Today is Sunday, July 15, 2012. This is Thuy Vo Dang, with the Vietnamese American Oral History Project, and I will be interviewing Ms. Ha Bich Van.

TVD: First of all, please introduce yourself, including your name, age, and birthday as well as your birthplace.

HBV: My name is Ha Bich Van, born in 1952, Hai Phong¹, Vietnam.

TVD: Could you tell us a little about your family, as well as about your parents, their names and ages?

HBV: My father is Ha Van Chu², and my mother is Nguyen Thi Hoa.³ Both of them have passed away after settling down in the USA. They died here in the States.

TVD: What did you say your father’s name was?

HBV: Ha Van Chu.

TVD: What did your parents do for a living while they lived in Vietnam?

HBV: Prior to 1975, my father was an active duty⁴ soldier who worked with the Americans, and my family had a big restaurant in Qui Nhon⁵ City, Vietnam.

TVD: You were born in Hai Phong?

HBV: Yes, then migrated in 1954.

---

¹ Hải Phòng.
² Hà Văn Chù.
³ Nguyễn Thị Hoa.
⁴ Chiến binh thành ngũ. (?)
⁵ Quy Nhơn.
TVD: Could you explain the reason why your family migrated in 1954?

HBV: We did not want to live under the communist regime, so we migrated in 1954. I was really young then.

TVD: Why did your family decide to settle down in Quy Nhơn? Why was that city chosen?

HBV: My father was in the military, so when we moved they sent us to wherever according to the government’s assignment.

TVD: Besides you, how many others in the family do you have?

HBV: I have many brothers and sisters. My parents have 13 children in all.

TVD: What is your standing in the family?

HBV: I am number four in the family.

TVD: Did all thirteen children survive?

HBV: No, two died trying to leave the country in 1979.

TVD: Could you list all the names in the family?

HBV: My oldest brother is called Hà Anh Hoàng⁶, followed by Hà Thị Quỳnh⁷, Hà Tân Phát⁸, and then me, Hà Bích Vân⁹. After me is Lan Hương¹⁰, Thị Thư¹¹, Minh Tân¹², Minh Tú¹³, Minh Phú¹⁴, and Minh Hải¹⁵, Quỳnh Giao¹⁶, Quỳnh Linh¹⁷. Minh Quân¹⁸ is the youngest.

TVD: Wow! I thought my family of nine was large but compared to this....

HBV: Nine persons yet it doesn’t seem like anything over here, does it?

TVD: What was it like to live in such a large family? Were you close to your brothers and sisters?

---

⁶ Hà Anh Hoàng.
⁷ Hà Thị Quỳnh.
⁸ Hà Tân Phát.
⁹ Hà Bích Vân.
¹⁰ Lan Hương.
¹¹ Thị Thư.
¹² Minh Tân.
¹³ Minh Tú.
¹⁴ Minh Phú.
¹⁵ Minh Hải.
¹⁶ Quỳnh Giao.
¹⁷ Quỳnh Linh.
¹⁸ Minh Quân.
HBV: We were very close to each other because our parents took care of everything. From the older to the younger, and from the top to the bottom, we were very close to each other.

TVD: Do you have any memories you would like to share growing up with your brothers and sisters, such as any particular game or song?

HBV: We grew up in a large household so we were not well provided, materially, as those who came from a smaller size family. Therefore there were things that we could not have. There were so many memories because brothers and sisters were all together, including the sons too. That was how close we were to each other. Even with thirteen children, our life was good because my father was a very capable man. He ran a restaurant, and did business here and there so we all lived prosperously, having servants to take care of us and what not. We did not lack anything until 1975.

TVD: Your family owned a restaurant?

HBV: My father opened this place.

TVD: Did your mother work there too?

HBV: My mother assisted only.

TVD: And did all the children in the family work there as well?

HBV: Yes, every one of us, from the oldest to the youngest, whoever had the ability, the knowledge. We’d go to school and then come home and help with the restaurant.

TVD: What kinds of foods were sold in the restaurant?

HBV: In 1963 when the Americans came to Vietnam, the restaurant served American style foods to these American clients. When the Americans went home, oh before they came around the 1960s, our family operated a very famous Pho restaurant. Around 1963-1965 we opened the restaurant selling American style foods. When they left we opened a bakery.

Third person: The Americans did not leave at the time; they only moved their base to a different location, in Cam Ranh or another city. They did not station their troops in Quy Nhon anymore.

TVD: What were the foods served to the Americans like?

HBV: We served hamburger too; we imitated their cuisine so we had fried potatoes and hamburgers. Then we also had steak, salad, and fried rice combining Chinese, Vietnamese and American tastes just like so.
TVD: How did you learn to make those foods?

HBV: No, not us but the hired hands. Or one showed one another then let the cooks handle it. There were cooks who would make those dishes.

TVD: So your family turned to opening a bakery?

HBV: Yes. It was a bakery called Bich Van. I learned how to bake in Saigon, so I made all the baked goods sold at Bich Van. This bakery was located in Quy Nhon and the address was 192 Vo Tam.

TVD: Starting from 1954 on?

HBV: We migrated to the south in 1954 and stayed in Saigon at the time. Then we moved to Ban Me Thuot and stayed there for another 4 years. I was very young at the time. My father worked as the head of the Economics Surveillance Agency in Ban Me Thuot until 1960 when we moved to Quy Nhon and started our family fortune there.

TVD: So your father was in the military and owned a business at the same time?

HBV: Yes. He was in the military and did business on the side too.

Third person: Later on our father worked for the CIA for which he was imprisoned for several years.

TVD: Could you tell a little bit about your schooling experiences up to high school?

HBV: I went to a convent school in Quy Nhon.

TVD: Could you spell it?

HBV: Convent school was Catholic school run by the nuns for young girls. The boys studied at La Salle, also a Catholic school for boys.

TVD: What was the reason they chose a Catholic school for you?

HBV: Families with money would send their children there back then because it was a private school.

TVD: Was your family Catholic?

---

19 Võ Tám.
20 Ban Mê Thuột.
21 Ban Kiểm Soát Kinh Tế.
22 Trường ma sascar.
HBV: We were not Catholic; we only practiced ancestral worshipping. However, the young kids were sent to convent school. In general, affluent families would send their children to whichever schools that had better academic programs.

TVD: Up to high school?

HBV: Yes.

TVD: So what did you do after graduating from high school?

HBV: I did not go to the university. I finished high school in 1972, and my parents let me study at a “nữ công gia chánh” school, learning how to cook. Back then it was called Women’s Domestic Science or Women’s Domestic Skills in our Vietnamese language. We learned to cook, bake, and sew: …everything.

TVD: Here they call it Home Economics...

HBV: Not quite. They only taught the culinary arts. Back then we still had money and the tuition was very high, not cheap at all.

TVD: So there were a lot of women there?

