

**Vietnamese American Oral History Project, UC Irvine**

Narrator: LE HUU KHOAN

Interviewer: Michelle Le Pham

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MLP: Hello, my name is Michelle Pham. I am from the Vietnamese American Oral History Project from UC Irvine. I will be interviewing Mr. Khoan, this evening. Mr. Khoan can I have your full name, age, and date of birth?

LHK: My name is name Le Huu Khoan. I was born March 3, 1940 in An Danh, Long Xuyen, in the south of Vietnam

MLP: What are the names of your parents?

LHK: My father's name was Le Huu Tham and my mother is Nguyen Thi Ruc.

MLP: Do you have any siblings?

LHK: I was born in a very large family of siblings. In total, living there are eight boys and one girl.

MLP: Poor girl

LHK: But my sister is the type of person who loved all of her siblings

MLP: Your sister, is she your older sister?

LHK: Yes, she was my older sister, she was the second born in the family

MLP: Which sibling were you?

LHK: I was the sixth one, somewhat in the middle

MLP: Can you describe your neighborhood?

LHK: My neighborhood was Long Xuyen, a part of the An Danh district in the south of Vietnam. It was a peaceful city, near a river. So you know that that Mekong River was divided into two. One was Hau Danh, and the other was Thien Danh. I was living near Hau Danh.

MLP: When you were younger did you have a lot of friends?

LHK: Of course, like any other young boy today. I was born in 1940, when WWII was still being fought. You could say that my life is filled with war. Born in a time of war, grew up in a time of war, and involved with war when I was older. In the end became a prisoner of war in a re-education camp. Realistically, that "camp" was only a prison under Communist reign. That's why in 1945, when I was 5 years old I had to follow my family to escape from war. France was bombing the country, so we ran from one place one day, and ran to another the next day. By 1950-1951, it was somewhat peaceful, until about 1954 when the country was split into two. Around this time was about 13-14 years old.

LHK: In my family, my father was a judge. My mother was a homemaker who took care of the kids. We lived in a warm, loving environment. My father was a straightforward, honest judge; that was why we were poor. I remember in 1951, when I was about 11 years old, my father moved from Long Xuyen to Rat Da to work in a court in that district. My father wanted me and another relative to move with him, while the rest of the family stayed in Long Xuyen.

LHK: That's why I'll always remember that at the age of 11, I had to leave my family. I had to leave the warmth and comfort of my family. My mother then brought me to a moped. It was my first time that I had to part from my family. Leave from one city to another city, by myself. When I arrived at Rat Da, I had to a new life. I didn't know what I was doing, but I knew I had to find a rickshaw driver to take me to my father's address. At 11, I was enrolled in school at Rat Da. I was taught at a French Jr. High school. Eventually I made it to high school

MLP: So does that mean your education was very unique? Or was it, compared to other people?

LHK: You see Vietnam at that time was under French leadership; therefore they must follow the French education system. The education system was split into two, either a regular Vietnamese education or a French education. That's why I had to learn French as a child.

MLP: Do you still remember how to speak French?

LHK: I remember a little bit, but when I speak it, I'm still a little shaky. It's because it has been way too long. Since then I went to high school (De That), do you know what that is?

MLP: I'm familiar with the term.

LHK: Even in primary school I was already learning French.

MLP: When you were young, were you a studious student?

LHK: In my family, my father was a judge. He always mentioned to me that education was very important. Everyone in my family went on into higher education, from elementary, to junior high, all the way to high school and college. For me, I went to school in Rat Da, but had to transfer to Saigon to further my French education. I don't personally don't like going to a French education program

MLP: Why is that? Is it because you weren't used to it?

LHK: No, it's not that I wasn't used to it, it because when you go to that school you have to speak French. There were Vietnamese people who were French, who came from French families. There were children who were half French and Vietnamese. The kids who were fully French I didn't hate them, but I hated those who were a mix. It is because they acted... I don't know how to say it. I guess it was a childhood opinion at the time; I didn't like them because they wanted to started trouble with me. When I wanted to speak Vietnamese with them, they said they didn't know how to speak Vietnamese, and said I had to speak French with them. In the meantime the kids who came from French families understood, their families taught them better. Honestly, I had a fight with one of them. It's because in the school they wanted everyone to speak French. In class speaking French was fine, it wasn't an issue, but when we went out to play, might as well speak Vietnamese. When I was speaking Vietnamese, he threated to tattled on me, that's why I hated him. I was Vietnamese, I spoke Vietnamese, and French wasn't my natural tongue. I even told the kid that he had Vietnamese blood running through his veins, why did he have to be like that? I told him if he tattled I'd beat him up.

MLP: So did you beat him up?

LHK: During school I didn't, but after school he followed me. I told him that if he kept following me I'd beat him up. As soon as I said it he continued to follow me so I beat him up. Back then I wasn't a trouble maker, but I had some deep seeded angst against them.

MLP: I understand that angst you had. It's similar to the angst teenagers here. So I completely understand and I applaud you.

LHK: Afterwards I told my father that I didn't want to go to that French school anymore. I transferred to a Vietnamese school called Petrus Ky in Saigon. I went there for a year, I missed home so much, I was only 12-13 years old, why did have to go so far? That's why I returned to Rat Da to go to school.

MLP: What is the highest education you received?

