclaves, and they were lifted by government programs.
- PO I got through the welfare program, I received food stamps, and when I was in college because I was poor, and my mom was poor, I got financial aid.

- SM This is Phu Jo Nguyen. He escaped Vietnam and came to the U.S. in 1980 as a teenager. Phu settled in Southern California, went to college and later became an attorney. But not before serving in the U.S. Army.
- PO I just feel like it is a civic duty, that you have to do it. The government helped me in every way they could. I mean without those assistance and then without the help of this great country you know helping me and people embracing us, I wouldn't be where I am today and I told my kids that this country has given me so much. My children little bit harder to teach them but I try to remind him that.
- SM Phu says it's tough raising his children to have the same appreciation for America that he has. There's a whole population of Vietnamese Americans who've grown up only knowing America as home. And they've had to balance being both Vietnamese and American. Thanh Tan is one of those people.
- TT So, I lived like a double life growing up like so many other people of color, immigrants, refugees, whoever right? I was really good at code switching so it's like at school I'd speak English, be super Americanized, I'd go home and immediately speak Vietnamese to my parents, eat Vietnamese food.
- SM Her parents sent her to a special school Friday nights to learn Vietnamese language and culture. Now she's grateful but at the time she hated it.
- TT Like that was probably the most Vietnamese thing about me during those years because I really, my real desire was that I just wanted to blend in with my friends at school.
- SM As an adult now, Tan says she's on a never ending quest to understand what it means to be Vietnamese American and she spends a lot of time asking her parents about their experiences and her heritage.
- UN There's a hunger among young people for Vietnamese American history because there is this problematic silence that still predominates in the Vietnamese American community. My family, they almost never talked about Vietnam. My father didn't want to have to think about that his mom would die one day and he wouldn't be able to see her and say one last goodbye. If refugees associated communism with oppression, then they associated freedom in the United States with depression because of the loneliness and you know the lack of culture and company that came along with it. The circumstances for that generation of people who actually remember what it was like to leave the country are not conducive to being able to do anything but express gratitude. Theoretically that's how we kind of think of charity, how we often think of rescue, that it kind of introduces a debt that unfortunately can never be paid back.

TT My parents knew they were very lucky and part of my parents giving back to America was making sure that their children did well in school and were successful when they graduated and that were self-sufficient.

UN The way I put it is that perfection was the price of rescue.

TT I don't even think anybody had to tell them, "you better be perfect Americans." It was this pressure that I think people of that generation took on themselves but it has come at a cost.

UN On the one hand, they're being told, "you're Americans, you're free now, things are better." And from American's perspective it's like that's absolutely true. What do they have to worry about now? From another perspective, just because their individual lives are safer and more secure, they have to still think about friends and relatives who need medicines or financial support. One lady who I interviewed talked very briefly about her father being thrown in a re-education camp and not ever being able to make it out. She had a pause a few times even though we were 30 years removed from this. So their worries haven't got away, and they really don't have a space to really be able to talk about those stresses and worries, and silence was their answer.

SM Turns out one way to break the silence was music. [music.] Phu Jo Nguyen told me that Vietnamese music played a role in community building during the nine months he spent in a refugee camp.

00:39:57

PO We sing songs all the time. Traditional Vietnamese music start, people just singing in the camp and then you listen to it and you start enjoying it. [music].

SM And Phuong Nguyen discovered that many refugees created their own new music as well.

PG They had composed songs which are considered refugee songs and these songs were very inspiring because not only were they ways for Vietnamese to finally break the silence but to realize that you know their story was not just their story, it was everybody else's story. [music].

TT There's a song called [Vietnamese words], which is a gift from my homeland. And it's this song about leaving the homeland and having to like save your pennies so that you can send medicine and send cloth home to your impoverished families back in Vietnam. [music]. My mom is like, "ugh." People would sing that song in camp and everybody would cry. It united them. These songs did a great deal to narrate the social history of Vietnamese at that time. I grew up in a household hearing the songs about life before

the war, hearing songs that were popular among the military, that is the soundtrack of my childhood, and I don't know it's like it. I used to think, like, this is cheesy, give me some Debbie Gibson and New Kids on the Block but so many Vietnamese songs have just really withstood the test of time and I am grateful because they tell stories that, in a lot of ways, my parents couldn't tell us themselves. [music]. I think, music, it's the critical thread that connects us to our past. It's the thing that survived the war.

