Vietnamese American Oral History Project, UC Irvine

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Interviewer: Tram Le
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TL: This is Tram Le with the Vietnamese American History Oral Project at UC Irvine. Today is Friday, February 6, 2015. I will be interviewing Mr. HaoNhien Vu in his home in Fountain Valley, California. Thank you for doing this HaoNhien.

HV: Well you're certainly welcome got to do this.

TL: Okay, well first off let me start off by asking you to say your full name, your birth date, and your place of birth.

HV: Okay, my full name is HaoNhien Vu or in Vietnamese Vu HaoNhien. Uh what was the second second thing?

TL: Where were you born?

HV: I was born in Saigon, Vietnam on November 2, 1964.

TL: Can you tell me about growing up in Saigon?

HV: Well I grew up in basically in two house in all of my time in Vietnam. One house for my first four or five years of life. And then we move to the second house and that was actually the house I grew up in. We actually have a a habit of calling the other house which was a rental, we call it the old house. Then the house in which my parents were buying, so we were even though it was during wartime, Saigon was really well protected. Even during massive attacks like during the Tet Offensive. It was, Tet Offensive only affected certain areas like military installation, the U.S. Embassy, certain government offices. And during that time we were actually in the old house out in the suburbs rental in a an alley, so, I don't remember much of it but I'm pretty sure
nothing happened. Uhh, so throughout the war we were pretty isolated farm with the fighting itself, even though it did affect us as a people and as a family in that. There are always issues, always about the war, you're gonna leave saigon, you may be ambushed or you may bust your arm, may be over your mind or something. You always have to plan something and going over here, it's kind of safe because there has been no attacks lately. But going over there is probably not safe so let's not go there. So it is more of the indirect effects like that. And so I had a good time as a kid, I was involved in a lot of things in some playing chest playing sports, I was usually the youngest person in like whatever. My parents and aunt took me this chest tournament and I was like the youngest kid there and I was playing against all of the older kids and well uhh well. Win some lose some in all the bet. Throughout, a big part of life, I have been the youngest of whatever. Like whatever I am in. The war never touched until, until the Fall of Saigon. Once when I was about, my parents saw they loaded us up in the car I was trying to get us a way out of there.

TL: How old were you by that time?

HV: By that time, I was ten, except we don't count by birthdays, if it is 1975 and I was born in 1964, 75-64 is 11, whereas for Americans here in the U.S. we count by birthdays. I was more like elevens but not by my eleventh birthday. And uhh, unlike other people who we ended up not getting to leave Vietnam, but unlike other people who didn’t get to leave Vietnam because they thought they could survive the new government. My parents didn’t have that kind of illusion, they know they were going to be in trouble, they just didn’t know how much but they know there will be trouble, problems for our family so they were trying to leave.

TL: Did you know this?
HV: I didn’t know that, I was ten years old, I didn’t know anything. I know what people tell me. So they tell me one thing I would know that, if they tell me another thing I would know the other thing. But I didn’t have the concept of what it means to get into trouble with the government. It’s not something that we were familiar with.

TL: Did you feel fear at that time?