LHK: I tested well into a high school in Can Tho. The current school I went too only had a Jr. High I had to transfer to Can Tho for high school. When I was 17 I tested into a prestigious school in Can Tho. The system in Vietnam then was that you had to test into every grade. I'll show you my diploma in a bit. In Can Tho there was not a senior class, so then I had to transfer and test into a school in Saigon. The school was named Chu Van An for 12<sup>th</sup> graders.

LHK: Can you read this? It's my diploma for 12<sup>th</sup> grade.

MLP: Is that your picture in the diploma? You were quite handsome back then

LHK: Really I was handsome? My specialty was math. Afterwards I tested into university. In the beginning I went to Engineering school, I went under a scholarship. They gave me money to go to school. However, you had to test into the program, for example 1000 people tested but a class only had 30 spaces. Afterwards, I also tested into a school for teachers; they were going to pay my way if I promised to work for them. Therefore, I went to school to become a math teacher and once I graduated I would work for the state, that's why they paid for my entire schooling. When I graduated I was about 21 or 22 years old in 1962. It was clear that I was going to be a professor. I was transferred to Tay Ninh; it was a city East of Saigon, about 100km away. I taught at a high school there.

MLP: When you taught for the first time were you scared, nervous, or were you rather confident?

LHK: I was fairly confident because when I was still a student at the university, I worked as a tutor.

MLP: So do you specialize in teaching math, correct?

LHK: Yes, that is my specialty. That was my major my minor was chemistry and physics.

MLP: What kind of math did you teach? Algebra, calculus, geometry?

LHK: I taught everything that was supposed to be taught at a high school.

MLP: Did you teach multiple classes or just one class?

LHK: Oh, I taught a number of classes, it's not like here in the United States. In a math class, say a 12<sup>th</sup> grade math class, it was split into multiple sections. Students who like a particular subject would be split, for example students who liked math go to one section, while students who liked science would go to another section. Here they teach it differently than Vietnam. For example, those who studied math had to study six hours per week. I had permission to teach sixteen hours per week, the rest of the time I had to prepare class. If I still had some spare time I could do extra tutoring.

MLP: So how were you paid?

LHK: The state paid my salary, not the school. Not like here, I was employed by the government. They transferred me from one school to another school when deemed necessary.

MLP: So how long did you stay at one school before the state transferred you?

LHK: In '62 I went to teach. Therefore, here in Orange County, I have a number of students that I've taught. The students I had back then are now all grandparents. We still keep in contact; we still have that teacher student relationship, very respectful, even though we were only a few years apart. I was 22 when I taught, my students were 17-18 years old.

MLP: Graduating at 22, was that something special? Were you just very good and graduated earlier compared to everyone else?

LHK: No, I graduated right on time, after my schooling I earned my Bachelor degree.

LHK: In 1965, war began to escalate. In 1963 after the stand against Vietnam's president, Ngo Dinh Diem, war definitely escalated. The Communist in the North gained some footing, this time I was in Saigon. I was part of the Vietnamese Republic. During that time any male that was of age was required to join the military. I was already about 25 years old, in 1965 I had to go to military school and I slowly moved from rank to rank.

MLP: Do you still have your badges and medals?

LHK: No I don't have any of those things. In 1968, when the war was brought to the South and the North lost the battle, I was allowed to return to teaching. While in the military I never fought, I actually was a teacher in the military. I taught war strategies and psychological warfare, not math. There was no real training for the position, they just evaluated my capabilities and determined that I was able to do so.

MLP: Did you wanted to give up your position in teaching, did you really wanted to go?

LHK: I just had to accept it and go. Everyone is afraid of war and death, but despite it everyone was in the military and was placed in a position that fit them. Some held guns and fought on the field, others used their mind to help the Republic. Either in schools or the military academy, my niche was in education. After three years I was able to return to teaching.

MLP: What do you remember about the war, the tragedies and memories that you've experience?

LHK: In my field I experienced meeting with the troops and battalions, I don't have any personal anecdotes from that, but I do have some understanding of the lives of these military men. These men fought against the Communist to preserve the Republic. I met the lower ranking soldiers and I felt very lovingly towards them. Everyone felt the same way about war, but if they didn't stick together, they would lose the country. Under Communist rule from 1954-1957, human life was reduced to living like animals. In the North, by the age of 17-18 years old the boys knew nothing of war, but they still had to carry a gun and fight. They tied their legs to other fighters to keep them from deserting and many of them died that way.

LHK: There are a number of stories like that. Soldiers of the Vietnamese Republic are different in that if they didn't fight they knew that there would be no future, there would be no prosperity. If these men didn't fight, their families would be subjected to the darkness and hardships of families in the north. There were a number of soldiers that volunteered to fight against Communism; I myself was forced to enlist. My older brother studied in France, when he came back during the war he had to join the Vietnamese Air Force. My other brother joined the military academy in Da Lat, similar to West Point here. There were instances where my family would spend 2 or 3 years apart without contact.

MLP: Were you able to contact anyone at this time?

LHK: Yes, I could have. I was stationed in Saigon at this time. I worked in the offices in Saigon. My younger brother, here, went to school in Da Lat, graduated and went to the United States to become a pilot. He flew overhead and brought paratroopers into the North. He's been shot down a number of times, the last time his left leg was injured, he was sent for American treatment or he would have lost his leg. He had cancer and passed away three years ago. In the family, I had a number of family members in the military. My other younger brother lives in San Diego and works for Cal Trans as an engineer. He went to the United States to study, when he went home he enlisted in the military for a few years. It's only my youngest brother who lives in Ohio that wasn't drafted. In the end everyone who lived in the South had family members in the Republic military.