HBV: In general people came there to study so they could serve their families later on. Before 1975, only female members of rich families or those married women would attend these institutions to learn the culinary arts to serve their families. I, however, enrolled in it so I could run a business later on like a professional.

Third person: Back then there were schools that taught standard cooking classes. However, if one wanted to open a restaurant or a business, one had to go to a culinary institution taught by famous chefs, and learned from them the secrets as well as the professional tips to operate the business. It was not the case where we attended a big school and there were many lessons. These places only offered a few special classes, like making Pho, Moon Cakes… etc. They only taught one specialty, and the student had to develop her own professional touch in making that particular dish.

TVD: Where did you live while attending these classes?

HBV: I studied in Saigon.

TVD: Was it your own decision?
HBV: Yes. I also liked it because I always liked to cook ever since I was a child. So my father let me take these classes, and my father already opened a shop for me called Bich Van by the time I finished the program a year later.

TVD: So you knew you want to be in this career since you were young?

HBV: The culinary career.

TVD: I think few youngsters out there know what they want. Many graduate from universities, and yet they still do not know.

HBV: Many over here are that way. Because cooking was my childhood passion so I got to learn what I liked, and it was the path to success. One can’t be successfully doing things one doesn’t like. Back then I could make batch after batch of bakery goods and made tons of money for my parents. I only needed to work 3-4 days, making hundreds of Buche de Noel\(^\text{24}\) at a time.

TVD: So what kind of cakes did you make?

HBV: The French cakes, birthday cakes, Buche de Noel, Pate Chaux….The French patisserie that I learned.

TVD: Did you come out to the restaurant often when you were growing up?

HBV: In Vietnam, the restaurant was also one’s home in general. The family would live on the upper floors, the 2\(^{\text{nd}}\) floor for example, while using the first floor as a restaurant. The third floor was entirely living quarter.

TVD: Are there any siblings of yours who would follow the same career path?

HBV: No. None of them. I had a younger sister studying teaching, an older brother who was in the military, and an older sister learned sewing. We all chose separate paths. My 2\(^{\text{nd}}\) and 3\(^{\text{rd}}\) sisters learned sewing.

TVD: Did your parents encourage it?

HBV: My father liked it a lot. He would say, “Can’t get rich without doing business”\(^\text{25}\) Of course one must have one’s own business. It was better than working for others. My father believed in doing our own business, not working for others.

TVD: What was that saying again?

---

\(^{24}\) Yule Log cakes.

\(^{25}\) Phi thuong bat phu.
HBV: “Phi thương bắ́t phú́.” It was a Chinese-Vietnamese term meaning one can’t get rich without doing business. Also, it was all family business back then. The society followed a different trend than nowadays. Most businesses operated as family businesses and did not extend to outsiders. All members of the family would do their own things, but each would also share in the work of running the family business at home. For example, one sister would cook or hired a chef for that job, and the rest of the brothers and sisters would work as waiter or waitress, cashier, making coffee ...whatever. Everyone worked and was a part of the family business even though they would be studying or doing something else outside. It was called “family work”. Nowadays in America, whenever a family opens a business, its entire members would come out and help. That is one particular thing about the Asian family which is also the Vietnamese tradition.

TVD: Growing up in a family doing this kind of business, I think you would not have a lot of time for going out or for yourself.

HBV: Not a lot of time to go out. Once I started working I devoted my time to the business. When I was younger I used to go out to watch a movie for example, or go to the beach which was close to our home. That’s pretty much all.

TVD: Could you tell me a bit about the activities in your free time? Where would you go with your friends?

HBV: Our family was doing business so we asked our friends to come to our place. If we had a party, it would be held at our home too. Big or small party would be held at home. Going out with friends usually meant a walk along the beach. I did not go out a lot.

Third person: I want to add a bit about those years before 1975. According to the Vietnamese tradition, young girls usually were not allowed the freedom like nowadays. Going out wasn’t allowed unless under the chaperon of the parents. Therefore, we rarely went out because our father was really strict. Wherever we went, we brought along a group of 4-5 kids and gave them a ride around town. That was pretty much it. Each kid going off by himself/herself in separate ways like nowadays is frowned upon back then. Any decent family in the old time would do the same thing. Girls were not allowed to go outside.

TVD: How then you got to make friends?

HBV: Only friends from the school. I did not hang out with people beyond that crowd.

TVD: Usually men in the military were very difficult and strict. What was your father like?

HBV: Very hot tempered. Extremely so. He would beat us up at the slightest mishap.
TVD: So he was difficult.

HBV: Very much so. It was to the point I thought the only solution to his control of me was to get married.

TVD: How about your mother?

HBV: My mother was a very gentle woman. She was really gentle.

TVD: Do you know how your parents knew each other, and what their relationship was like?

HBV: My father told the story of how he knew the older sister of my mother who then introduced her nice younger sister to him to get married. Often he would tease her by asking whether she married him because she loved him. She would say there was no love at the time, just getting married. If she did not love him why would she born so many kids later?

TVD: There were many arranged marriages at the time?

HBV: Yes. By introduction.

TVD: How about your generation?

HBV: My generation was allowed to meet, to get to know the other person and to wed if we liked each other.

TVD: We would call it dating, correct?

HBV: Yeah! It was dating. Thing had changed a little for my generation. The concept “One must accept whatever one’s parents decide” was no longer in fashion.

TVD: It was in the 70s, wasn’t it?


TVD: Must a young woman reach a certain age before it was ok for her to date?

HBV: It depended on the family. Back then 18 years old was ok. One’s studying was considered completed. There were many who wedded at a young age. However, I waited until 23 years old before getting married.

TVD: How did you meet your husband?

---

26 Bố mẹ đấᴛ dấu con ngời dó.
HBV: It was because we had the restaurant and he was a customer there. That was how we met each other.

TVD: You must have had permission to go out?

HBV: Yes. We need to have permission.

TVD: Were the places you went to ok?

HBV: There must be a crowd there. We could not go to a place where there was no one, for example. It was ok to go to a movie because it was crowded. Or to go to the beach for drink was also considered going to a crowded place. It is not like over here where one can take off for a long trip anytime one wants to. If we went to the movie, we must go home after the movie ended. Or if we went for a drink, we would need to go home after one or two hours, and no longer than that.

TVD: How old were you then?

HBV: 20 – 22 years old.

TVD: Over here 20s means one is still very young. In Vietnam, however, one was considered older because it was a different era, wasn’t it?

HBV: Yes. It was considered older.

TVD: So when it was time for marriage, did you have an engagement and everything?

HBV: Yes. Parents’ approval was important. There was an engagement and a wedding following that. He was a soldier whose family was in Saigon while my family was in Quy Nhon at the time. Because of the physical distance involved, we had an engagement and wedding on the same day.

TVD: I heard many couples did just that during the war time.

HBV: Yes, that was true.