HV: Uhh some what. I feel the fear of the people around me. I felt the fear of the people around me and I sort of know that I should feel something but I’m not sure what it is. So we were going around trying to leave the country, uhm, we actually swung by the Embassy compound and we actually saw all the people in layers and layers of humans surrounding the compound and we pretty much decided there is no way we can get in. My parents were both doctors and they had a red cross, so they but a red cross like a uhm red cross because they thought that would keep them safer because at that time a lot of government officials and law enforcement and military was pretty much in chaos and pretty much so you know who may get attacked by the mob or whatever. So we put that on so we put that red cross on and drove around and looked at the compound and it was full of people. We pretty much know we have no chance, so we went back home and I think later on when my parents would tell me later on that they thought they had a deal with some American friends they were working with uh in a lot of research medical project they were working with a lot of American friends who are part of the U.S. government or part of different kinds U.S. aid missions to Vietnam, so they thought they had a deal to get a way out so they only tried but not as fervently as they might otherwise. And other of their colleagues thought so too. So during the final few days, we and another family that are colleagues of my parents, we all went to this one hospital coincidentally the hospital I was born at was called the St. Paul Hospital, was a hospital run by the nuns and so we took refuge there. Uh partly because
my house is in an alley it’s surrounded, it’s in the middle of a block of houses with an alley going in like in a U-shape so we’re at sort of like the U-shape goes like this and was right above the bottom. So we have one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight houses around us in the same kind of alley area. Same, same softness, same boudoir, same neighborhood. Uh we are the only civilian family in that neighborhood. All the others are military family, actually we and another, but the other is also a high ranking government official. We are the only regular civilian non-official person in the whole neighborhood. So my parents were thinking, well, if I were a communist, I’m gonna fire a rocket at something in the city, this, this will be one of the…so let’s go somewhere else. So all parents decided, let’s go to the hospital. Did I mention St. Paul happens to be the one I was born in and my little brother as well. So were there and we were taking refuge there and uhm with the other family and we didn’t really know what to do, it was just like okay fine, so we’re not staying at home because our parents think it’s not safe but we’re just here in the hospital and we’re just here running up and down the aisles, and uhm the other family is also catholic and the other girl wanted to play in the chapel and I went to play in the chapel and we run around. We didn't really, it is not really the feeling of being in a war at the end of a war, with like hundreds of thousands of enemy troops closing in on the city and invading it, I never gone on us as kids, until like the very last day when we were just still you know running down the aisle and balcony and we looked up and we saw like a girl being killed in front of a person. Totally bloody all red from top to bottom and I was probably my first sight of what war is. Other than that its just concept that I would see on tv, on the news and obviously you'd think American TV news was such graded with war images. Aha, well Vietnamese tv news even more such saturated with war images but that was the first and only time I actually see it for myself not through TV, and shortly after maybe 20-25 minutes it was like the person surrendered, and so we
know okay, the person surrendered we lost. And I’m not sure how I felt at that time, it was just another event. I’m not sure if I thought that we were losing, it was just another event, or that pieces at hand or that the country is unified, none of that. I had none of those concepts. I was a pretty smart kid but it was all school smart, I had no concept of all of these political things was happening around me or social things were happening. And so that was it for the first and last and end of the war for me.

TL: But what about seeing that body, did that do you remember anything?

HV: That girl was just being carried in. We were up in the balcony and we saw it carry in the hospital has a big yard and it was carrying from the gate of the hostpital to inside of the hospital which is like below the balcony, the balcony we were looking out at. It is the balcony that run from one wing of the hospital to the other wing. So we just standing there and we saw that was it, the body was being carried in went in and well there it went. So

TL: So it didn’t impact you that much?

HV: It, it’s visually it’s a lot of impact but it’s not that I was traumatized or afraid of blood for the rest of my life or anything though.

TL: Let’s go back to a little bit of your family, can you what is your dad’s name?

HV: My dad’s name is Dai, Vu Quy Dai, Dai Vu. And my mom’s name is Nuynh Do, so her last name is Do, her her the my maternal family’s full last name I guess is actually Do Hoac, so we more recently she’s been writing her name out as Do Hoac as opposed to just Do. But you know her name officially is just Do.

TL: And what were their occupations?

HV: And both of my parents are physicians and professors at a medical school of Saigon. Saigon, Vietname uhm South of Vietnam had two public medical schools and one private
medical school. The two public medical school in Saigon is in Hue and then there’s a private medical school in Saigon. And both of my parents taught at the medical school in Saigon the public school and it’s a part of the University of Saigon. They both are microbiology researchers, they both have their MD’s, my dad has a PhD, and my mom has her master’s in microbiology from Thomas Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia and so that’s what they were doing. They were researching microbes and viruses and tropical diseases like Malaria and things like that and different kinds of antibiotic and how whether or not they work or they don’t work. And so that’s what my parents did and my brother went in their way with all the medical and biological stuff I went more into the physical science site and things.

TL: So there words didn’t inspire you or influence you to follow the medical route?

HV: Well I mean they would want to influence me I guess, but no it didn’t work.

TL: How was your uhh so would you say you grew up pretty comfortably?

