Vietnamese American Oral History Project, UC Irvine

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Interviewer: Han Vu

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HV: What is your name, date of birth, and place of birth?

RTV: My name is Robert Vu. Place of birth is in Vietnam. I was born on December 25, 1962.

HV: Where were you born in Vietnam?

RTV: It was Ba Ria. It was in one of the small towns nearby the beach, on the south side.

HV: What are you parents’ names and describe them for me.

RTV: My father name Vu Duc Chan and my mother name Vu Thi The.

HV: Do you want to say anything about them -- you don’t have to.

RTV: My parent is -- there’s a good memory to me and they was very good and raised us when we was little until now. Even now.

HV: Where did you grow up? Please describe your hometown.

RTV: I was born in Ba Ria and there was a small town and when I’m about two years old, my dad and my mom move us from the small town to Saigon (that’s the capital). That’s where he joined the army, and my mom worked for all the general in the army. She cooked -- she was a cook at the restaurant.

HV: Where else have you lived in Vietnam?

RTV: I’m sorry?

HV: Where else have you lived in Vietnam?

RTV: That’s funny. When I was two years old, we moved from Ba Ria to Saigon and then after the Fall of Saigon, we moved back to the old neighborhood that where I was born, until I left Vietnam.

HV: Do you have any funny or any childhood memories?

RTV: I have a lot of memory as a childhood, you know, we play stupid games, you know, and there’s a lot of fun. A lot of memory, you know, like play like kick here, a lot of toys to play with and a lot of young kid about the same age that we play with.

HV: What were some main industries in your hometown? Like farming or manufacturing?
RTV: Yeah, there have farming and some people go to the beach -- fishermen. And some people go to the mountain to cut up the tree and make good out of it and resell it.

HV: What were your neighbors like?

RTV: Neighbor -- I have to talk about two part: the part before the Fall of Saigon, it really good, really peace, even we in the war zone, but still. After the Fall of Saigon, we moved to the same, the old neighborhood that I was born. We’re supposed to have peace because the communist come over and say, “yeah, now we have peace,” but I don’t think we have peace at all. At the time that we grow up, we have to go to work at a young age to support ourselves and the family if we can. So, if you ask me how the neighbor, I don’t think it’s a good picture if I want to remember. It’s not good for me to remember.

HV: How did you celebrate Tet or birthdays or funerals or any other special occasions?

RTV: Well funeral is like people die, we go to the house who passed away. We pray for them, and that’s about it. The birthday -- no we don’t -- because after the Fall of Saigon, the life is very bad. We don’t have enough food. We very poor, so we’re not talking about any cake for the birthday or celebration, none. The Tet -- that day is very special for everybody in Vietnam because that is like the New Year. It’s like Christmas here. Its very big for us. When the young people can get the money from the older and hang out with all the relative. And eating all the special cake.

HV: What jobs have you had?

RTV: I’m sorry?

HV: What jobs have you had?

RTV: The first job I have is try to help my mom and my dad doing farm work. I go to the rice field and try to help my mom and dad. That my first job, but not for long.

HV: How old were you?

RTV: I was about fourteen.

HV: What other jobs did you have?

RTV: And after that I went to the mountain and I start chopping bamboo tree so we can put on our shoulder and bring it home and sell it for people who need it in exchange for the food and money.

HV: Describe your schooling in Vietnam. What level of education did you have and how were your teachers and peers like?

RTV: I have the education until the Saigon fall, and after the Saigon fall, we don’t call that education. Before that, I can say when I was a little boy until the Fall of Saigon. I learned a lot. I learned a lot of thing that I like, even in English. The teacher is mean everything to us. In Vietnam, at that time -- I’m saying before 1975 -- the teacher got more power than parent. That’s to show you how important the education in Vietnam when we were young. But then, after the Fall of Saigon, the school is getting upside down. I would say like 360 degree. They don’t teach us anything good that we should learn. We learning something really bad, for instance, if we go to school and the teacher put the situation like counting... say like oh, the soldier -- one soldier shoot five American soldier and one Vietnamese soldier equal how many soldier? That how they teach the kid after 1975. That’s really bad
to my experience because my mom work for American people, my dad was a soldier, and we are Catholic -- so 100% and plus, we never gonna have a chance to pass college because of the background is so bad compared to wherever we go after 1975, they look at our restaurant and say oh no. That's how the life upside down, after the Fall of Saigon.

HV: What do you remember most about your parents and grandparents when you were a child?

RTV: I live with my family, and my dad was very strict about education and the life for all of us. I have eight brothers and sisters but me and my older brother who have a lot of pressure from my dad. My dad was a teacher, so he want to teach us, he want to give us all the experience, all the knowledge the best that he can. So compared to any other kid, we have a very stressful life to live with my parents. Anything my dad want to teach me, and if he say he right -- like I never get the chance to raise my hand and say “dad, dad you were wrong” -- no.

HV: What memorable stories have family members told you in the past?

RTV: The memory? Well, there is a lot of memory. I think I will skip this part. Maybe related to the next question or so I can describe it.

HV: Which occupations have your family members held in the past?

RTV: Like I said earlier, my dad is in the army and my mom work for American people. She cook for American soldier.

HV: In America or Vietnam, does your family hold reunions or annual gatherings? What activities take place and what kinds of stories are told there?

RTV: Well we, every time we reunion in Vietnam or in America, we only talking about whatever the past that we have fun. And do all the traditional, like the other Vietnamese family. The older will give the younger money for good luck and we playing poker or some kind of bingo -- stuff like that. Like New Year Day.

HV: Do you have a spouse? If so, how did you meet and marry?