TVD: Were there any family traditions or ceremony other than the engagements and weddings? Was there any family reunion in a year?

HBV: As a family, we gathered together during the different Tets. Tet\textsuperscript{27} was most the important day. On The 30\textsuperscript{th} of the Tet, all members of the family would be home waiting for

\textsuperscript{27} Chinese calendar New Year.
the moment when the old year ended and the new year arrived to wish grandparents and parents this and that. That was within a family.

TVD: So you said your family followed the practice of ancestor worship?

HBV: Ancestor worship.

TVD: Did you do give offerings?

HBV: We followed all the necessary steps. We worshipped the Buddha, but we were not original Buddhists even though we had Buddha on the altar. We worshipped our ancestors.

Third person: Following Confucianism\textsuperscript{28} also meant ancestor worship in old time. To be a true Buddhist, one needed to come to a temple and asked for a Buddhist name\textsuperscript{29}, or to go there for vegetarian meals. Confucianism was heavier on ancestor worship side and lighter on Buddha worship side. The main thing was to pay respect to our ancestors, following the tenets of that time to be respectful of one’s parents.

TVD: Did you have an ancestral altar?

HBV: Yes. Of course.

TVD: There was one thing I would like to ask whether a Vietnamese family would celebrate birthdays at all back then?

HBV: No, many did not. My father was westernized so my birthday was a big event.

TVD: Could you tell me about those birthdays, as well as which one was the most important?

HBV: When I was 20 years old, I got this huge birthday cake and pretty much everything else. My father had an in-house musical band so he used them for the entertainment.

TVD: Who made the cake?

HBV: I made the cake. I made it for myself, and then I organized a dancing party too.

TVD: How many people came?

HBV: My friends and my parents’ friends to about a few dozen people. It was just like having a party, but we already had everything in place at home so it was a simple affair to arrange.

\textsuperscript{28} Nho giáo.
\textsuperscript{29} Pháp danh.
Third person: It depended on the family too. Only those with the financial means would have such a party so few people celebrated birthday parties back then. There were also a lot more of large festivals than nowadays. For example, in the old time we would have a Tet called Tet Doan Ngo on the 5th day of the fifth month of the Chinese calendar. There would be Tro cakes and at night the grown-up would use lime to spread on their children’s front heads in their sleep. There was also the Tet Trung Thu which was a big deal back then. People would have a big outdoor display called Trung Thu celebration including chopped up pieces of sugar canes arranged into a high rise tower, rounded and cut-up grapefruits shaped like a mountain upon which little colorful beautiful animal look-alike were attached. Of course there were the Moon Cakes. Back then these celebrations were much loved because people always made a lot of food.

HBV: Only in Doan Ngo and Trung Thu. Noel was like in the West in general.

Third person: In that time Noel was not as big of a party like nowadays. It was celebrated but not as elaborate.

HVB: People only followed. They did go out for fun but not in a grand manner.

Third person: A number of people would organize parties then went out together. However, there were not a lot of them.

TVD: Did people exchange gifts back then in Vietnam? How about a Christmas tree?

HBV: Yes, they did. The Catholic families did all that. Perhaps, they did not exchange gifts, only making cakes to share in the family, not having gifts like over here.

TVD: Youngsters living in the US seem to only know gifts, not other customs. When you mentioned about your 20th birthday, did your friends bring along presents?

HBV: Yes, of course!

TVD: What did they usually bring? I am curious because I am ignorant of it so it is good for me to learn about these things.

HBV: I can’t remember them all. Perhaps a box of toys or something like that. Not ready-to-wear clothes because they were not sold in that way, but they gave me rolls of fabric. My presents were like that.

---

30 Tết Doan Ngo.
31 Bánh Tro.
32 Cỗ Trung Thu.
33 Bánh Trung Thu.
TVD: Did the women wear ao dai back then?

HBV: Of course. Women wore ao dai back then.

Third person: In old time people like gold the best for presents. These small gold chains or small gold-plated frames just like so. There were not all kinds of options for presents, clothes or cakes and foods like nowadays. It was only gold. Gold was most important.

HBV: People gave these gold chains weighted about 5 phan\textsuperscript{34} or 10 phan at young children’s birthdays, fashioned into small bracelets or rings.

TVD: I can see the difficulty in exchanging gifts back and forth. There were issues a 20 year old woman would face; they want something worthy to be the present. Besides the experiences with the festivities, I would like to ask if you remember anything about those first few days learning the skills needed for your future business.

HBV: There was a school that taught very good bakery classes, yet not patisserie. Others offered good patisserie classes, but not bakery ones. When I opened my own business I had to test them out because there were ingredients bought in Saigon that changed substantially once they arrived in the province. There were items I asked people to get for me in Saigon, and it took a long time for me to find a local substitute. They could be found locally, but at the beginning I did not know. So I practiced making them for a while. I also had a talent for it so I was successful in whatever I did after all.

Third person: Back then facilities were limited, so to have really good food one could only buy and transport them from Saigon which was not a simple purchase one could make any time. It took a few days to transport things from Saigon to Quy Nhon, or even the entire week sometime.

HBV: It probably reached the destination two days later by bus.

TVD: Usually we order a cake today; it is ready to be picked up by tomorrow.

HBV: It is fast.

TVD: So how much did a cake cost back then?

HBV: I can’t remember it clearly, but it was expensive, not cheap. I can’t remember the cost, but I knew it was in Vietnamese monetary unit.

\textsuperscript{34} 10 phán vàng = 1 chỉ vàng. 
10 chỉ vàng = 1 lang vàng
TVD: could a poor family afford such a cake then?

HBV: No, I don’t think a poor family could afford a cake at the time. Middle class family could buy or order one. There were inexpensive cakes, with no sugar and not exactly the French style, which common people could buy. The poor families would not celebrate birthdays any way. People ordered cakes as gifts for one another, and only the middle class people could afford such practice. The poor could not even have a birthday to start with.

TVD: Would your family be considered a middle class family?

HBV: Slightly better than middle class. We did have money coming from our restaurant business as well as other business. Not rich, but better than middle class a little bit. People who worked for the government belong to the middle class. Business owners were better by a small measure. To ask whether we were rich, we were not very rich.

TVD: Yet when you got married, did your status shift to that family?

HBV: No. My family “caught” a son-in-law meaning he stayed with us after we got married. So our family remained unchanged until 1975 when the entire family evacuated and moved to Saigon, losing everything on the way. When the communists arrived, they took everything from us. We should have left the country once we arrived in Saigon, but there was neither the opportunity nor the means to do so. So we stayed there starting from the beginning with empty hands.

TVD: At the time you already got married and your husband was in the military. Had he moved around a lot?

HBV: No. I did not have to move a lot, only my husband did. I stayed at home.

TVD: Both of you moved to Saigon in 1975?