HV: Yeah I would say it’s well part of the thing you might want to understand is that South Vietnam is actually not that stratified society. A doctor doesn’t make humongous amount of money compared to an elementary school teacher. They make more but not ten times more and a professor makes just about as much as a teacher medical professor verses a math professor, probably make around the same. And in my neighborhood there were several people who were like one of my like one of the reasons why we moved in that neighborhood in the first place is that it was like a neighborhood of middle class housing sold by the government to public employees. And one of my dad’s friends from high school is a military officer he was well off as well as all public employees, so he bought one house and told my dad about that and my dad bought a house right next to his. So here’s a professor in one house and there’s a guy who became a colonel in the army and assistant to the president and actually the man who shook hands with
the communist as they went into the presidential palace to take the president’s surrender. So and we were living in two houses next to each other with about pretty much the same level of middle class and there are other civilians, public employees here, eventually he moved in a military office. And around it, and one of the neighbors start climbing up the ladder and became a general and it’s still in that small little house in that small neighborhood. It’s not like the level of disparity of wealth isn’t there, so it’s not like we live in a big mansion or move from an apartment to a house to big mansion. So you can think of it like, the house is probably, about twenty feet wide and forty feet deep, so it’s actually not that it’s townhouse, has yard in the front but no yards on the side. So it’s not that big so you probably but you know Vietnamese don’t need a lot to live in. So it’s ten percent bigger than somebody elses house or ten percent smaller than somebody elses house here in Saigon. So all houses are about ten fifteen twenty percent on each other. So it’s comfortable we went to a public school we took music lessons and uhh schoolmates would be, well my school mates their parents would be public employees or entrepreneurs or even like people who open like one guy, one guy lives in Chinatown and his parents had a small little kind of like a seven eleven type of store in the house, so it’s fun that my friend lives upstairs from a seven eleven if you think it that way. We call it the Tim Toc Quan, we sell whatever. So it’s like a dimestore. So that’s the situation it’s not very stratified it’s not as stratified as a lot of other underdeveloped countries like you have massive wealth verses massive poverty. Yup there’s wealth there’s poverty but it’s not massively different. So yep, so so yep on the one hand it was comfortable, but on the other hand it’s not less comfortable than you know probably its less comfortable than the some people in the country other than the top three or four people I guess. It’s just normally, regularly comfortable.