- SM What does your generation or babies when they came here think about the war in the U.S. involvement now from how these many decades later?
- PG My generation especially those who were raised and taught in the United States initially and for the most part adopt a mainstream American perspective on it which is that communism never posed a significant threat to American society.
- TT Unfortunately for me as this like privileged kid who grew up in America and is like, war is over, and like, so what if there are communists among us? But for like people like my parents and their generation, it is a real fear that is born out of real experiences, so I don't want to diminish that pain that they feel.
- PG Vietnamese-Americans, people of my generation who have no memory of communism, have no memory of escape, their concerns are mostly with the present. Naturally and understandably, they come back butting heads with their parents.
- TT It is very nuanced you know it's not black-and-white but generally you have an older generation who feels a connection to the Republican party because it was known for funding the military and for being very anti-communist and they fell in love with President Reagan's rhetoric throughout the 80s and yet you have a younger generation and a lot of them support progressives and Democrats and socialists and it's this weird full circle thing sometimes where I'm like, "oh my god, is this, are our parents freaking out?" You know it's a weird debate I think going on like within our, within our community.
- SM Kim Delevett is part of this next generation who grew up in the U.S. but her experiences as an American and connecting to her Vietnamese roots are very different.
- KD I was born in Saigon, Vietnam. My name was Phan Kin Phun.
- SM Kim left Vietnam by plane with her 10 year old brother on April 25th, 1975.
- KD I was a toddler when we fled.
- SM But her mother Kim missed the flight.
- KD She was stranded and stuck. She never had the chance to say goodbye to us.

SM We found Kim's story in a collection of oral histories in the Texas Tech University Vietnam archive. The audio's a little rough because she was interviewed by phone. She's talking to oral historian Jason Stewart back in 2010. Sometimes you can hear him breathing when she talks.

KD Thank you Jason and thank you for letting me share my story today.

JS Sure.

SM Kim was adopted by a white family in Florida. She talks about going to the beach after church every Sunday and generally enjoying her all-American life.

00:45:05

But she always felt different.

KD When I was asked such a simple question, "where were you born?" I would just feel anxiety. I couldn't say, "oh, I was born at Sacred Heart Hospital and I was 7 pounds. I was different, and I was born in Vietnam, and I didn't know where that place was. It really wasn't until I was a junior in college that I began to feel a hole in my identity. My boyfriend bought 2 tickets for the Miss Saigon play about a young Vietnamese mother named Kim. [music]. And she sends her child to a new life in America. And she never sees him again. As the play was unfolding, I can see that my life was eerily mirrored. So, I got very emotional. I didn't realize that a play could have that impact. And as soon as we left, I told Peter, my boyfriend, I need to go find my roots, and I need to go find out where I was born. I'm ready to go back. [music].

SM Kim and Peter arrived in Ho Chi Minh City formerly Saigon in 1994. They carried with them a note written in Vietnamese and a rudimentary map which her cousin drew from memory.

KD I was looking at this map that my cousin had drawn, and we were following it to the tee. It was amazing how nothing had changed after 20 years.

SM After a long trip, they arrived at home in the Mekong Delta and Kim knocked on the door. A man answered. She handed him the note and he motioned her to follow him down the street.

KD I don't speak Vietnamese so I really was just following this stranger and we came to another house, and the woman in the doorway, she read the note, and she looked at me, and immediately said Phung. I hadn't heard that name since I was a toddler. And she immediately started to cry. And she woke up a little man on a bed. And she kept

saying Phung, and she showed him the letter. And he started crying, and I'm like, "What's happening? What's happening?" in my mind because I was just really in shock. My uncle pulled out a stack of pictures and paraphernalia that he had saved for 20 years. I saw a young picture of my mother I'd never seen before, I saw baby pictures that I had never seen before, of myself. He pulled out young pictures of my brother, and he looked the same. That's when it resonated with me. I realized that I was home. I'm just knocking on the door, and my life had forever changed. And it was a homecoming that I thought I would never have. But was so blessed to have been given my family back.

SM Kim learned her mother did manage to escape about five years after missing that plane but she died of a heart attack the day before she was scheduled to leave the refugee camp.

PG The government of Vietnam for a while was talking about refugees as though we had it easy.

SM This is researcher and author Phuong Nguyen.

PG They act like it was really simple to get on a boat and leave the country and just simply go to United States and enjoy a middle-class life. Half of us died. And I think that explains to a certain extent why refugees express just a constant gratitude about being in the United States because they have this sense of guilt in and good fortune they were able to to make it that far.

SM Today Americans are debating new refugee seekers and that debate is playing out in Vietnamese American communities. When news broke that families are being separated at the Mexican American border, Tan was surprised that her father saw it as a rational way to manage the process.

TT You know, I just said, "Dad, I feel like I have to remind you. When you escaped Vietnam, illegally, and you landed on the shores of Malaysia, and the Malaysians didn't want the refugees, you ended up in a refugee camp. And you were in the process of seeking asylum. How would you have felt if they had taken Wen, my older sister, how would you have felt if they had taken her away from you?" And I literally watched his face change, where all of a sudden he could empathize and he actually was like, "Oh, okay." And it became more real for him what was going on at the border. I hope that the Vietnamese are not the last to have benefited from that American sense of generosity and opportunity.

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