HBV: The entire family went and escaped to Saigon. They took our house and everything else because there was no one left to watch over them. We were evacuated by vehicles so we could not bring anything along.

TVD: Do you remember how they took over your properties then?

HBV: Our family left a few days ahead of the fall of the central provinces. This area was lost one month prior to the rest of the country, and our family already left a month before that. For example, we left on the 20th and Qui Nhon fell on the 30th. We had family members in the

\[35\] Bát ré.

\[36\] Miên Trung.
armed forces so we knew the fighting was coming to our direction. Back then we thought they wanted land and the country would be divided into three areas. Hence, being originally Northerners we wanted to live where we could be free. So we left for Saigon.

Third person: Back then my old man was lucky enough to have a son-in-law, a younger brother of Van, who was in the air force. So we caught a ride on an air force plane and evacuated to Saigon carrying with each of us a few special belongings. The old man stayed back and did not leave until the communists attacked Qui Nhon. He had a friend who worked in military transportation service who agreed to ship our numerous restaurant equipments which all packed into containers waiting along the shore to be transported to Saigon.

HBV: But they were all lost. There was no time!

Third person: When the fighting was so near the ships, the order was to leave everything. Only people were allowed on, leaving all the restaurant equipments stored inside the containers at the port of Qui Nhon. The situation was urgent at that point, so only people were saved.

TVD: Do you remember what you brought with you at that moment of urgency?

HBV: We brought along some clothes and personal belongings. Clothes and household items were all we could carry with us, and that was about it.

TVD: How about albums?

Third person: In families that owned properties, they would carry mostly gold, diamonds, precious items etc... But my old man just finished building a house to use as a cafeteria unfortunately. He wanted to open a bar, a new business, therefore all the money worth hundreds of tael\(^{37}\) of gold was invested in there. We did not have any cash when we left at the time. Each individual had some clothes, few jewelries, and family albums too.

TVD: Did you bring the old pictures?

Third person: Yes, of course. I brought along some pictures with a few precious mementos. We could carry with us few necessities onto these flights. I still remembered bringing along with me books because I loved books.

TVD: How did you make a living when you arrived in Saigon?

HBV: We rented a room.

TVD: Did the entire family, all 13 children, go?

\(^{37}\) A tael (aka lăng or lường) is ancient Chinese weight unit, about 37.5g, and is used for domestic transactions in gold.
HBV: All went. My oldest brother preferred living separately while the next sister stayed with her husband’s family. I also moved in with my in-laws. My parents and younger siblings, very young at the time, rented a room slightly larger than this room we are in now.

Third person: Our house in Qui Nhon had four floors and pretty large with 7m width and 40m depth. At the end, we ended up in this tiny dirty dark room with the restroom right next to it. We lost all and there was nothing left.

HBV: Empty handed by the time we arrived to Saigon because all of our money and gold went into building that new house. Others left with their gold; our family just invested in a new business which had cost us 600-700 taels of gold just to build the house, with an additional floor to work in there. It was all lost.

TVD: Did you help out your family?

HBV: Yes, I did. I made bánh cuốn⁸ at a street corner. I felt no shame at the time because I thought I did not steal or did something bad. So I promptly proceeded to a street corner, setting up my spot and sitting there making bánh cuốn to sell to bystanders. I made enough money to live through the day. At the time Giang’s father was in Saigon. He was sent to a reeducation camp a month later. They told us it would be only one month, but it was anything but that. I still remembered at that time I had a 4 month old baby, my first child, an older sister of Giang. I gave birth to her one month before Liberation. It was in Qui Nhon before we left for Saigon. I brought my baby to Saigon to stay. She was about 2 months old then.

TVD: What was the baby’s name?

Third person: Nguyễn Hà Thế Uyên. It was so long ago. If she was still alive, she would be 37 years old by now.

TVD: What a beautiful name. Did you or someone else come up with that name?

HBV: I believed I did back then.

Third person: Quỳnh Giao’s novels was very popular back then, so were the names imported from Taiwan. Quỳnh Giao’s novels had a lot of names, so there were many names that sounded similar. When we arrived in Saigon, our first steps were to unload all of our belongings onto the streets and the flea markets for sell.

---

³⁸ Bánh cuốn.
³⁹ Nguyễn Hà Thế Uyên.
⁴₀ Quỳnh Giao (or Qiong Yao), a popular Taiwanese novelist whose works were translated widely in South Vietnam in the 60’s and 70’s.
HBV: We sold them to make a living, buying and selling.

Third person: At that time, we still have some porcelain, a few things that we considered precious, so we sold them at the flea markets to raise some seed money to start making a living.

TVD: So you sold food on the street?

HBV: Selling food that I made.

TVD: Besides banh cuon, did you sell anything else?

HBV: I also made banh tom\(^{41}\), bun rieu\(^{42}\).... Everything.

Third person: Bun cha\(^{43}\), too!

HBV: We made it ourselves.

TVD: When did you have your baby in 1975?

HBV: I had one called Uyen in 1974. She was one month when the country was liberated, and three months later her father went into the reeducation camp.

TVD: How did you take care of the baby by yourself?

HBV: I worked and took care of her at the same time. My mother watched over her while I worked at the street corner, running back and forth.

TVD: You said Giang’s father was sent to the reeducation camp soon after that. Did you visit him at all?

HBV: Yes, I did. Oh, no. They only allowed us to send packages to the prisoners during the first 3 years. These packages were sent to the camps. We were not allowed to visit them. After that Giang’s father escaped from the camp.

TVD: He went home or somewhere else?

HBV: Home. We took care of him, and we used faked papers.

TVD: Back then it was easy to recognize, wasn’t it?

\(^{41}\) Bánh tôm.
\(^{42}\) Bún riêu.
\(^{43}\) Bún chả.
HBV: He had to hide and not show himself in public. Live incognito among the people. He avoided approaching or talking to people in general. I went to work but people only knew about my work. I did not talk about my husband nor answered any questions about him. Or I told them lies. He attempted to leave the country illegally two months after escaping from the camp. That time he was caught. I visited him in prison under a fake name.

TVD: How did you find the way to visit, as well as where your loved one was held at?

HBV: They could communicate back to the families back then. They sent mail. We knew where they were held at through these letters. The prisoners in the camps also knew how to send mail, to write their testimonies, to use whatever names..... Letters were sent to a particular address where families could receive them. I used fake papers, and to be honest it was very easy to fake papers back then. I stamped the papers myself, using a jam molded into the stamp. I faked the permit to visit him.

TVD: So you wrote permit and stamped it yourself?

HBV: I asked a woman who was my neighbor to help. I declared myself as her adopted sister, and used that piece of paper to get the stamp of the local government office for the permit to visit the reeducation camp. She gave me that paper and I used it to visit him. Back then IDs were only on paper and without any picture, so it was very easy to pull the wool over the authority’s eyes.