TL: What about your grandparents, what did they do?
HV: My grandfather died when my dad was young on my dad side so I have no idea what he did. He uhm my dad’s family came from the country side in Province of North Vietnam. They came from one of those areas full of Catholics, so that’s my dad’s. If I were to go back now to that old countryside, it’s probably still pretty much the same, it’s like full of Catholics, everyone listens to the priest, the preist says blah blah blah, and people would do blah blah blah, uhm and because my grandfather died early and we were in the countryside so basically my uncle who’s my dad’s oldest brother, went to school maybe through, it may have been through high school. Maybe he finished high school. Then he started working; he is actually, in that day and age, like in the 1940 or so once you finish high school, you are probably the equivalent of getting a Master’s in the U.S. in the year 2015. You are one of the few educated people and you go back to the countryside and teach and you open a school and kids come to you for learning. And the kids are ambitious to finish elementary school. So that’s sort of the situation. So my uncle didn’t go to college even though college existed, my uncle didn’t go to college because he had to go home to start making a living and tending all the kids to school. My dad by the time he finished high school, he had the opportunity to go to college and went to college but he still, during the time off he’d go back to the countryside, even before finishing high school. When he was in high school he would not be in the high school in the village. Because the village doesn’t have a high school, so he needs to be in a high school somewhere else. And the province Nam De, there’s a one high school called the, it’s either one or two but very few. My dad went to the one in Inmo, and he went to high school there. And so he had to live there and go to school somewhere else, and on his days off he’d go back to the village, help my uncle teach kids and then go back to school again. Public education was free but you have to pay for room and board because you’re not living at home because there’s no school at home. So you have to make all that money and
my uncle had to make all that money to send my dad to school, and then after high school, went
to college, started as a math major for a year then switched to medical school. On my mom side,
my grandfather was a cook in a tax office I believe, or what’s equivalent to our recorder’s office
where rent debts are are recorded. It’s one or the other. And so the thing is by the time and this is
all in the 1940’s and 50’s and in 1954 when Dien Binh Phu happened, the French and the State of
Vietnam and the government of Ho Chi Minh signed the court in Geneva and invite people into
Vietnam North and South. And people have to start to decide whether to go south. Well, several
things happened that caused both my mom and dad to go south. First of all, my mom and dad
were in medical school at the time and the medical school decided they are going to move south.
At the time all of Indochina, so we are talking about three countries, all Indochina had one
medical school in Hanoi. So you either go there for medical school or you go to some other
country for medical school. And that medical school decided they are going to move to Saigon.
So well some people who really don’t believe in politician or really love Ho Chi Minh or they
thought they could stay behind but don’t love Ho Chi Minh or you know think he’s okay enough,
they would stay behind and let the school go somewhere else. But my mom and dad were
students so they moved with the school in Saigon. My dad’s family was Catholic and all Catholic
have a fear of communist so the whole family went with all the other Catholics. Millions of
Catholics. My grandfather on my mom side, he was working for the tax or recorder’s office, well
that office, says we are moving south. So that family moved south too and in fact my grandfather
moved into by the time that office moved south they saw got allotted of the an apartment
building for their employees to buy because they were in Hanoi and all of these people in Saigon,
what are we going to do. Well buy one of these houses. So each office is allowed a certain area
to build apartment building or whatever, so my grandfather ended buying one of those
apartments in one of those buildings that were set aside for the office. So he ended up and that was the one single apartment where my entire family on my mom side grew up in. Since 1950 it may not be 54’ exactly maybe 55’ or 56’. So the entire mom side family grew up in that house still there, and my aunt still lives in it. I have an unmarried aunt and unmarried uncle still living in it, in that apartment, everybody in that apartment complex were originally working at that office tax slash recording office. So they knw each other unless they got sold to some outsider otherwise anyone in that apartment complex knew each other since nineteen fifty something three or four generations ago. So it’s really interesting going into back to that neighborhood and visiting my aunt and them saying oh this must be Nhuynh’s son and its pretty interesting. But obviously overtime the family is not really there anymore they sell it to outside people but that’s different. But other than that one whole neighborhood came from one office in Hanoi from the nineteen fifties early nineteen fifties and right now the 21st century and is still there. One apartment complex.

TL: Did your parents meet in medical school?

HV: So my parents met in medical school, my mom a year ahead of my dad, they met and they got married, either after or before graduation I have no idea. I just know they got married and they got pitures but they didn’t say they already graduated. My oh probably before they graduate because my brother was born in 59’ my mom is class of 59’ and my dad is class of 60’. So shortly before graduation, they got married, and shortly after my dad graduated, he got a scholarship to study in the U.S. for his PhD program and he went and a year or so later my mom also got a scholarship she also went and she spent some time at the center for disease control in Atlantic. She went to join my dad at Thomas Jefferson Medical School.

TL: And how many siblings do you have?
HV: I have two brothers, the one that was born first right after my parents got married and before they graduated, he’s five years older than me. I was born then actually I was conceived when my parents are in the U.S. so there are pictures of my mom pregnant in front of like U.S. landmarks like the Niagara Fall or buildings in Philadelphia whatever. But I was born in Saigon, my mom came home to give birth and then there’s my younger brother, there are three of us all boys. My younger brother was born in 1968 late 1968 and 1968 was also the year of the Tet Offensive was at the beginning of the year. So uhm yep so that’s the family and so where are we, we’re at the grandparents the parents the brothers and the time of the war and the last image and probably live image of the war so the person all bloody all red from the top to bottom being carried into the hospital we are taking refuge at.

TL: Tell me about your high school years, how was that?

HV: Okay so skipping ahead to high school, because there are actually it’s pretty interesting that there are certain things that happened that coinincide with some interesting thing with my life. Like the Tet Offensive during the year my brother was born and at the end of the war 1975 same year I finished elementary school. Same year I finished fifth year of schooling. So things that happened around that time, I went to school called Quy Dong and it’s right across the street from the presidential palace and so I was there when and a little bit before the time when before the war ended one of the airforce pilot the south Vietnamese Airforce pilot turned out to be an undercover agent for North Vietnam. So he took his airplane and dropped two bombs on the presidential palace except that nobody died and he took off somewhere else and joined his comrades. So we were there when the bombos were dropped and so the school moved all the kids to the far side of the school. The person said if they bomb over here let’s move all the kids over there. So move all the kids to the far side of the school and wait for the parents to pick them
up. And that coincide with the end of my elementary school years and that coincide with the end of Vietnam.