MLP: Did women participate in the military at that time?

LHK: Yes, there were a few women who were in the military. In my family there wasn't, my sister worked in the local courts.

MLP: Earlier you told me that you put in prison? Can you tell me a little about it, the days leading up to it and the days after?

LHK: After three years in the military, I returned home to teach. I wanted to continue to go to school to further my education so I could be an official professor at the university. I wanted to teach psychology, earn a Masters. Eventually I wanted to earn a Ph.D., unfortunately in 1975 war broke out. In 1975, those who were in the military or government officials were forced into reeducation camp to brain wash us. But how could you brain wash us, we know what's wrong and what is right, what makes you think that we will change our ideas? But they knew ways of forcing us to, so I say go on right ahead. They call it a reeducation camp, but it was nothing more than a prison, a gulag. I was there for three years in the forest. Luckily, I was in the South, there were thousands of these prisons across Vietnam. My other brother, who lives in Virginia now, was imprisoned for 10 years. It was because he was higher ranked. The higher your rank the longer you stayed in prison and they sent you off to the... To say in short, it was a prison, they used force to harass you. If you didn't listen to them they would beat you or kill you, in front of their faces you would agree with what they said, but deep inside you had your own opinion.

LHK: You see it for yourself, everything they say sounds good, but living in it now it is extremely difficult. The rich are comprised of government officials. My experience is that, after I was released I was under watch, everywhere I went I had to ask for permission. I no longer had the rights of a citizen, only after three years I could have the possibility of earning those rights.

MLP: Within those three years, what were you doing?

LHK: First off, I filed paper work to return to teaching, this was something I wanted to do, but I knew they wouldn't let me

LHK: One more thing, when I was released from the military from in 1970, I became a principle of a high school in that district. So from 1970-1975, I was a principle, I remember when the North fell I had to give back the school to the new government. I remember a women, I don't know from where, but she was completely backwards, but she claimed she was an esteemed teacher. The students needed someone to open their minds, but the teacher that showed up knew even less than her students.

MLP: Did it hurt you to see something like that?

LHK: Yes it made me very sad. If you aren't an educator then you might not, but as one, giving up your school to the Communists hurt. When the person who took my school came, he claimed he was an esteemed teacher in Hanoi, but my God! Back then I was working on a type writer, making seven copies of a document using carbon paper. They came up to me and said "My God, what kind of new technology is this!" So you see what kind of people they were, their ignorance was dumbfounding.

LHK: Another time I was at a meeting and I had to leave. I got on my Vespa (moped) and revved up the engine. As soon as the engine fired, everyone around me went for cover yelling "What was that!" I saw it and was embarrassed for them. Another time in my office, I was drinking tea and when they came in they sat like this (draws on leg up on seat). After I poured them tea, they acted like they were so clean; they swished the tea around in their cups and proceeded to look for a place to toss the tea, because the first pour was supposed to wash the cup. My room was very clean, and put together, I had my trash taken out by the students. The Northern administrators didn't know where to pour the tea so they just splashed it under their chair! Afterwards, they poured a new cup, thinking that it was somehow cleaner. It was up to that degree of ignorance.

MLP: Did you say anything?

LHK: Of course not, I wouldn't have dared to. Witnessing those actions was more than enough, they were already lost. In my stomach I knew that Vietnam was going down culturally. Another example of ignorance was when I met a student who had a father that owned a kiosk to fix watches. The student complimented me on how fancy my watch was and asked if he could take it home to take it apart to see how it worked. His father told him "No, if you take it apart it break, just wait till it gets old". You see how ignorant they were? They thought it was some sort of heavenly invention. This was after 1975.

LHK: Before 1975, I had some business to go to Bangkok, Thailand. Let me compare Bangkok and Saigon at that time. Bangkok used to be below us and now it's above us. That's why I'm not surprised at the way it is now, because I saw it from the beginning. Those that were supposed to be the elite were so ignorant. So how could you make a successful generation? So back to my previous story, I was released from prison in 1978. I went home and asked for permission to teach. They didn't let me and my children were old enough to go to high school at the time. The state said that children of people who were involved with the military were not allowed to go to college. That's why if I let my children live in Vietnam, one day they would end up as bum on the street. It hurt me, that was why I asked to go teach for the state, but they didn't let me. So then I had to become a rice farmer. I've never done something like manual labor. Before I held a pencil and taught, but now I had to hold a trowel and machete, lead the buffalos to work in the fields. But I had to do it.

MLP: Was there ever a time where you just stopped working and thought what have I become, I used to be an educator?

LHK: Of course, but at that time I didn't have time to think too much about it. I was more concerned with figuring out a way to find a living, finding food. I did everything and anything.

MLP: Would you say that you sacrificed yourself?

LHK: It was as though my life was already done, I was about 30-40 something years old. I did everything I could. At home I had a small library filled with about 2000 books, French, American, I had them both. It was because I had connections with Americans, every month I would go to Saigon and ask for books to further expand my understanding. It was part of becoming a teacher. I left the books displayed in my home library. After 1975 the Communists came to my house without permission, I had a very valuable bowl that was hundreds of years old. They said it was a nice looking bowl and asked for it. I couldn't have said no, they would have taken it anyways. I told them you could have whatever you like. Even though they were going to take my things, they pretended to ask, to make them look like they were decent people. They saw how many books I had and asked me why did I have all this rubbish? I told him that I was a teacher and it contained all the things I learned and understand. They asked me if these books contained statements that went against the state. I told them, "go ahead and take a look for yourself. Take anyone of those books and read through them and see." They didn't know a damn word it was all in French and English. I'm a teacher I have to have these so I can answer students' questions to open their minds. He got so mad and sold all my books, to take the paper to use as wrapping.