TVD: By saying “visit” you meant you brought food supplies to him?

HBV: Yes, I brought food supplies to him. There were camps where they only allowed the foods like the one that I visited the first time. They allowed me to send foods, but not let me see him. Then they transferred him to another camp where he escaped again.

TVD: So he did it twice?

HBV: Yes!

TVD: Every single time he would come home afterward?

HBV: Where else could he go? My father was the one who would keep him. Because he loved me, his daughter, he had to put up with hiding an escapee for a son-in-law that even his own family would not dare let in. Back then people were really afraid of being involved in this thing. I am his wife, so I had no choice but to hide him.

TVD: Were you afraid?
HBV: Of courses I was terrified. The entire family was scared, not only me. I was afraid too, same as my family, but what could we do?

TVD: How did you hide from the neighbors in the city?

HBV: People hid.

Third person: One got out of the house in the early hours like a stranger. One walked out of the house after cracking the gate to look outside to make sure there was no one around before one stepped out. At night one returned home and stepped inside only after one was sure there was no police around. Once inside the house, one stayed put and not going anywhere. Others in the family also acted as watch outs. The city teemed with people also made it easier fortunately.

HBV: The Saigonese was not so Sovietized like those in the provinces so there was no report no accusation. There were more of “April 30th” type of people. The Saigonese was more at ease. I had visited my father in the central provinces so I knew. People there were very Bolshevik-like. They would scrutinize and report the smallest thing that was out of the ordinary.

TVD: So your father was also sent to a re-education camp.

HBV: He was gone for 10 years, no actually 6 years. In 1979 we were caught trying to get out of the country. My family escaped in 1979, and only my siblings and I went on this trip. I lost my two sisters next to me, Huong and Thu, in this trip when the boat capsized out there in the open. That was the 23rd day of Tet. The day that boat went down, and I lost my daughter, Uyen, plus my two younger sisters, and my sister’s son. All in all, Giang’s father’s family and my family, nine of us went up to sit on the altar after that day.

TVD: You had not had Giang at that point?

HBV: No, not yet. I was pregnant with Giang, yet I still took that trip.

TVD: How old was Giang’s sister at the time?

HBV: 5 years old.

TVD: Do you remember what happened?

HBV: The boat sank because its bottom cracked just as it entered the estuary. It took in water and sank in an instant, just like we would drop a bowl in water, and sank right away.

TVD: So that boat was not made for such a trip?

44 Ngày 23 Tét.
HBV: No, water started leaking in when it reached the estuary.

TVD: There was not a problem with the engine, but the boat itself?

HBV: There was some sort of technical problem in general.

Third person: Back then we either organized and build the boat from scratch or bought a boat and fixed it up. With the simple means back then, the quality was not 100%, so accidents happened quite easily for whatever reason.

HBV: At the time, there were a lot of people who lost their lives because of the rudimentary boats because they were fooled into thinking such boats were fit to go on.

Third person: We must leave at all cost. The lower deck of the boat was small, and the engine was not even decent. The engine was second handed and fixed up, and we did not even know about the thickness of the boat’s wooden frame. As it went into the estuary, something happened and it sank. We guessed it was because of the cracks at the bottom, but in truth it could be any other reasons. At the end it sank.

TVD: How many people were on that boat?

HBV: Thirty-some people. There were a few who weren’t picked up. It was Mr. Sinh’s family who could not make it. I still remember it vividly.

Third person: That boat was not big because it was meant only for family members.

TVD: There were only a few siblings, and another family? How did you know those people and who organized the trip?

HBV: That was a friend of Giang’s father. We knew each other and we were all into making boats and organizing trips. Back then, there were many ways for people who wanted to leave the country to get to know each other.

TVD: Did you have to share in the burden, put down the money for example?

HBV: Yes. We had to forge out the money, and gold, to buy the boats. We tried out these boats, as well as learning the way by navigating them back and forth. We also arranged for the logistic of bringing people down to the boats.

Third person: At the time, usually one knew someone who in turn knew the local people. These local people built boats, fixed boats, and put on the engine. People made a career out of
building boats in the Western province\textsuperscript{45}. They built boats for fishing; we took the opportunity to ask them to take us out.

TVD: When did you leave Saigon?

HBV: In 1979 and from Saigon.

Third person: We had to divide into smaller groups, going on separate small boats at times. From Saigon we took the buses to our destination.

HBV: We had people waiting to pick us up as we arrived on the buses.

Third person: They guided us to the location where the boat was docking.

TVD: Do you remember at which location the boat docked?

HBV: At the time I was pregnant with Giang, so I only followed when people alerted me of the departure. There was a smaller boat that transported me to a bigger one.

Third person: The Western provinces are located characteristically along the rivers. From any point inside one of the towns of these provinces, one can step down to a small boat riding on the inter-connected watery ways to reach one’s destination at another town. People called them “fast boats”, and these “fast boats” transported people to bigger boats. Otherwise, land travelling in large groups made us too easy the targets, and no one would dare risking it. For example, we would arrive at a safe house, and then stepped down to the small fast boats which would transport us to the waiting big boat.

TVD: Did you travel in the morning or at night?

HBV: At night, late into the night.

TVD: What did you do when the boat sank?

HBV: I was allowed sitting near the boat’s door because I was pregnant at the time. The wheel was on the boat’s upper deck just like so, and I sat near that door. I only heard someone screaming that the boat was taking in water and that we were going to die. Someone pulled me out, and I had no idea how I could survive that. Even to this day, I can close my eyes and think back to that moment; I still have no idea how I have survived it.

Third person: There were two floats on the boat.

\textsuperscript{45} Miền Tây.
HBV: Those floats were on the boat initially. People hang these connected floats along the boat’s front tip to keep the waves down. Somehow someone had cut these floats and released them. Two of the floats were still attached together. I did not know how to swim, nor did I know who had guided me onto that boat and the float which saved my life. I hang on to the float battling the waves until the morning when a fishing boat spotted me and brought me back to shore.

TVD: The entire night until morning time?

HBV: From 2:00 -3:00 am to around 6:00 – 7:00 am when it was time for fishermen to sail out for a fishing day. That day was the 23rd day of Tet. Those fishermen who brought us to the shore told us they did not have to go out on that particular day, and they did not know why they just had this urge of going fishing. I thought we would all die by the afternoon. While I was hanging on for dear life to the float, I saw clearly for an instant my younger sister’s face, Huong, and I called out to her. At that same time, I heard my older aunt’s/uncle’s daughter crying out to me, “I am so tired, Van!”, so I turned toward her direction. By the time I turned back, my sister had let go of her hands which meant certain death in the middle of the ocean. I turned to my cousin again and had enough time to see her letting go of herself too. The waves were incessant and strong enough to lift the float up, and I had been able to position myself right in the middle. People said let the pregnant woman staying in the middle and in all truth when death was staring down people did not think much. So I got to stay in the middle. I turned and looked at my older brother who was on the outside, he cried to me, “I am exhausted, Van.” We were floating on the water. I gripped his shirt’s collar because I was in the middle of a round donut shaped float, so it was easy for me to do so. I told him to take a rest, still holding his collar. When death seemed certain and eminent, one did anything to delay it because of one’s survival instinct. By the time the fishing boat arrived and saved us, I saw scenes that broke my heart. The case of the younger brother of Giang’s father was one example. I did not know standing in water for the whole night could cause one’s muscles all cramped up. When the fishing boat arrived and the lines were thrown out to us, he grabbed on to one of the lines and it slipped off his hands. He was under water right away. He died at the moment when he could have been saved.