TL: Were you scared going to school with all the chaos and bombing?

HV: No the bombing was actually I don’t really remember what happened after that but I do remember we actually didn’t finish the school year. At some point somebody decided the school year would be cut short but I don’t remember if it was right after the bombing or some time after that. Remember the war was on April 30 which was then end of April which was not the end of the school year in Vietnam. In Vietnam the end of school year is in the month of May. So sometime before that someone decided that no don’t come to school anymore because the school is closed. So that was yeah so other than that I wasn’t scared I was supposed to be scared I guess I didn’t know enough to be scared. Two bombs drop on the palace. Boom, boom! Actually my classroom was on the close side on the near side and then we all got moved and that was the end of it. No more bombs. So it was done and over with. So I don’t think I felt fear, it was more excitement than fear, it was more like woah, now I know bombing yay.

TL: So how is it going to school now you’re under communist rule?

HV: So yeah right afterwards, I have to moved “Chung Hoc” to high school which is sort of a combination of high school and middle school. And then I did I must and then something happened and I don’t know why. I’ve always been one of the top students in the class in particular subjects not everything. I was really bad at writing and all that.

TL: What were you good at?

HV: I was really good at language like foreign language, like we took French for about 2 to three hours a week. In elementary school I ace French all the time and I ace Math all the time. So something happened when I’m when I came back to school I was supposed to enter 6th grade
which was another part of the school not the elementary school so it is no longer automatically
joining in you have to pass the exam to continue onto 6th grade. And for some reason I flunked
that exam. I was actually so proud of my performance I actually thought the question was written
wrong. Because I got an answer that doesn’t make any sense. My question was blah blah blah
and it and the question was whatever and I remember the it gives a situation and asked to
calculate a specific weight of iron and I know the answer is 17. And somehow I get answer that
is not 17, and I left the answer as is thinking the question is set up wrong. If the question is set up
correctly the answer should be 17. And I came home being so proud of myself that I know the
question was wrong because the answer didn’t come out to be 17. So well obviously I must have
done something wrong because how hard is it to be to make the answer 17 right? So it can’t be
that hard. So I flunked the test so I could no longer continue from the same school. So my mom
took me to another school took their test and I passed that test just fine. That school was La Santa
Bear, La Santa Bear turns out, it turns out two of very old schools in Vietnam. Liquadon was a
public school, was opened created by the French Colonial in Saigon. And it went through Shala
loo loo BA, and Jean Jacque Su, and it went through several names until it was transferred to the
government of Vietnam and got a Vietnamese name. So under the old names because it’s been
around forever so you have all of those illustrious alumni from colonial times like Prince Seano
he went there. Because he was Catholic he didn’t want to go to school in Filapion so he went to
school in Saigon. And that was the school he went to and because the French created only so
many schools for all of Indochina and no matter where you live you have to go where the schools
are. So and then La Santa Bear is by the an order of it’s actually in Catholic theology it’s called
the third order of religious. So it’s run by friars. So friars are kind of like priests except they are
not priests. So I don’t know why people do that because you have to do everything priests do.
Like you can’t eat meat on Friday and you can’t get married and you can’t do, so all of the things that priests are banned friars are banned too. But all things priests can do like give absolution or mass friars cannot. So I have no idea why people become friars but anyway that’s the order that runs that school. That school had like a hundred years of history in Saigon as well. In Vietnam we call it the La San order in the U.S. we know it as the Christian brothers. The CBC I don’t remember what it stands for so we call it the Christian brothers of something CBC. So in the U.S. we call it by a different name. Uhm and so we went from that school I went from that school to that other school. I spent a year there and what happened at the government is that they decided they were going to shut down that school because it was a Catholic school and under the new government, the only people allowed in school are the government. No private schools are allowed, that is a private school. Shut it down. So I went there for one year for sixth grade the school got shut down. So all the students get spread out all over the place and my mom got me on hold in why is it my mom and not my dad aha we’ll come back to that don’t forget to ask me that. My mom took me to another school, named after Marie Curie, before 1975 it used to be an all girls school. In French time it was an all girls school reserved for local girls. So the French opened a school for local girls and have another school for French girls or European girls or nonindigenous girls. So this used to be a girl school and now its co-ed and I went there. I went there for a year and the governemtn decided to shut it down the junior high or middle school portion as well. So from that school I went to another school. So it’s actually no more within a radius of a couple miles really because Saigon is a small place so it’s within walking distance of each other. So I was going from one school to another school from Liquadon to La Santa Bear to Marie Curie and whatever remains of Marie Curie is still functioning now. And then moved on to another school called Hom Gum, Hom Gum before 75’ was a northern nun school, a school
run by nuns with the order of Notre Dame. And it was called Reigne Munde which means Queen of the World, in Latin. Another name they would call it and you find certain references here and there in French literature because it is the nun order has been around forever a lot of girls get sent there so it’s called Cuvan Dezoizou, so anyway I went there and again private parties are not allowed to run a school so the school for this particular school instead of shutting it down the government takes it over. Takes over the school and turns it in co-ed. And so after they closed Marie Curie they moved all the students into that school so that’s where I went for eighth ninth tenth eleventh and twelfth grade and graduated. So fifth grade one school, seventh grade one school and eighth grade another school so I had four schools in four years. They keep closing things I keep going to:

TL: How was teaching did they force communist propaganda on you or how was that?

HV: Well communist, we ended becoming apart of the curriculum. It’s called politics, a politics class but it’s not like a political science class where you explore different theories of politics. No it’s just one theory of politics and that’s the theory you’re learning but so everybody is doing that and you look around and all students are and all schools and all grown ups have to go through that so you didn’t feel so bad. If only like children of former public employees had to that then you feel bad but everybody has to do that. Grownups have to do that little kids have to do that tv talks about that all the time so whatever we’ll get through it and move on. Move on with our lives. I had a lot of well developed teachers devoted to teaching so I was fortunate in that sense in that time actually one of the characteristics of that time is that by the time all the boat people phenonmen was happening people were interested in becoming one of the boat people than doing whatever. I so for example my parents who are microbiology researchers one of their field of research is Malaria so would need to sample mosquitoes in the delta and do research on them.
Well at that time it was hard to get out of Saigon you have to get permission. So they got special permission to go collect samples of mosquitoes in the delta while they walk around they would set up meetings with people to see if they can get us out on the boats so you know the trip was sanctioned by the government but in reality people were doing all kinds of other things like lab technician and grad students were working with my parents and take the opportunity to buy meat and rice. Because they’ll be coming back in a van sanctioned by the government so it would not be searched and even the driver would take the opportunity to buy some meat and rice from the countryside and bring it to Saigon.

TL: To sell or to eat?

HV: And or, first to eat but maybe to sell who cares right, surplus over here is the natural flow of goods. So that’s the situation even people in research, my parents were into do those things like finding a way out of the country than to actually doing research, research is actually an excuse, so likewise a lot of teachers were spending a lot of time to get out of the country, unfortunately a lot of my teachers even as they do that they still care a lot about the students, still teach us well and still take care of a lot of troubles that typical kids get in plus all the troubles that kids get in because of the new government so that was very fortunate of me.

TL: Did you get into a lot of trouble?