MLP: Did you manage to keep or save any of your books?

LHK: I was rummaging through my shelf and I came upon a French book, it taught how to make a number of things. There was a chapter that taught me how to make detergent, my eyes opened wide. This was my escape, I read it well and it told me the ingredients to make it. But how could I buy these? It gave me the idea that I was going to make detergent to sell. Before 1975 people used all kinds of soap, now they only had the bar soap. In the morning I took a bar of soap and cut it into small pieces and cooked it, I whisked it to make it frothy to make it soft. I



poured it out in a pan to dry. It was so soft, like cake, then, I took a mesh and rubbed the soap on the mesh, until it fell through. The powder was still a little wet and I set it out to dry, I didn't dare set it out in the street, so I dried it on my roof. Afterwards, I tried using it, it was great! I had to buy more bar soaps to manufacture more detergent.

LHK: You have to remember, back then it was illegal because you can't manufacture anything. This was because the Communist government wanted to control everything. Everything we had to do was in secret; we couldn't do what we want. So when I went to buy the soap it wasn't like going into the market today. I had to go to a state warehouse where they sold it in rations. I went in and saw my old students; they asked me what I was doing. I told them that I was going to buy soap and resell for some profit. They felt bad for me and asked how much I was intending to buy, I told them as much as I could. They all said, "Why so much?!" they had no idea what I was doing. In the end I bought about 20 kilos of soap. I took it home and stored it; afterwards I went to another place and come across more of my students. By this time I had a lot of students that offered to buy me soap. It was now that I was buying soap every chance I could. I would go home and make large amounts of detergent; I had a large pot and would put kindling underneath. I made a larger whisk as well. I snuck back into Saigon and would buy plastic bags to package them in. I was living in Tay Ninh at the time.

MLP: Did they ask you for paperwork as to where you were going?

LHK: Oh yes they did, but I never asked. Do you know why? I would take my bike early in the morning like 3 or 4 am, to a bus stop and take that bus to Saigon. I would then bike around Saigon buying plastic bags. Finally I would go home by biking to the bus stop and have the bus take me home. No one knew I was gone. I would make my own type of Ziploc, by ironing on the plastic to an aluminum zipper. Each individual bag was about 100 grams. I would take about 2 kilos of it to sell. In the market, I would meet more of my students, they asked me what I was up to. I told them I had detergent, they told me to hold on to it so they could go get money, early the next morning, they gave me money. I don't remember how much it was, but it was profitable. They told me to bring about 10 kilos next time. But my God, working all night I could have only made 2 kilos. Sure I could have made more, but I only made them at night, to keep it a secret. I put them on the roof at night for 1 or 2 hours till I dried and put it in bags. I also went into the jungle to find cassava to sell. I went into the jungle and got them very cheaply; I put them on my bike and sold them in the city for profit. I did practically everything to make a living. One day as I was leaving the jungle I came across an old student, who was a pharmacist that was imprisoned like me. He asked me where I was going, I told him, "trying to find a living." He asked me if I was "going", at that time "going" meant leaving the country.

LHK: At that time no one believed anyone. Mentioning something like that would land you in jail without any hesitation. Even if he was my old student and a fellow prisoner, we had to keep it a secret. He knew that I knew that he was talking about leaving the country, but I responded as though I didn't know just to be safe. He then asked me if I was busy tomorrow so he could visit, I said naturally. It turns out the family of another former student was building a boat to escape. They insisted that I leave with them; they were willing to let me go free. Back then to pull something off like this cost countless amounts of gold bars. They also let me bring along my sons. I told them I only had enough from selling detergent for the two oldest boys.

MLP: What was your wife at this time?

LHK: She was also a teacher at a local school; she stayed behind with my youngest son. I had three boys at that time. My youngest was too young to escape and come along with us. In addition we didn't have enough money to pay for his fare on the ship. I eventually sponsored my youngest son six or seven years after I arrived in the US. I filed an I94. So the student let me go and I did everything and anything to help out from preparing before the voyage to while we were at sea. I even swam.

MLP: Where did you depart from?

LHK: Rat Da. I came from Long Xuyen, it took me 3 nights and 2 days. I pretended to be a normal person, while my kids went first out the beach. A hired guide took me onto a boat with an adult and two children. The adult was actually a high ranking military officer in the Vietnamese Republic, he was missing a leg. We had to swim from Long Xuyen to avoid detection. When we got onto the ship; actually it was a small boat about 10 meters long crammed with 50 people, I called out for Le and Lim my two sons. They yelled back "Father I'm here", once I heard that I was at ease. On the passage, it was wrought with pain and sadness. We were there for 10 days and were robbed five times. Thai fishermen who turned into pirates robbed us; they would block our boats and proceed to rob us and damage our engine in the process.

MLP: Generally how many robbers would board your boat?

LHK: They would come to us in these large fishing ships; loot our boat and force us to board their ship while they raided ours. One time three girls, nieces of the person who coordinated this escape, 11, 12, and 13 years old were taken away. You know what that means. In their country the girls experienced pain and hardship, and now leaving they experience the same thing. A number of refugees were my old students. The Thai pirates towed our boat to a nearby island, took those three girls away and did their ugly deeds on another part of the island. Their father told me to move on with the other refugees, the family wanted to stay behind. He said to me "I wanted to leave to give my children a better life, and now they are kidnapped what are we going to do, please take everyone and go", and I said to him "I won't, I know the pain of you and your wife, and this pain is shared by the group. And you tell me to take these people away? No one wants to leave your family behind on an island like this. We either live together or die together. There is no way I can do what you ask of me".