TVD: How many people died in that incident?

HBV: A dozen, maybe 20 deaths. These were not a lot of survivors.

TVD: So where did they bring those survivors after they were saved?

---

46 Chị con bác.
HBV: Brought to shore. I was lucky enough to be brought to a local’s home. I don’t remember very clearly the home’s owner except he/she told me how terrible the conditions in the prison were. On these fishing boats sometimes they stationed informers who would then alert the police. The people on the boat that saved us saw my condition, so they told me the prison was miserable. They hid me until the night, and then they rented another boat.

TVD: How far along were you at that point?

HBV: I was about 8 months pregnant, near giving birth at that point. I gave birth a few weeks later after that trip. At the time I let my cousin came along in hope that if I gave birth she would be able to help me out.

Third person: When talking about estuary, in reality it was open water where one could not even see the shore anymore. So when it happened, one did not know how things would turn out to be. One grabbed onto whatever one thought it would save one’s life.

HBV: There was nothing except a float that could save one’s life at that moment.

Third person: The scene at the time was horrific, and it was not easy to find an opportunity to save one’s life.

TVD: And you did not know how to swim.

HBV: I did not know how to swim even though I lived on the coast.

TVD: Where was Giang’s father at the time?

HBV: He was in prison. I did not understand why he would use a different name, but there were a lot of arrests during 1978-1979. The prisons were so full that they had to release some because so many people tried to leave the country in spite of all the arrests at the time. Perhaps it could be the UNHCR got involved in the whole thing so he was released at the end.

Third person: The policies of the communists changed continuously. There was time when the crime of trying to leave the country illegally was called treason, other time it was said people were instigated. It was entirely up to the person who made the testimony. Then it could also be the sheer number of people being arrested, so they had to release some of the prisoners to make space. Therefore being caught trying to escape due to someone else’s instigation would carry a different name.

TVD: So did Giang’s father come home in time for the birth?
HBV: No. After I got caught, I was home. I was hidden by the local people and eventually brought home. That night I went into labor, the night of 30th of Tet, and gave birth to Giang. Exactly one week after the incident. Giang’s father was still in the prison in Ben Tre.  

Third person: In prison for a few months, wasn’t it?

HBV: 6 months.

TVD: Who named Giang then?

HBV: I did.

TVD: Do you remember why you would choose such a name?

HBV: The correct name on the paper was Le Ha Chau Giang. I did not have residency permit in Saigon, therefore I had to use the birth certificate of my older sister and that of her husband.

TVD: And used the Le’s last name.

HBV: Yes, the Le’s family name. When I gave birth to Giang, I used those papers for her birth certificate. Because of that I let Giang taking the trip to escape in 1983-1984. Giang came over here in 1983-1984. I thought if I or Giang’s father made it to freedom, then the issue of sponsorship would be easier in the future. If Giang stayed back, I already calculated it in my mind, which I must concede that God gives me this habit of anticipating problems that could happen and trying to solve them. I thought if Giang left at the time it would be easier because Giang was still young, only 5-6 years old. So once she was gone, the sponsoring papers for those left behind would be less complicated. I did not have the residency permit in Saigon until 1982. At that time I had Dung, Giang’s younger brother. Giang’s father was released at the time, and we still had to use faked papers and live illegally. I tried to find ways for him to leave the country. At the time it was illegal but we still had to do it, through the connections with friends and acquaintances. After I took care of him, I needed to take care of Giang.

TVD: Why didn’t you come along?

HBV: This was how I thought. Firstly, if I came along and was caught, there was nothing 100% at the time, I had to sacrifice myself. If I was caught, I needed to have someone who was still outside to get me out. If both were caught, then who would do that? I could not depend on anyone. Who would take care of me except myself? My parents were old. What could they do
to make money? My younger siblings were still young. I could only depend on myself. I could accomplish what I thought about. So I stayed back with Dung, and let Giang go off by herself.

TVD: How old was Dung at the time?

HBV: Dung was about 2 years old, not even 2 years old.

Third person: The problem was the society made people always had to come up with all kinds of deceitful acts just to survive.

HBV: I agree that under such a regime, it created a machine, a generation of scoundrels, of liars, of cheaters, of wheelers and dealers in order to survive. Whatever business one did, one must be a crook in order to make a living. It was not like in the USA where one would study, graduate and find a job to earn money. One’s mind was occupied with calculating how to find ways, under the table, to do whatever. What did it mean to open the so-called “tiếp thu vô năm quáng”, co-operating business for example? It meant my seed money and you would want to be a partner, without having to invest in any of your own money. You did not put down any money of your own, yet you would have half of the profit, while I am the one who put down the money for the business. That was the policy of the Communist regime. Then how was the bookkeeping done in this situation? Since you were so removed from the business you then must have your own secretary sitting in to observe how much was earned daily, in order to divide the profit. How would you know how much was your share otherwise? So came the secretary whom I would bribe to underwrite the sale volume, to note only 1 quantity for every 5 sold, or 1 for every 10 sold for example. So I became a cheater and a crook then.

Third person: Until now under a different form, the communist regime still helps making these people who could not live honestly. To be honest means one’s own detriment.

TVD: So after organizing these unsuccessful escape trips you turned to the business of selling goods as before? Did you open any other business?

HBV: I had a business at the market. It was not too difficult to open one at the market back then. Since I already had experiences, I just came to that place to do business.

TVD: You meant in the food services?

HBV: No! I bought and sold clothes, imported from overseas.

TVD: In 1984, you said your husband and daughter had already gotten out successfully, and you stayed back with the two year old baby. You continued doing business as you had always done. Did you still try finding other ways to get out, or you just waited?
HBV: I would not dare to attempt another trip. At the time the HO Program\textsuperscript{50} was already implemented for about 1 or 2 years. I believed my father was released from the reeducation camp, around that time, so I did not think about leaving the country illegally any more. I wanted to do so very badly, but I was just too scared.

Third person: I remember you already attempted 1 or 2 more times but none was secured enough. After the boating incident those had went through that experience were too terrified to risk such a trip again. Especially when one saw one’s loved ones dying right in front of one’s own eyes in the middle of the ocean. One was just too scared. Therefore, one only tried again when one thought everything was secured. Otherwise, one just paid up then waited around.

