

Memories From Refugees Who Escaped Vietnam by Boat

Kristie

Kristie, bilingual instructional assistant at Cleveland High School in Seattle, provided some pillowcases and a photo of her family from 1974 for a Wing Luke Asian Museum exhibition on the Vietnamese American community that was created in 1995. Kristie is pictured immediately to the left of her mother (please see Portrait Card from Lesson Three), who is holding the youngest daughter. Kristie tells this story:

“We escaped by boat from the fishing village of Song Doc in September, 1978. Before we left, Mother embroidered a pillowcase by hand for each of us. She put each of our names on the pillowcases. I picked the color purple, and I said I wanted flowers and musical notes. We packed the pillowcases, jewelry and clothes all into one suit case.

“There were about 30 of us on a small motorboat, going through a small inlet the night of the escape. I remember the storm and the strong winds and the waves. Water began to fill the boat, and people started panicking. At one point this huge wave came down and the boat capsized and we were all in the water. Mother was holding my baby sister, Hong Hanh, in her arms. I was screaming and praying. It was so dark I couldn’t see anyone. I didn’t know how to swim. Fortunately, I was able to hold onto a roll of fish net.

“When we were finally rescued by another vessel, I asked, ‘Where is my mother?’ No one could find her. I never saw my mother or my younger sister again. Two elderly couples, a little boy and two other women also perished.

“When we met up with my father’s boat, I was the one who told him, ‘Mother is gone.’ My father broke down and cried. This was the first time I ever saw my father cry. At first, he said he wasn’t going to leave. Other people told him, ‘You have to think about your children.’ They finally convinced him to go.

“We didn’t see any sign of land for a long time. We were all seasick and throwing up. During the trip, I kept hoping that an angel would bring my mother back to me. We arrived in Malaysia after a three-day journey.

“When we came to the U.S., my sister and I had to take over responsibility for the household. At the time, I was 11 years old. I kept thinking that I just wanted Father to get married again so I could have someone to take care of us. At dinnertime, we would place an extra setting of food for mother, to remember her. We wore a black patch on our shirts as a sign of mourning for the first year after her death. Father never remarried, and he passed away last year.”

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Tam

“At night, my family and 30 other people silently sneaked out onto the boat, leaving behind the only lives we’ve known. We all had to lie on the bottom of the boat, which was normally a place for fish. We were not unlike sardines packed side by side with hardly any air space left for air. In the cover of darkness, the little fishing boat, carrying so many live, made her way out of Viet Nam. It was not until I woke up on my family’s chest that I remember I had not said goodbye to Viet Nam. I was never to see my ba ngoai (grandmother) again.

“One time, we spotted a pirate boat that, fortunately, did not stop us. The weather was calm and pleasant. Just when we were about to run out of food and drinking, we spotted land. We landed on the shores of Malaysia. Since all of us on the boat were Roman Catholics, we immediately gave thanks to God.”

Ngoc

“At the age of 11, I bravely held back my tears and waved the last farewell to my family. With 116 other people on a small, fragile fishing boat, we made an escape out of Viet Nam. I will never forget the gasping moan of hunger and emaciated bodies stacked on top of one another. For days, we drifted aimlessly on the open sea. Our supplies were low and ravaging sea constantly challenged the durability of our boat.

“During the journey on the open sea, most of my clothing burnt away. It was used to signal large ocean liners. None of the liners came to our rescue for fear that we would become a burden from their usual tasks.”

Trang

“Our journey was seven days long on the ocean. On the fourth day, we ran out of food and water. Everybody was starving and dying of dehydration, but we did not know what to do besides pray. On the seventh day, we met an Indonesian ship. They supplied us with break, milk, water, gasoline and directed us how to get to Galang, a refugee camp in Indonesia. In return, we gave them gold, jewelry and watches.”

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Anonymous

(Former political prisoner whose son and daughter were “boat people.” He is referring to an embroidered textile that he let the Wing Luke Asian Museum borrow for an exhibition on Vietnamese Americans in 1995.)

“This embroidery was given to me by my father. It is one of a pair that I received as a wedding gift in 1943. The embroideries were given to my father by his father. It’s a family treasure. This kind of embroidery is very expensive. It was made in the north and brought to the south.

“In 1973, I gave one of the two embroideries to an American doctor who was volunteering at a hospital. He was a very good friend. He had been in Viet Nam six times, and this time was going to be his last. I said, ‘Please keep it. It’s a genuine artwork from our country.’

“The second embroidery, a scene of a temple festival, was given to my son and daughter in 1980. They had decided to escape Viet Nam, but before their departure, they asked for some souvenir to take with them. My wife gave them the embroidery. The boat sunk. Both of them drowned. There were 34 people on the boat; only 16 survived. The embroidery went with them into the sea.

“I was very sad when I got out of the prison camp in 1980. When I came to the U.S., I tried many times to get in touch with my American friend. But he had moved many times. Finally, at Christmas time, 1993, he wrote a letter to me. He sent me back the embroidery.

“It was a miracle. I never thought I would get it back. I am a Buddhist; I believe it’s the law of Karma. You always get back what you have given. If I had not given the embroidery to my friend, I would have nothing left of my family. I have a son who came with me to Seattle. The embroidery and all my possessions and property will go to him. He is my only son now. I told him the story of the embroidery, and I said, ‘You can remember it for all your life.’”