LHK: It was around the evening when they brought the girls back. We were all sitting on the beach; everyone was upset because of what happened, the lack of food and water. At night we would just open our mouths so dew would collect. In the end the girls were brought back, I told my former student, who was their aunt to take them to the ocean to clean them and see if they were injured. After 20 years I met those three girls again in Rosemead at a wedding. I was happy for them; they had a chance at a new life. After they returned the girls, they towed our boat out into the sea and cut the rope. The other times we were robbed they would always cut the fan belt. The belt helped pump the water out. I had to figure out how to pump out the water. I used aluminum wire to reconnect the fan belt, I ask the kids to try hard to stay awake all night

to keep an eye on the pump. All night I kept reattaching that belt until morning, by then there was nothing left to connect, it was all tattered. I then found a piece of cloth as a substitute, but it didn't work. The winds were blowing us towards Thailand and we came across a ship leaving the country. Every single one of us was making a ruckus to catch the attention of that ship.

MLP: Weren't you afraid that it could have been another pirate ship?

LHK: No, I mean for every 10 bad things there is always 1 good thing. That ship was a Thai ship, but it was owned by a Chinese man living in Thailand. There was a few of them on that ship that spoke English, we asked them to please take us to shore, but they said that they didn't have permission to do things like that. We begged them so much that they finally decided to tow us near the beach and would cut the rope. In that time, I felt a little happier. I was far away from death and despair. They cooked us some porridge to eat. I've never eaten a bowl of porridge that was so delicious; not even a restaurant could have made a better one. To this day I still remember the gratitude for that bowl of porridge; it gave me new life again. So the boat took us near to the shore and cut the line. It was the third of April 1980; Thailand was celebrating a holiday. I believe it was a state holiday? They were celebrating by the beach, it was so crowded, full of people and police. As we slowly pulled in, the police shot at us. The ship captain (same as the relative of the girls and the one who coordinated the escape) and I jumped into the water to try to signal to them that we were refugees, but there was so much shooting we jumped back on the boat. Over a loud speaker they said "Do not come down". They knew we were boat people, refugees. They wouldn't let us set foot on their land because we become their responsibility. We sat and waited on the boat, around five or six in the afternoon their police boat came and towed us to an empty beach and told us to get off. We tied our boat on a coconut tree for fear it would drift away. Everyone slept on the beach, me and my two son slept with empty stomachs. We didn't have proper clothing I was only wearing a shirt and a pair of shorts, same with my kids. We were hungry, thirsty, and cold. All three of us was holding each other for warmth, they were about 15-16 years old. In the middle of the night, I don't know what time, I heard rustling, and I saw torches all over the beach. They were coming towards us, they were going through all our things without discretion, and we were being robbed yet again. We were robbed in the sea and now we were being robbed on land. I didn't have anything else left to loose, what was I afraid of? They went on our ship and looted too. But remember when I told you, when there are 10 unlucky events, there is always 1 lucky one?

LHK: There was a young Thai woman about your age. She saw that my kids and I were holding each other. She asked me if I spoke English, I said I know both English and French. She said that she couldn't speak French so we just spoke English. She asked if I was cold, I was curled up in a ball so it was pretty clear. She asked if I was hungry and I said yes, she told me that she was a student of the Bangkok University. They were celebrating a state holiday; she went home for vacation and saw that her village was coming down to the beach in droves, so she followed. She said that she didn't have anything to give me now. It was very late, I didn't know what time. She said tomorrow she will come down with food and clothing. When she said that, I believed her. I woke up the next morning I saw the other refugees moving around getting ready to go back on the boat. They didn't know what else to do. I saw her come back she brought us food and clothing. She laughed and apologized that she didn't have men's clothing she only had her clothes and gave them to the kids. I only regret that I didn't get to ask her name, even more than

30 years later I still remember her kindness. Every time I think back about her, it makes me want to cry, like right now. Despite all the unmentionable cruelty that the Thai people have committed towards us, this young woman's actions negated all of that. That's why I really regret not knowing her name, in my life, in my heart I'll always remember that redeeming moment. Excuse me. The next morning, they towed us to another place a few hours away, it was just as empty as the last one and they left. After an hour or two later another police boat took us to another location. We did that three times, by the last time it was getting dark. They told us to get off. I figured that they were towing us from one district to another, in the end the Captain and I jumped off the boat to find some form of help. I saw another Thai woman, she seemed all right, and she was on a moped coming in from the main road to the beach. I stopped her asked her if she spoke English, she said she did and that she was a teacher. I told her our situation and what happened. I asked her to contact somebody that could take responsibility. About an hour later, a large police vehicle arrived. The officer asked us who was in charge and the captain and I stepped up. They asked us to make a list of everyone one that came with us, including name and age. They told us to get into the vehicle and took us to the police station.

MLP: At that time did you think you were lucky?