HBV: I took many trips, many many trips afterward.

TVD: Could you say how many in all?

HBV: I took 4 or 5 unsuccessful trips, going together with my friends. They told us to pay for our seats, and then the small boats would ferry us out to the big one. I used to stay at a government station\textsuperscript{51} which was how they organized it. One could say how well it was organized in Vietnam. Hundreds of small boats would come to this sandy bank which was above water level in the day time and under water at night. If the big boat did not come to pick us up, the small boats would quickly ferry us back, so we did not have to stay back in the middle of this vast watery body. I took many trips. Every time I travelled to Ben Tre\textsuperscript{52}, I would hide myself in the locals’ homes waiting to be brought to the big boat at night. I did so twice, arriving at the big boat and feeling so scared. I brought Giang with me hiding among the locals, and then moved on to a small boat waiting to be transported to the big one at night. Afterward, they told me the big boat could not make it, so they cancelled the trip and I went home. We divided into the small groups to go home. I was lucky not to get caught in those times, but some of my friends were on their way home. Being caught for no particular reason and were sent to prisons.

TVD: After Giang and her father left the country, did you received any communication from them?

HBV: Yes, I received their news frequently. I got the news from America that they had reached the island.

TVD: How?

\textsuperscript{50} Humanitarian Operation.
\textsuperscript{51} Đồn.
\textsuperscript{52} Bến Tre.
HBV: By mail and telegraphs.

Third person: Back then telephone was very expensive and not available.

HBV: Only telegraphs.

TVD: Do you remember how you felt after receiving news that half of your own family had reached the USA? Or did they only reach the refugee camp at the time?

HBV: Only the refugee camp, but it was considered a success already. They had arrived at the shore of freedom, so to speak. To be honest, my happiness was 10 times better than that of how other people would feel\(^{53}\) in the same situation. A person staying without any papers was considered an illegal resident, subjected to being arrested at any time easily, and then I had to worry about getting him out. Therefore I would say my happiness was 10 times better.

TVD: So your husband had no residential permit and Giang had a different last name which was problematic. How and when did you get to the USA?

HBV: My permit to leave for the USA initially came from the sponsoring papers that Giang’s father sent back. However, I actually got out by accompanying my father who was permitted to leave the country under the implementation of the HO Program. I left the country under ODP\(^{54}\) status.

TVD: What year was that?

HBV: In 1993.

TVD: So your father was in prison for 6 years, and then he left the country under that program after he was released. In other words, he had been able to get the entire family out, even with married children?

HBV: No. Three of us could not make it. My situation was that I already had the papers sent back by Giang’s father, so they put us together and allowed us to leave at the same time.

TVD: So in 1993, you flew directly from Vietnam to the USA? In which city did you stay initially?

HBV: I arrived at LAX.

---

\(^{53}\) Nguời ta mừng một, mình mừng mùa.

\(^{54}\) Orderly Departure Program.
Third person: At the time brother Tan⁵⁵ had been there for a while. He is the older brother of Tu⁵⁶. He had a younger brother came here with his family under the HO3 status previously so we had local contacts right here.

TVD: So this younger brother also came by being sponsored?

HBV: No, not by sponsorship. He lived here, and we had his contact address so that we could come here directly.

TVD: So how did you manage the paperwork to come here? How did you do it?

HBV: I do not remember how my father did his paper work, but I remember Tan did file the sponsoring papers.

Third person: The society back then was like this. When the American government started some program, if one wanted to be in it, one must be really clever first of all. One must also have relative/relatives living in the USA at that point so they could give pointers to one. Otherwise, one had to give money to some private office to take care of one’s file for the best result. At worst, one had to bribe the police if there was any problem, or those working in the various agencies of the Vietnamese government who would provide us with faked documents, transferring of residency or whatever, just so that one would have the best chance to leave. Therefore, nobody could remember exactly how things were done, for example if a birthday certificate missed some detail, one had to change to another one. Or if residential paper was not certified, one also had to change. It is difficult to remember all, but there were people who would take care of all that.

HBV: I must say my family used a lot of faked papers under that regime.

TVD: I also heard many similar stories.

HBV: Like brother Tan who was forced into the army being a young man at the time. He had to choose between joining the Youth Volunteers⁵⁷ or the Army. He dodged both and tried to leave the country illegally, got caught and got released. Once he was released, he would use fake name, fake birthday etc...for his personal papers. I do not know what fake papers he acquired in order for him to join his wife’s family going to the USA under the HO3 status.

Third person: Not really. He acquired a new identity by using a fake name. Then he got married to his wife whose family had HO status, and his name was added to that family’s

---

⁵⁵ Tân.
⁵⁶ Tú.
⁵⁷ Thanh niên xung phong.
residential paper. Thus, he was allowed to enter the USA. One hundred ways, a thousand means.\textsuperscript{58} Names got changed in so many times.

TVD: You lived for almost 20 years under that regime.

HBV: I knew them so well. In the 1900 some\textsuperscript{59} when they took over private trading in Saigon Market\textsuperscript{60}, my older sister Thu got it bad. They took inventory of one’s assets and properties, called Anti-rich\textsuperscript{61} policy at the time. It was a horrible time. Between the 70’s and ending just before 1980, they targeted all people who were financially affluent.

Third person: The communist regime did not want private people to be rich. Only the government could be involved in economic activities. But people needed to make a living, and in doing that people got richer. So when the government saw that they wanted to keep them back. They added to it a policy called Anti-rich, which meant “against rich people”, destroyed them and not letting them survived economically. The government took inventory of all the properties, big buildings, restaurants, and economic activities so they could look for the money.

HBV: I had seen it when I were still selling and buying cosmetic products in Saigon Market between 1975 and 1976 after a period of making banh cuon. I did everything, including selling cosmetic products. I had this small glass cabinet to sell the cosmetics which I purchased from others. Back then these were the consumer items left over from the previous regime before 1975. Sometimes, these used cosmetics once belonged to others whose houses they, the communists, took over. Even then, there were people who wanted to buy those used items for their own use. I traded in those things, and didn’t always have brand new products. A few years later, the packages from the USA started arriving in the late 1970s. I must say, sorry, but I must have a word; if there was no help from oversea at the time then Saigon would certainly be dead. Do you know a black pant would cost one or two “chi”\textsuperscript{62} of gold? That was enough black fabric to make one pant.

Third person: The government took all the goods. They kept them in their hands.