HV: I didn’t get into a lot of trouble, I didn’t have any reason to get into a lot of trouble. So that was high school and in tenth grade my parents snuck my little brother out of the country by signing him up in place of this other kid who died. So there’s this other family my uncle’s family actually who gets to leave the country get to go to France well they had younger kid my cousin who died at birth after he is his birth certificate has been issued so there’s a family list this family is allowed to leave Vietnam, it consist of the father, mother, daughter, son, daughter blank son,
that blank the cousin who died at birth my little brother was squeezed in at that spot. So when I
was in about tenth grade my little brother was snuck out of the country that way. And when I was
in about five or six months later my older brother successfully made it on the boat to Malaysia.
So by the time I graduated high school, I was the only kid left.
TL: Did you want to leave:
HV: Oh yeah, everybody wanted to leave all my friends, a lot of my friends were leaving. My
parents kept trying, like I said we kept trying to go to these places to make connection with
people organizing these trips. I went to one trip to Camron and somehow didn’t make it with one
of my parent’s friends and we didn’t make it so we had to go back. I went with the whole family
went on another trip somewhere in the Mekong downtown and we didn’t make that one either
and my brother tried several times because he is male older he could be conscripted into the
army to die in Cambodia anytime so it was much higher priority to make sure my older brother
gets out of there. So after several times I think close to a dozen times my older brother made it
when I was in the eleventh grade. So by the time I graduated, by the time I was in twelfth grade I
was the only child left at home, and when we left on the leave program it was just my parents
and me because my two other brothers have already gone.
TL: Okay so let’s talk about those trips, because you make it sound like a vacation to go to these
places before your escape. So talk to me how was this trip like?
HV: It was not like quite like a vacation vacation but it’s kind of like playing James Bond. I
speak Vietnamese with a northern accent I can speak it with a southern accent so I was told told
to speak with southern accent only don’t call attention to yourself, and on the other hand don’t
get yourself arrested, be ready to run. So it was lot like playing James Bond, playing a spy game.
So one trip was taking the trip to Camron which is on the central coast of Vietnam. So taking the
train there and going there and hooking up connection there. It was all hush hush and secret secret and another trip it was the same thing, it was hush hush and we go into a peasant’s house and we hide there and go on a tiny little boat to get to a bigger boat uhm and then it didn’t work and we have to come and it’s all hush hush. We’d be on the boat we’d go from one spot to another on a small river boat and people would talk to my dad and he would pretend he is going to leave Saigon becauase he couldn’t make it in Saigon and he’s going to find a place down here. I think everybody knew except that nobody is saying it’s not, in retrospect I don’t think anybody in the countryside would believe a Saigon person if they say they’re moving to the countryside. It’s a story that you have to come up with to tell people, people will pretend to believe it because they are actually on your side. And all that but I don’t think we fooled anyone. The only real thing is to hide from the police, if a police happen to walk by I’m pretty sure they know to. The idea is to not be seen by a police that walks by but other than that I don’t think we fooled anyone.

TL: How did you feel about going, is this the first time have you been to the countryside before this?

HV: Uhm we were not we have not been to the countryside before the war ended uhmm because we really didn’t have any reason to. When I was in school in elementary school a lot of my friends during came back from vacation from summer vacation they would say they “ve hue”. I always like wish to have a way to go to say we went back to the country and we didn’t have a country to go back to because both of my parents are from the northern side of the country which is separated by a national border and a lot of war in between too. First of all we didn’t have any reason to go to the countryside because we’re not from there and second of all it wasn’t safe to go to the countryside. Unless you know exactly where you’re going, you can go from Saigon to a safe town that’s not like half run by communist sometimes. You could be going to some area run
by communists could get ambushed or whatever. So it wasn’t a safe thing unless you knew what to do. So do have family in the countryside they would know exactly a, where to go, and b, how to go there. We don’t, so even if we don’t my parents decided to see “Canh Tu” because it’s like the Mekong delta and every Vietnamese person should see it at least once. Well we can’t because we don’t know which way would be safe to get there which day would be a safe day to travel. It’s just not one of those things we know how to do. So before 1975 there were a lot of places in Vietnam we didn’t go to because we didn’t know about the safety situation. Whereas after that yes I have gone to the countryside several times. Precisely on all these trips, taking samples and what not that reminds me there’s another trip I took that I took and not my parents so I have two attempts without anybody else in the family and you know two or three with the family. The second time the first attempt was going to the central coast and the second time was actually to Canh Tu, which is like the some people call it the western capitol so all of the southern tip of Vietnam the area that the French used to call China, all of the southern tip of Vietnam is sort of elongated like this with a Mekong delta so east versus west. So on the east side there is Saigon and on the west side, the biggest city is Canh Tu. So on east side Saigon is actually the borderline of east and west so they are called Canh Tu is called the capitol Tay Do is called the capitol of the west. So we actually went there and spent the person who took me who is a pharmacist who works in my dad lab she is a very devout Catholic and related to the bishop. She was staying in the compound for Canh Thu for one night. Which is sort of scary because the pharmacist thought that would be a safe place to stay so she went there and talked to the bishop but the bishop was asleep and nobody was there to wake the bishop up so the uh what do you call a person starting to be a priest? Well anyway the assistant who is actually a priest apprentice uh couldn’t decide what to do with us called one of his superior who is a priest and one of the high
ranking, that person wouldn’t wake the bishop either. So they decide fine you could stay here for one night not so that’s okay and then now they say they don’t want trouble with the local government so give us our papers so we can go. Whenever you stay at someone’s house you have to register with the local police so that freak out the pharmacist because now everybody knows she is there what if the police ask her what she is doing there. That freak her out but she had to hand the paper over anyway because we have no choice. That totally freak her out she was so scared. But nothing happened you know the priest went to see the police handed over the paper the police did whatever they did and he came back with a permit to stay temporarily at somebody else’s place so fine we slept there one night and the next day we went on I don’t even remember what happened after that. But that was my first time in Canh Tu and my first time seeing you know the city itself and how beautiful it is and how actually how rich it is compared to Saigon. Canh Tu at the time because it is in the Mekong delta itself you know in terms of food and rice and meat and all the meat that is hard to get in Vietnam. It’s totally abundant in Canh Tu so that’s why actually way later in 1994 when I visit Vietnam for the first time after coming to the U.S. actually I asked my uncle to somehow get me back to Canh Tu so I can visit it again. And eat “Com Dia” in the market and it was still good. Still as good as always.