LHK: Regardless if it was lucky or not, whether they would imprison us, I didn't know. When they told us to get on, I just got on. I wanted to be free from the beach. They took us to the police station and brought us upstairs and wouldn't let us come down. They asked for three women to come down to cook porridge for us to eat. They gave each one of us a small watermelon. My God, I never seen anything so great, I got to eat porridge and watermelon. I began to think, if they were going to take care of us, we would be there for a few days. I didn't know how we were going to eat our porridge. There were a number of people who saw how delicious the watermelon was and just smashed it to eat. I on the other hand, took the watermelon and cut it exactly in half. I scooped out the inside and ate it, the rind I fashioned into a bowl for porridge. A number of them were my old students; they said I was so clever. Unfortunately they smashed theirs and had nothing. My kids and I had three makeshift bowls for porridge. That is a little fun anecdote. I was there for two days

MLP: Did you know where you were at that time? Did they say anything to you?

LHK: Afterwards I found out it was in the south of Thailand, it was a small district in the province of Surat Thani. In one morning they gathered us all into a vehicle. I knew it was a province because there were street and cars. They brought us to camp with about 2000 other refugees like us. When we asked them, they said they were in the same situation. They gave each of us a pair of long pants. As a boat refugee, we were really skinny, before that I was thin too, but not like this. The pants were so loose, the women who were in there before me told me that they would be happy to take it in. At that time, Vietnamese refugees loved one another, always willing to help those in need. In there was when I came back to my senses, I realized that it was a place for people like me, with 2000 people, my two boys and I only had a small space to rest. We cooked and tried to make the best of everything, however we only had one water faucet to share for 2000 people. We couldn't shower or anything.

LHK: The next day the officers asked to talk to the head of each family. They asked us about our situation and where we wanted to go. There were a number of physicians, one was a Swiss physician and spoke French. She asked me for someone who knew how to translate between French and Vietnamese. There were a lot of unfortunate people, women and young girls; a number of them were assaulted. A number were very ill too. She truly had the spirit of a doctor; she loved everyone and wanted to help them. Therefore, I volunteered, but it's been too long since I've practice my French. She said it was fine; I worked with her for a little while. I can't remember her name. I asked her if she could do me a favor and she agreed. At that time my older brother was a lawyer in France, and my younger siblings were in Ohio because they left before 1975. I asked her to get me into contact with them. She said she could and gave me a letterhead with the addresses. Before we left Vietnam I made my children memorize all the addresses of my siblings. I would point to one of my sons and ask for the addresses and he would recite it. I wrote a letter to my brothers in France and the United States and she sent it for me. The physician then told me that in about two weeks I'll get a letter for a transfer to a camp run by the UNHER in Song La. We lived through the hard and difficult times while at our current camp. The hardest issue was that I didn't have money. I saw people eating a cube of sugar, and my God, we were all craving it. Just imagine going days without eating well, you crave sweets, you crave this and that. But in the end it was the needs of the body, one could easily overcome it. I saw other people who brought money and asked the officers to buy them food from the outside. I felt sorry for my children. Before we left Vietnam, my son wore a pair of shorts and in the lining I had \$10 from Vietnam, I rolled the bill tightly and put it in a plastic bag and sewed it into the lining. I told him to keep these pants, never lose them and he knew too. Even when we were craving comfort food then, I didn't dare spend it.

MLP: At that time weren't you hungry? Didn't you want to spend it on something to eat?

LHK: Oh we were all famished, but I didn't dare spend it. Even if we were hungry and craving this and that, we still had some sort of food. People had money so they were spending it on extra food and sweets, but for me us it was just a phase. Three weeks later we arrived at a camp in Song La, south of Thailand. There was a large refugee camp run by the UNHER. I remember the first day we slept in a warehouse that distributed fish to the people there. Admittedly it smelled, but that wasn't a big issue. There at the camp I met another one of my former students, he arrived there before me. He exclaimed "Teacher, is that you, where are you going", I said I was going out. He asked me where I was staying and where I was sleeping. I pointed at the fish shack, and he said "My God, why are you sleeping there?" Fact is, I had just arrived and I didn't know where to go. He said he was going to find a place for me in the barracks. He's been there for a while and worked as a representative, helping new refugees acclimate. I told him that if found a place for me; please also find a place for the other refugees that came with me. Luckily there was a place for all of us to move in. We had a small space, enough for my two boys. I asked my former student for an old rice bag, I cut it and hung it to make a hammock for me.

LHK: Life was more or less peaceful at the time. Every day they gave us some rice and fish, there were a number of us who became friends, we cooked and ate together, and it was fun. Now, I began to think, my children grew up speaking French, we were on our way to America, they had to learn English. That's why I told my son to take out the \$10 in his pocket and I went to the market. The market at that time was inside the camp; I exchanged it for Thai money and

bought a dictionary for my kids so they could learn English. I still have it; do you want to see it? I bought that and I celebrated a new life for the three of us. Every day I brought them to the makeshift school in the camp run by a Catholic clergyman. Father Joe, he passed away. He was the type of person who took care of everyone, he was an American. I still remember him. There was this one time, there was an orphan in the camp that was playing in the ocean and he drowned. He ran to the boy and did so many things to try to revive the boy, in the end he passed away. He sat on the beach, held the boy in his arms and cried.