HBV: I traded with them, those who had money were those who took from others and that was how they got their money. I can’t recall everything that happened during the time they took the inventory. It was about 12pm at noon, and I had a few younger sisters working at the local government administrative unit\textsuperscript{63} who had working papers there. They went to work in the

\textsuperscript{58} Trăm phương, ngàn cách.
\textsuperscript{59} Năm 1900 mấy.
\textsuperscript{60} Chợ Sài gòn, aka Chợ Bến Thành.
\textsuperscript{61} Đánh tư sản.
\textsuperscript{62} Một chi vàng. One tenth of a tael of gold.
\textsuperscript{63} Phường.
morning and were told not to go home, just like a military camp. Then suddenly they would drive buses pulling barbed wire around the Ben Thanh Market and came in every house to take inventory. There were houses where they would break down the beds, cut up the mattresses to check for hidden things. They did not come in just to look and to take inventory; they behaved more like robbers. If you meet and talk to others, they would tell you the same thing.

TVD: So you lived and built up for about 10 years by yourself and with your young son?

HBV: My business was ok. I made enough money to buy a home.

TVD: Usually when I talked more to men than women because women were not so openly chatty. They would defer to their husbands who would know more.

HBV: I was very independent.

TVD: Where did you stay and what did you do after arriving here in America?

HBV: I came here in 1993, and I lived with my parents. At the time Giang’s father already had someone else, so I found a job working at a bakery less than a month after coming here. I worked there initially.

TVD: In Los Angeles?

HBV: In Los Angeles, at Monterey Park. I worked there for about 2-3 years then my friend, whose boss opened up a restaurant, introduced me to this person saying I had skills in baking/patisserie and cooking. I preferred cooking over the others because I also know more about it due to the fact that my family was once in the restaurant business. Back then I had to help my family so I learned a lot. Learning in the classroom was only a small part. The buck of it was done at home. Having one’s own restaurant with working cooks is a better place to learn than any classroom. Hence, armed with the introduction I went to San Francisco for the job. I worked there for almost a year, travelling back and forth, learning the operations of a restaurant. Later, when the owner opened a restaurant in Beverly Hills, I moved back and worked there for about another 17 years.

TVD: Wow! Already 17 years? From the time you came here?

HBV: No. I have lived here 20 years. I worked in the bakery for slightly more than 2 years, and then came up there to work. I returned and worked at the restaurant in Beverly Hills since its starting time until now.

TVD: So the friend who introduced you also knew your family?

HBV: My friend, and someone else’s friend.
TVD: Did you stay in San Francisco initially when you started working there?

HBV: I lived with the owner’s family.

TVD: Did you intern during that period?

HBV: I worked in the restaurant itself. I observed how this restaurant operated in America. In Vietnam the methods of cooking were different, so I must watch how they operated a restaurant in America, and then I imitated. The mistress-owner of the restaurant was excellent.

TVD: So this owner was slightly older than you?

HBV: Older by about 8 years.

TVD: So you two knew each other a long time?

HBV: No, I did not know the wife. I knew her friend, who was a friend of her husband.

TVD: In those 17 years working there did you see, I want to ask because this restaurant seems so special, so different from all other Vietnamese restaurants.

HBV: This is a very successful business. This couple has five or ten girls who are very capable. They are all very successful in America. If one wants to talk about the Vietnamese, then I must say this couple still follows the traditional Vietnamese ways. They taught their children the traditions of the Vietnamese. Those girls are very successful, but they are very orderly within the family itself. I respect them a lot for that. They know of my friendship, and so they always greet me nicely by calling me auntie this or that. Unlike other families who would look down on others. This family is rich, yet they respect others. I tip my hat to them, and that is also the reason for me to stay this long with them.

TVD: You must have many opportunities to socialize with foreigners?

HBV: Yeah, there were many of them to whom I get acquainted: Japanese, Italian, American, French...etc...They come to demonstrate their skills to the owner. I learned all. I learned many things from them.

TVD: You are 60 years old now. Do you plan to continue?

HBV: I’ll work until I retire. I’ll do it as long as my health permits.

TVD: Could you tell us about your position?

HBV: I am the Chef Manager. I take care of everything in the kitchen.

TVD: Could you tell us about your daily work? How do you start your day?
HBV: Some times in the morning I will do whatever grocery shopping is needed for the kitchen that day. Otherwise I will order by phone to be delivered by their companies. There are things that I order and if I am not happy with them, I will have to do the shopping in person. While I am at work, I watch over everything going on in the kitchen.

TVD: How many sous-chefs are there under you?

HBV: There are about twenty some assistants helping me.

TVD: The location at Beverly Hills is a bit.....I would like to ask where you are staying right now, in which city?

HBV: I am living in Rosemead, and it takes about 28-30 minutes to travel to Beverly Hills if there is no traffic.

TVD: In your work place, do you see – just because you grew up in Vietnam and steeped in the Vietnamese culture – in Beverly Hills where there are other communities which are very different from our own?

HBV: There is a difference. However, the owners are Asian themselves therefore they still have the Asian tradition within the restaurant itself. There are Americanized principles, yet the interpersonal interactions are still very much Vietnamese. That’s why I can work there for so long.

TVD: I know in Rosemead there is a large Vietnamese community, as well as a Chinese one.

HBV: Yes, a lot of Chinese, from Taiwan.

TVD: Do you think of yourself being a part of the Vietnamese community living in America?

HBV: Yes, of course. I see myself as a part of the Vietnamese community. Whatever I do, I am still a Vietnamese, and follow my community. However, I don’t have time to interact with the community most of the times.

Third person: The Chinese in Rosemead are also Chinese-Vietnamese, who used to live in Vietnam years ago, so they are close in a sense. Therefore there are close ties, unlike those Chinese escaped from China. They are called mainland Chinese.64

TVD: Your children are all grown-up now.

---

64 Tàu Đại Lýć.
HBV: They are all grown-up. They all have their own families, and stable personal lives. I am lucky that my son still have the Vietnamese blood in him that he lives with me under the same roof.

TVD: So does your daughter in law?

HBV: Yeah! She lives with us.

TVD: Looking into the future when your grandchildren grow up, what will you want them to remember or know about you? What will you want to keep for them as memory of you from all the things that you have been telling in this interview?

HBV: I want them to care and love each other in whatever they do. They must know that they are Vietnamese. I always think of myself as Vietnamese; we all share this Vietnamese familial relationship among us. It is a fact that we live here in America, but we need to be proud of ourselves being Vietnamese. My grandchildren should be proud of their grandmother. Building up my life all by myself on this land, I consider myself lucky many times. There were many who would congratulate me for building up these entire all by myself. I am thankful that America had extended its help to me.

TVD: I don’t know if you would like to have further comments, as the last words for this interview?

HBV: I would like to say things such as we, Vietnamese, came here to this country to settle down, we should be thankful of this nation, very thankful indeed. Don’t think it is so just because America is rich. They really take care of us a lot. We must realize that America has been taking care of us very well. If we are proud to be Vietnamese, we should also be thankful of America where our children can live in freedom. It is so much happier than if they would still be in Vietnam.

TVD: I also want thank you so much, and you too, uncle.