TL: Let’s go to when you said to remind you about your mom?

HV: So why is it that my mom was taking care of everything well because my dad wasn’t there. My dad is a civilian was a civilian well he still is, he’s a doctor he teaches at a medical school. He is not a government official but he still has to reeducation camp because way back when he was a third or fourth year medical student he was conscripted into the army medical core. So when he graduated he was made a second lieutenant. When he went to graduate school, the military signed a piece of paper that said you can go to graduate school without permission but
they neve actually released him from his duties as a military person. Why? Obvious reasons, they want the option to call back all of these people whenever they need to. So in south Vietnam before 75’ there is a lot a lot of civilian workers who at some time in the past had been part of the army because they were conscripted it was universal conscription. So everybody had to go join the military there is no choice about it. But Soon or later the country will need teachers doctors nurses secretarie tax all of those civilian positions had to be filled somehow. So those people have to be gotten back by the military. So the way the military did it and the way they made sure to get the personnel later if necessary later on is to sign a release but not actually like a transfer. It says we allow you to start doing civilian stuff and until further notice or further order, so it means people are free to do whatever. Just as good as a discharge but not a discharge. So officially on paper my dad and tens of thousands of other civilians are still part of the military. So when the communist government came they decided that all military offices have to go reeducation. And so what about all the quote on quote offices who haven’t been in offices for decades because they were released well they were permitted to do something else. Well it was never clear, so my dad says better not get into trouble let’s just go. So he went. So that’s why all of that thing with schooling is on my mom.

TL: How long is he gone?

HV: Uhm not that long I think it was six months which to me was super long becase he had other friends This is something actually happened because of all the physicians that was sent to reeducation, they were called back pretty quickly. There were people in reeducation camp for 10 to 7 years 8 years four years five years, a lot of physician went for one month two months three months six months and nine months so my dad was on the long ish side of things. One of his friends went for like two or three years and we thought that Oh my gosh. And I think the new
government needed doctors and all the doctors were in reeducation and they were students in medical school were conscripted into the medical core. Everybody went through what my dad went through. They were conscripted medical core got a whatever rank or some sort of lieutenant and then let go. So they were all in the camps and there were no doctors over here so they decide to pull all the doctors back. So one after another so one of the doctors my parents friends were there for a long time. Because he was also a big activist in the catholic church. Big lay activist but to us they kept him for two three years. Your dad has been there and their dad not out yet and so then I realized my dad six months is eh so nothing.

So I think I snuck in as opposed to computer. So I was young for a college student, I was not yet my 18th birthday and when I graduated I was not yet my 21st birthday. So I graduated in three years then I went to graduate school. So in Vietnam I was the youngest in whatever. I was in choir and I was maybe the third youngest. And I was actually singing base and was the youngest by far by like seven or eight years compared to other members of the base section. The choir I sang at it was originally, when I joined the choir.

--End of Transcript--