LHK: My kids went to him to learn their ABCs. In the mean time I had to do something, so my former students recommended that I work at the camp's post office. I didn't have time to teach my kids, but they knew that and would come and ask me questions about their studies at night. After a few weeks, I had to interview with an American immigration panel. They asked me if I needed a translator, I told the official that I want to do it myself, I could speak English, but I want to sit next to me just in case. He said that was great and asked me about two or three questions, he asked me what I did before 1975, and if I was in the military. If I was in the military, what was my rank and what was my serial number. He checked in the computer and I was documented. He approved and stamped me through. At that time there were a lot of fake military men out there, but I had proof and I could speak English. I later found out that the interviewer could also speak Vietnamese. I told him that I wanted to do it myself; I wanted to try before I depended on a translator. By then he knew the kind of person I was. I was at the Song La camp for three months. They brought me to a processing camp in Indonesia in Galang, but before that I had to go to Singapore for a few days. In Galang, I stayed in the barracks. They said everyone had to learn English. Before I was transferred to Galang, they interviewed me and asked me to write an essay. They told me that I wouldn't go to learn English, rather I'd teach it. That was my niche, teaching, it followed me everywhere. I taught ESL, that program was divided into multiple sections, A, B, C, depending on your proficiency. I agreed to teach along with a number of Indonesian teachers who taught English as well. From there I became familiar with Indonesian people and their customs. I taught two semesters, totaling about six months. In the meantime the refugees who left Vietnam with me were in American already. I got stuck there. I complained why I couldn't go, they told me they were short of English teachers and said that I should stay a little longer, and that I would eventually go to America. Every day my kids went to school. Every day I would work and they would pay me in you know what, cartons of cigarettes.

MLP: Wait did you smoke at that time?

LHK: No I didn't smoke. Every now and then I would smoke a few out of boredom. But why did I have to smoke if I wasn't a smoker? I took those and sold them for money. Going back to when I was in Song La, I received a check for \$50 from my younger brother. Oh I was so happy, I had to buy clothes for my kids, I could buy other things that we needed too. That check was from my younger brother, my other brother sent clothes. In Indonesia they paid me in cigarettes and I sold them. There were a number of my older students at the camps and I accumulated more students teaching ESL. After six months I left for the United States. On my way I stayed in Singapore for a week. Every day they gave us seven Singaporean dollars so we could explore the country. It was me and my kids walking around town shopping. After that we arrived in the

United States, our first stop was Alaska. Did you know when we arrived, it was February. I just stopped on the runway for a few hours.

MLP: Oh dear, was it snowing?

LHK: Of course snow blanketed the land; it was Alaska during the winter in February. While parked on the runway, they had to turn off the engine. The Americans were walking around with no problem, but we were all drawn together shuddering. We sat there for hours like that, we wrapped ourselves in blankets and looked outside the windows, there was white everywhere. Oh God. There was snow in Thailand and Vietnam, but nothing like this. It was a novelty to see. That's a little anecdote for you about my experience coming to the United States for the first time. I saw it was so cold, I didn't know how I was going to live there. From Alaska, they flew all night until morning to San Francisco. I was there for a few days and they had a list with our destination.

MLP: Did you know where you were going at that time?

LHK: Of course I did, I was going to Ohio, because that's where my younger siblings were. By now it was 1981. That morning an American came and called my name and took me to a bus to the airport. We were given a jacket, my God it was thin, but it wasn't too bad in San Francisco. As we flew over Ohio, it was a complete white out. It was -40 degrees. I only saw snow; when my siblings came to the airport to pick us up, they looked at us and asked where we got the jackets. I said they were issued by the camps. They told me to throw it away and brought thick fur jackets. When I arrived at the home I felt some sort of peace, my siblings were all here, my own flesh and bone. For some reason I felt some coldness within me, I stayed in the house for three days. My brother told me to step outside because it might be warmer. The warmth came from working in the snow, I was walking in it and shoveling it, but I did feel better. From there I went with my sister-in-law to sign up for social security, welfare, and enroll my kids in school.

MLP: About how older were they now?

LHK: My kids were old enough to go to high school. Both of them were in the same grade, 11<sup>th</sup> grade. What made my happiest was that when they went were enrolled they were in regular English not ESL. When I met the Thai woman and spoke with her, my sons ask me what language was I speaking, meaning that didn't know anything about English. They only knew French and Vietnamese because that's what they were taught. In less than a year, they studied on their own and learned English. From knowing absolutely nothing, in less than a year they were in regular English. A year later they were getting straight A's. When I enrolled my kids in school I went to the school and met with the principle. I introduced myself as a refugee and a former principle. Based on my observation I didn't think the school was a good one.

MLP: Why is that?

LHK: A majority of the students were colored and many of them didn't take school as seriously as they should have. When my boys came home, there was no homework assigned. As a student you have to have homework, and there was none. In the end I vowed to move to a different city

in Lakewood, Ohio. I thought the school was better and this time was a few Vietnamese students. I also went to meet with the principle of the school, I felt a lot better. During their senior year in high school, my kids did very well, straight A's, scholarship to go to Case Western Reserve University.

MLP: Case Western? They have a medical school I want to apply to!

LHK: Did you apply yet?

MLP: Well not yet I have another year to go at UCI before I apply.

LHK: Wow, what a coincidence. So, both my kids got into that university and I told my boys, "I don't have much money, please don't pick anything that is too grand, like a doctor or anything, maybe engineering". So they studied computer engineering. About this time, in the 80s the computer wasn't anything like it was now. But I believed that sometime in the near future, every discipline, from medicine to mathematics to humanities will blossom because of the computer. Now do you see that it has happened?

MLP: So both of them were computer science majors?

LHK: Yes, both of them were computer science. When they were in school, I pushed them very hard. Every semester they had to take 18 credits or more, nothing less. They graduated in three years and began to look for jobs. I told them that they were still young and should continue schooling.

MLP: Wait, what did you ask them to study?