RTV: At first, I met my spouse when I was in the prisoner -- when I escape from Vietnam the first time. I mean, the second time that I got caught, I mean I try to escape from Vietnam too many time, but that the time the longest one that I stay in the prison as the political prisoner. I met her there, she also a prisoner there as well, and then we talk a little bit and then when we get out, we try to escape from Vietnam again, I met her again in the refugee camp. I was in a member of the choir and so was she. So she remember me, and we talk and we fall in love and we marry when we meet each other in America again.

HV: Do you have children and how many?

RTV: I have two children. I have two children, yes.

HV: Would you like to describe them?

RTV: My children is very important to me. I love them and I want to give them whatever I can. To share with them whatever experience -- good and bad, so they can learn, so they can get that to make a foundation for when they grow up. Yeah, I do love my kid more than anything else.
HV: Does your family keep an alter for your ancestors?
RTV: Yeah. But I will pass that for now and talk about that later on in the question.
HV: What religion does your family practice?
RTV: We practice Catholic.
HV: How important is religion to you?
RTV: In the religion? In the religion?
HV: Religion -- how important is religion to you?
RTV: Well, when we was born, when we was kid we was raised as a Catholic member, so we obey to the Catholic rules as the best as we can. So to me, you better have religion so that you can feel when you down or when you up. For instance, if I was in trouble, I can talk to God. God, help me. I’m in trouble, I’m lonely, etc. etc. So best way to have a religion. I mean, the way I look at it, than to have no religion.
HV: How did the war in Vietnam affect your family and community?
RTV: It was affect my family is very badly. We have a very healthy family cause most of my mom and my dad have a good job and make good of living, so we have a good life. So, after the Fall of Saigon, we lost everything. Meaning, my dad will have no job and my mom will have no job. And we can’t, you know, because mom and dad don’t have a job so we all suffering. So it really affecting a lot for the life and for the economy as well and for the community as well because the whole country was upside down when the communist come over and take over the country.
HV: Where did you live during the war?
RTV: I live in Saigon during the war.
HV: Did you have a job then?
RTV: No, I was a student.
HV: How were you or your family members involved in the war?
RTV: My family is -- I’m talking about my grandparent both side my mom and my dad -- they originally they from North of Vietnam was under control by the communist. In 1954, my parent (at that time they’re not married yet), the move from the North to the South side. What was the question again?
HV: How were you involved in the war?
RTV: Okay. So, basically, with the life of the communist, my mom and my dad could not live with the communist, that’s why they left the North, moved to the South. Yeah, South side in 1954 when they were young. So, when they moved to the South Vietnam, there still war between the North and the South. And my mom and my dad marry and I heard my dad say one time, there’s a lot of communist go to our hometown when I was a little one, like I was about one years old at that time. But when I grow up, my dad told me the story. There in the night a lot of communist, came to the little town that we lived, and they keep shooting the gun. Shooting on the sky, on the air, you know, but right next to my dad ear, that make him upset so he change his mind. He was a teacher and then he moved from the
little town in Ba Ria, go to Saigon. So the war is affecting my dad and my mom a lot, and it transfer to us too. Cause I was born and raised during the war.

HV: What do you remember most about that time period?

RTV: You mean about the experience with the war? Well, the first incident that we have in Tet 1968, as I remember, I was a little boy and I think it was about 1968 Tet -- the communist come over and the people in the army in our country, I mean on the South side, is try to defend. And then they throw a lot of grenades, and that thing smell very bad. That the first incident that I smell the war -- 1968. And I saw people shooting -- fighting, shooting, and then people dying on the street and there’s smoking everywhere. That was 1968 as I remember correctly.

HV: Were you ever captured or held by enemy forces during the war and how did you feel?

RTV: In the last day of Saigon, I was 13 years old, as I remember. I saw a lot of gun firing, smoking, firing everywhere in my, let my say that before the Fall of Saigon, I was in Saigon but then one week before we lost Saigon, my uncle -- he brought me to his hometown, that’s the town that I was born. Later after the Fall of Saigon, I moved back to that town too. So the whole family, all my family, in Saigon except only me in Ba Ria. And the last day of the Fall of Saigon, my family want to get in a boat to go to America. But then my mom said, that last minute she said to my dad, “well, we have one kid, and if we die on the sea, he will be orphan. If we make it to America, and he still orphan, so I don’t want to live without my kid. So I rather stay here even I know it gonna be really bad because we move once from the communist already, but I cannot leave my children in here then we can all go to America.” Final decision, we all stay. That make me feel very bad later on when I grow up.

HV: Were you or anyone you knew ever in reeducation camp and how was that like?

RTV: I was in the reeducation camp, a prisoner. Like I said earlier, I tried to escape from Vietnam by boat, so we couldn’t make it because the boat not even left the neighbor dock long. We get caught by the Vietnamese police whose communist. So they put us in one of the small, small prisoner with a lot of people. I would say people sit next to each other and sleep right next to each other by not even one or two inch, when the time was very crowded. And its so sad, there have no air conditioning, all they have was the metal building and we stay in there. Everything was metal, and no air, no fan, nothing. And we have to make our own fan to cool down the temperature. And there’s a, I mean, to me it was bad, very bad experience with the re-education camp. I lived there for like six month, and relocated me to another small town to do the farm work. And I was talking to one of the gentleman in there and he help me to become an advisor like in prisoner. Like in prison, the communist control us, and we or one of the guy represent for another 100 guys like called advisor or security guy -- I am one of those. That make me a lot of trouble when I go to refugee camp. If I get that chance, I will talk about that later on.

HV: Where were you during the last days of war?

RTV: I said earlier yes, I was in Ba Ria with my grandmother, the mother of my mom.

HV: What were your memories of those final days?

RTV: Wow, it really bad. It’s like all of the sudden you see a lot of fighting and smoking everywhere, you know, in your grandma house and also in your house, I mean I’m talking