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Twice a Refugee: The Story of Hoa My Nguyen

“Lucky I pack two pair of pants! Ha, ha, ha!” laughed my grandmother, speaking with broken English. Growing up, Bà (Vietnamese for grandmother) repeated the story of how she escaped communism after the Fall of Saigon. Bà would repeat the simple story from time to time, and our family laughed along. But when any of the family would ask for details about her life in wartime Vietnam, she didn’t say much. All she said was her family was poor and as the eldest daughter, she had to quit high school to help the family take care of her seven younger siblings.

Three years ago, when I had a class assignment to interview a family member and write about their history, I chose to write about Bà. During the interview, she answered my questions, but she was reluctant to give details. My father suggested that it must have been a painful time during the war, too painful to talk about.

With lack of information, I did my own research. I read books about the Vietnam War, Google searched background information about Vietnam War refugees, and watched YouTube videos of refugee stories, from those who were willing to share their experiences.

From a combination of what my grandmother shared, and from my research, I learned about the painful experiences that Vietnamese people suffered through war. My grandmother told me that when she was 10 years old, in 1954, she and her family moved from communist North Vietnam to the non-communist South. She and her family settled in poor conditions in Saigon. When I asked if her family found a house to live in, she said they lived in a “bad area.” When I asked for more details, she just repeated that they lived in a “bad area,” until her father

later found a job as a secretary in the government. But they continued to live in poverty even after better circumstances, since there were many mouths to feed.

From my research, I found that when people moved from North Vietnam to South Vietnam, they had no homes waiting for them in the south. There weren't any charitable organizations or government assistance programs to help migrants. They lived on the outskirts of cities in makeshift shelters made from cardboard boxes and whatever they could find. They searched for food in garbage and sent children to beg for food. After reading about that, I felt I had a better understanding of what my Bà lived through. I admired the strength and perseverance my grandmother had to endure and survive in such impoverished circumstances.

When her siblings were older, Bà found work as a secretary in the government's electric power company, where she met my grandfather, who was working as an electrical engineer. They later married, but Ông (Vietnamese for grandfather) often traveled to Bangkok because the governments of South Vietnam and Thailand partnered to work on a hydropower dam project to generate electricity from the Mekong River.

In 1973, American troops began to withdraw from South Vietnam, after a peace treaty was signed. The peace treaty was supposed to allow North and South Vietnam to agree on how to govern as one country, but the fighting continued. With less support from American soldiers, communists progressively took over southern cities. Bà said everyone listened with fear to the radio to get updates. By March 1975, Ông was working in Bangkok. When a neighbor was fleeing to Bangkok, Bà gave the neighbor a letter to deliver to Ông, telling him to not return to Saigon, as communist soldiers were fast approaching. Bà's sister worked as a secretary for the US Embassy and was authorized to give out evacuation paperwork to her family. Bà received the documents to evacuate on April 29. Since the airport was destroyed, US military aircrafts and

helicopters were picking up evacuees from the US Embassy. Bà quickly packed the two pairs of pants into a sling bag and looped it over her shoulder. She picked up my father with one arm and my uncle with the other and started to push her way through the tumultuous crowds in the streets. She said she was afraid of being slowed down by carrying two boys on each hip, but she was determined to run as fast as she could for her life and for her sons' lives.

The scene at the embassy was pandemonium. With so many people trying to get through the gate, she was worried she would not make it. After a chaotic rush, Bà helped her young sons into the military helicopter. Bà didn't know where they were going, but she was relieved to have escaped. Everyone sat on the floor in the helicopter, and soon after takeoff, my father had a smelly accident. "Lucky I pack two pair of pants!"

After an hour's flight, the helicopter landed on a US aircraft carrier, which then took them to a refugee camp in Guam. After three days in Guam, they were flown to a refugee camp in Camp Pendleton. There, Red Cross volunteers helped Bà write a letter to Ông and three weeks later, Ông reunited with the family. They remained in Camp Pendleton for four months before a Lutheran Church from Council Bluffs, Iowa, sponsored them.

Our family was blessed with assistance from the church. Upon arrival, clothes, blankets, and other necessities were donated. Church members helped the family find a home, helped Ông find a job, taught my grandparents how to drive, and taught Bà how to cook American food. She still has the tattered, worn cookbook she had no doubt paged through many times. Church members also helped Bà with her English. Ever since she made the sacrifice to quit high school to help her family, she had always wanted a high school diploma. She studied hard, and her wish was fulfilled. I am proud that my grandmother later became a bilingual aide in a middle school,

after moving to Sacramento. With her fluency in English and Vietnamese, she helped recent Vietnamese immigrant students who struggled in school.

Thinking about my grandmother's past, I recognize that she was twice a refugee, starting over when she was ten and again with a young family. My family arrived in America with nothing, and with the help from the church, they worked hard to overcome challenges in a new country and led a successful life. In the past three years I have been volunteering at Camp Nefesh, a summer camp for refugee children. I help at a refugee farm through NorCal Resist, a nonprofit refugee assistance organization - on Sunday mornings in the spring, I weed and plant vegetable seeds and harvest the vegetables in the autumn. I also organize donation drives to collect gently used clothing, blankets, and other necessities for Opening Doors, another local nonprofit refugee assistance organization. As I reflect about my family's past, I will continue to serve refugee communities with the confirmed knowledge that a little assistance can have a lasting impact.