

Vietnamese Finding Hope in America

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Mr. and Mrs. Toai (center) welcome FLF staff members (1-r) Elena Barros, John Hung, and Dan Fefferman to their new home in Virginia.

Two weeks before Vietnam fell to the Communists, Freedom Leadership Foundation members marched in Washington, D. C., knowing that it was too late to alter the fate of that nation, but knowing, too, that the issue was not just Vietnam but the basic issue of whether a free versus a totalitarian society will prevail in the world. Then, Saigon fell on April 30.

As Saigon entered its last days of freedom, thousands of Vietnamese citizens faced the decision of whether to live under a system they abhorred or to give up everything to start a new life in America. Among them were people like Mr. Ngo Vuong Toai, Chief of Press Services in the Ministry of Information and his wife; Mr. Le and his two cousins, all RVN Army officers; or Mr. Phuong, professor of classical guitar at the National Conservatory of Music and Drama in Saigon.

These few are among the refugees who have found a temporary home at the Freedom Leadership Foundation-sponsored New Hope Center in Washington, D.C., while they look for a job and apartment and learn the English language and American customs. Actually, Mr. Le and the two Huong brothers had not originally intended to come to America. When they left Saigon on April 29, they wanted to go to the Mekong Delta and join insurgents there to continue fighting the Communists.

Two strong anti-Communist Buddhist sects are based there and there is a good supply of rice, so it would be possible to hold out there. But the captain of the ship they were on rendezvoused with an American ship picking up refugees and now they are here. Of the three, only Mr. Le has his family with him -- at least his wife and two of his three children.

I talked with them in the living room of the New Hope Center, which can accommodate 10 to 15 people at a time. As people like the Toais, who were among the first to arrive at the center, move out on their own, others can leave the refugee camps to take their place.

Talking intently, Mr. Le displayed a still strong determination to help his country, if not by fighting then by helping Americans to realize how much his people love freedom and are looking to America to help them achieve it. "The basic desire of the Vietnamese people is for freedom and democracy. I hope that America and the world will understand that. America has those ideals and the Vietnamese people really want to share them, too.

"America should wake up and try to unite all free world nations together and make people understand the threat of Communism. We need a much clearer idea of the reality of this threat. That Vietnam was lost is a tragedy. If America and the free world do not unite against Communism, it is very possible many other countries will fall to them. Vietnam is just the first example."

Mr. Le posed the question, How do Communists get into power? Then he answered it himself. "It is not by winning the people's hearts. In Vietnam there are many religious people who are anti-Communists but who now must live under the Communist regime. They get power because they have an ideology. They have unity among themselves and from unity comes power. To fight Communism effectively, we need an ideology to counteract theirs, an ideology that can unify people within a country and unite different nations. To fight the Communists we need three things: First, high spirits and people willing to work hard. Second, we need a unity of ideals. And third, we need humanitarianism. The basis is the last one of

these three -- love for mankind. Our ideology must be higher and our will must be stronger than theirs."

A Roman Catholic himself, Mr. Le pointed out that the ideology of the free world is based on a belief in God. "God is the source of power. All religions have different beliefs, but they all believe in God. The point is how to bring harmony among religions in order to create strength, to bring power. To fight Communism effectively, we must be on the good side and does everything in our power to fight against evil. Communism is evil. There's no more time for debate; there's only time to fight it."

An equally dedicated patriot is Mr. Toai. One night in 1967, while he was acting as master of ceremonies for an evening of folk songs at Saigon University intended to counter leftist student influence, two teenagers shouldered their way to the stage and seized the microphone.

The girl announced, "Friends, be quiet; our security toen have been planted all around this place," and then proclaimed, "We are going to celebrate the seventh anniversary of the National Liberation Front."

Mr. Toai wrested the microphone away from the girl; her companion whipped out a pistol and began firing. Mr. Toai was shot three times in the stomach, but the terrorists fled out a back door into the night. Three other students were injured and Mr. Toai spent several weeks in the hospital.

Both Mr. Le and Mr. Toai affirmed emphatically that the South Vietnamese soldiers did not lose because they didn't have the will to fight. Mr. Huong, for example, left behind his parents, children, and wife when he left Saigon to fight for freedom in the Mekong Delta and ended up in America without any of them with him.

Mr. Toai explained it this way: "The South Vietnamese people love freedom. We just ask the American people to look at the refugees who fled from the Communists, from city to city, from central Vietnam to southern Vietnam. Many people died on the way, including young children. Many poor people were part of the flow to the south. There must be a reason why. This was not a class struggle. Those poor people could have stayed with the Communists, but they fled because they know from their own experience that they could not live with Communism, because Communism is inhuman. By looking at the blood and the sweat and the tears shed by the people who were fleeing to the south, we can see that the South Vietnamese people really want freedom.

"The ironic thing is, even two weeks before the fall of their country, many South Vietnamese people who believe in freedom were still convinced that the Americans would come back like chivalrous knights and save the people, to give them the freedom that Americans have. The people still believed in American righteousness, even two weeks before the Communist takeover. Maybe the people were dreamers or watched too many movies, but they believed that when the people were in danger and were going to be killed by bandits, knights would come along and Save them, like Zorro. But no knights came to liberate the people."

The Toais spent three days on a barge before being picked up by an American ship in international waters. "On the barge," he says, "when we heard the news on the radio that South Vietnam had been lost, we all cried. The miserable thing is that South Vietnam fought against Communism for 21 years, and then was lost in only one month. The whole free world did not care. No one raised their voice against Communism. So it was very lonely for South Vietnam."

Mr. Le concurred: "Our allies failed to support us. We had to ration our artillery to maybe five shells a day. There was no air support because there was no fuel. Our hands were tied. On the other hand, the Communists had all possible support. Our soldiers ran because they were lonely."

But because freedom and democracy still exist in America, the South Vietnamese have hope, hope that the free world will wake up to reality and liberate their country.

As they speak, their voices are sad, but not bitter. They are establishing new Jives here in America, but their hope is that it will only be temporary, that in the future they will be able to return to a free Vietnam and reunite with their families.

In the meantime... Mr. Toai has found work in a hotel and his wife works in the Ginseng Tea House, a restaurant and gift shop sponsored by the International Family Association of the Unification Church in Washington. They have moved to an apartment in Virginia. Miss Huong, who also worked in the Ministry of Information, is now working for a firm of financial consultants and has also moved out on her own. Mr. Phuong is looking for a teaching position and for a recital manager; he is being helped by well-known guitarist Sophocles Papas. Mr. Le and Mr. Huong expressed hopes of doing auto, TV or air conditioning repair work. For several hours a day they receive instruction in English, and they spend additional hours on their own reviewing the previous day's lesson. "It's a joy to teach them," says their instructor Toni Muller. "I get so carried away that sometimes I forget the time until I notice them losing attention and I realize it's late."

Helping them to adjust to America is John Hung Leba, a native Vietnamese who has been in the United States for six years and is a member of the Unification Church. Also assisting with the work at the New Hope Center is Marlene Trenbeath. "Having been in America for a month," Mr. Toai said, "and having become friends with many Americans who have been in Vietnam, especially those who understand our country and have the same ideals of freedom as the Vietnamese people, I now have found some hope that someday the cries of the South Vietnamese people will be heard in the United States as well as in the world; and that someday in the future we will be able to see a Vietnam without Communism.

"Being in the New Hope Center, I have found some hope. The loneliness that I experienced at the beginning has diminished tremendously. I have found here people from different countries and different races who are able to love each other. This is the spirit that I have been looking for, and now I have found it."