LHK: I told them to get their Masters. In the end they both got one from Cleveland University. I went to Cleveland University as well. I was a very tough father, in a sense that while they were living in their dorms, I told them they had to call home every day.

MLP: Why did they live in the dorms at that time? Was it too far from your home?

LHK: It wasn't far, but I wanted them to. So they could have more benefits while going to school, such as work study.

MLP: Lucky them, my parents won't let me dorm.

LHK: Well, that's because you are a girl! When they were in high school I taught them how to drive, but I never let them take the test.

MLP: That's odd, why is that?

LHK: If they had their license or money to buy a car, or if they had friends; they would be out having fun. At that age and time of their life they aren't supposed to be messing around, it's for studying. They had to study. After they graduated and after they have a stable job then they can



have all the fun they want. For three years as an undergraduate, they rode their bikes everywhere. Here in California, kids in high school already have cars; they are being spoiled, spoiled rotten. Do you agree?

MLP: Yea, a few of them are.

LHK: So during the summer after their third year of undergrad, I let them take their test so that after they earn some money they could buy a car or I would buy one so they can go to their job interviews. I slowly let them venture out; I didn't let them all go out at once. Today, both my oldest boys have jobs, in Virginia; they are about 40 something years old with family.

MLP: Honestly when my friend and I came for the first time, I though you looked 50 something

LHK: Ah well, thank you! I'm actually 70 something.

MLP: You look very good for your age!

LHK: While my kids were in school I went to school as well. I returned to school and studied electronics. I was able to get a Pell-Grant and Ohio grant to go to school. 5am I woke up to sell newspapers at a hospital and convalescent home. I would place a box of newspapers near the hospital door and anyone walking in or out could grab one. At the convalescent home I would go from room to room and deliver newspapers all the way to the 7<sup>th</sup> floor. In would also go into the homes of the residents and tidy up, take away their old newspapers. The old folks loved me. Sometimes they would ask me to go buy cigarettes for them. I would go all the way down stairs to the store and run all the way back up. They often let me keep the change. I did this until 7am, by then I was in front of the hospital sitting with my box of newspapers and studying. The nurses and doctors who came early asked me what I was studying and I told them electronics. They asked where I was from and all sorts of questions like that. They ended up falling in love with me too. When the time came, they let me go by each patient's room and ask if anyone want to purchase newspapers. I did that until 8am, I got about \$20 profit every day. After that I would change and go to school and stay there until late at night.

MLP: Doesn't your routine make you tired? You had to be a father, a student, and work.

LHK: When my kids were in high school they studied until 1am and I did the same thing. When I came home early from school I had to cook and prepare dinner for my kids.

MLP: Weren't you tired at all?

LHK: No, it could possibly be that at that time, I tried to acclimate with my new life. You see that all the time. For example someone who is 40 years old who grew up in the United States has lived a full life. But for me I was 40 and it was as if I had to start all over again.

MLP: That's why you look so young

LHK: Oh I don't know about that. Anyways, I sponsored my wife and my youngest son, when my youngest son came he was between 17 and 19 years old. He also went to university to study computer science. He currently lives in Ohio and his job requires him to oversee IT all across the US and Canada. When I was earning my degree, I became involved with the Vietnamese community in Ohio; there were about 2000 members at the time. The wife of the president of this community was also my former student. Everywhere I went I saw my students. My former student also had a sister that was my former student. They helped me acclimate to the US, and bought me a small black and white TV. It was very emotional; it was a token of their appreciation. I was very fortunate that everywhere I went I had some form of help. With that help I was able to overcome many episodes of difficulties and hardships. In Ohio the president of the Vietnamese community told me that I should go into teaching, he knew a school in Cleveland that approved of my teaching credentials in Vietnam. I taught math again in an aviation school in Cleveland. I was starting over, I taught math and electronics. I taught all American students

MLP: Did you think teaching them was different from teaching Vietnamese students.

LHK: Let me tell you. I knew that the method of teaching and atmosphere of school was different than Vietnam. It was stricter in Vietnam before 1975. Here in the US you can't yell at your students. Despite that I gave my students homework and a number of them didn't bother doing it. They sat and crossed their arms and said "What's up". Can you imagine how I felt?

MLP: I'd imagine that wanted to smack some of them.

LHK: Oh God I wanted to smack them across the head so bad, but I knew that I couldn't do that. After teaching for a few months, I come to realize that if continued teaching, I would end up in jail. So I left, I quit.

MLP: If students were to do that back then in Vietnam what would happen?

LHK: Not only would I yell at you I would make you kneel and call your parents. Here you can't do that. I had a friend who was also a teacher back in Vietnam, while he was teaching in the United States he was beat up three times by his students. In the end I decided to stop teaching, I couldn't teach students in the United States. I went back to school at Cleveland University and earned a degree in engineering and became an engineer. I worked as an engineer until I retired and came to California. While I was an engineer, they noticed how hard I work and how much passion I had in my job, they all loved me, I got to know all my coworkers and my supervisor. I'll tell you a little anecdote. One day I came to work and I noticed that no one was on my floor, I thought nothing of it and continued with my work and daily routine. Around lunch time, over the intercom I heard my supervisor call my name "Mr. Le please come upstairs into the meeting room". I had no idea what was going on I thought something had happened. As soon as I walked it hear "Surprise!" It turns out that they were throwing me a party. The supervisor came up and embraced me and gave me a present. He made a speech and said he knew my situation and how far I've come and that everyone just wanted to say thank you. I was so emotional, I felt as though everything came full circle.