

Completing a Good Work: A Refugee Story of a Family of Fourteen

Chau Dang, Calgary Vietnamese Mennonite Church

This is my story of being a young man who ventured out and risked his life in order to find a new life. How did God turn a wreckage into a useful tool in his hand?. For most of the people in the south of Vietnam, particularly in Saigon, April 30 1975 was a turning point in our history. It had not only changed the history of our country but also many human lives. At first, most of us thought the war was finally over. We could start rebuilding our life and our country since we were in war for more than twenty years. A mixed emotion of relief and fear was clearly shown in everyone's faces and discussions. We were relieved that peace finally came, but we were also fearful of the new government from stories we had heard through those who had fled the communists back in 1954. Our relief soon faded away. The truth soon came out. The horrible stories we had heard soon became reality, that is, mass murders, executions, disappearances, and soldiers with guns making the law. We saw people run for their lives to avoid war and people fleeing their homeland to avoid the cruelty of the communist regime.

The communist government trusted no one after they took over South Vietnam. Because of their mistrust and their fearfulness of the people, it seemed the communist regime would rather mistakenly kill ninety-nine innocent people than allowing one of their enemies escape. Human life under this new government did not mean much. So human rights didn't even exist in their dictionary. The unreasonable killings of the new government marked the beginning of the big Vietnamese exodus of the so-called "Boat People". There is nothing more uncertain than fleeing one's homeland to unknown places, unknown languages, unknown traditions, and a lot of others unknown factors. Bravely risking their lives for freedom, Vietnamese people tried to seek refuge in the nearby countries, such as, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippine, Hong Kong, and Singapore

Like a lot of other Vietnamese citizens, our family was also under the watchful eyes of the undercover "watchdog". Around 1977, upon returning home from college, my Dad took me aside and secretly whispered: "You and your younger sister must leave Vietnam for the

sake of your future. There is no hope, no future here in Vietnam. I cannot afford to pay for the whole family to leave. Beside, we have to stay back to cover up for your safety. If we have to suffer the consequence for your freedom, it's worth it." Hearing that, my first response was NO. I said, "If we have to die, we will die together here. I will not leave you or the family behind. I am the oldest son in the family and therefore bear added responsibility."

Then my Dad asked "Why? What was the benefit if we all die together here? That would be no good for you, and no good for the family. If you and your sister, My Loan, succeed to come to a western country, then your future might be bright, and then there probably is hope for us too". With this vision from my Dad, I agreed to leave the country.

For two straight years, from 1977-1979, I tried 11 times to escape Vietnam, but without success. At one time, my three brothers and I went to Rach Gia, the sea port in the southern most part of Vietnam, ready to board the boat in which my oldest sister had already been waiting a month. At that time, my three brothers were still very young (five, seven and eight) so they just climbed into the boat in full view of the police without any problem. But it was not so easy for me. I knew that if I climbed into the boat I would be caught right away. Consequently, after waiting for a while, my three brothers and sister together with other people in charge of the boat left Vietnam without me. I literally 'missed the boat'!

That same afternoon, on the way home, I almost gave up hope leaving the country. but my father kept up hope. He tried every possible opportunity to make the connection for me to leave Vietnam regardless of much bad news we heard. There were stories of people caught and jailed for trying to escape and others of death at sea due to bad weather, engine failure, no water, or sea pirates.

In March 1979, Dad got another connection with the people who organized the whole process of escape. So he sent a telegram to me through my college about 300 kilometers away where I was training to be a teacher; he asked the director for permission to allow me come home for an urgent reason. Part of the reason that I attended this college was to be exempted from mandatory military service. When I got home to Saigon, this time I prayed that if the heaven above could help me to escape successfully I would serve the Creator (Thuong De) and be a channel of blessing for my country. At this time, I was considered an atheist although my Dad believed in Cao Daim, a religion founded in Vietnam.

Believe it or not, this time, my younger sister, My Loan and I and 543 other people in the wooden boat made it to the sea without any worry of being caught by the police. However, the boat was so full, it almost sank or at least so it seemed. The good thing was that we

made it to the sea.

The boat we were in had two levels packed with people. My sister and I were on the bottom floor. Even though there were three vents, there was not enough oxygen to breath so many people became seasick and threw up.

On the second day at sea, we were followed by the Thai pirates. These Thai pirates would stop and board refugee boats, and then rob and kill those who opposed them. For that reason, the leader of the boat told me and other young men to come up to the deck and get ready to fight. We were armed with knives, make-believe guns and telescopes pretending to be the artillery. So I had a chance to come to the deck and enjoy some fresh air of the sea while my sister was still down there in the bottom floor. Seeing that we were ready to fight, the Thai pirates did not dare to get close to our boat but kept following us at a distance all day. When it was dark in the night, we turned off all sources of light and steered the boat in another direction. So they lost us. But by day break, there they were again. This time, we tricked them by using the telescope, leaning on two legs, pretending it was a canon aimed at them. It worked. They got scared and sped away.

On day three somewhere on the south sea, our heavy loaded boat was picked-up and rescued by a Thai commercial ship. Almost everyone left their belongings behind in the wooden boat and happily boarded the ship which was stronger and more stable than our wooden one. So by the end of March, 1979, after five days on the sea, 540 Vietnamese boat people arrived safely in Thailand. However, we were not allowed to land. So we had to stay on the deck of the ship for almost a week, waiting to hear from the Thai authority and the intervention of UNHCR (United Nation High Commissioner for Refugee). During this time, we were grateful for the Thai people who lived in the villages near by to give us foods and water in order to keep us alive.

This opened the new chapter, a new hope for my family and me. My sister and I spent three months in a Bangkok transit center. During this time, we were interviewed and accepted by the Canadian immigration officer and prepared to come to Canada. I did not know about the other refugees, but for me, I did not have any choice and was willing to come to any country that accepted me. In this case, it was happened to be Canada.

So one summer night, on June 7, 1979 my sister, My Loan, and I arrived at the Calgary International airport alone. We waited there for about two hours and did not know what to do. Then a gentleman came and asked us a few questions. We gave him the immigration papers. It appeared to me that he knew what to do. So he went away for a while to make a telephone call and came back with a couple. I learned later that man was Mr. Bill Thiessen, director of MCC

Alberta. The couple was George and Hilda Klassen, our sponsors.

Only a few days after our arrival, we attended church on Sunday with the Klassen family for the first time. There I met with many other church people. They seemed very friendly and hospitable. In this church, the Calgary Mennonite Fellowship, I came in contact with, and learned more about, Christianity. We attended church from this time on, not fully understanding what was being said or taught. The Klassen family treated us very kindly. My sister, age seventeen and still within the school age, she began to attend school. I was over nineteen so it was agreed that I had to work. The ones who sponsored me owned an electrical company so I got hired right away by them.

I remembered my first job was using the knife to skin the copper wires or beat them up with the hammer and burn the smaller ones to sell for scrap metal. I did this job for couple of months. Over time my boss, Mr. George Klassen gave me a book to study for the entrance exam of the electrical trade. If I passed I would be accepted in the so-called apprenticeship program as an electrician. This was the trade that I learned and four years later, I earned my certificate of proficiency with the red seal as a journeyman electrician.

While living with the Klassen family, I told them that we still missed our other brothers and sister who left Vietnam before we did but did not know where they were, nor the situation of their well being. With their help we tried to contact the Red Cross and many other international agencies with no positive result. One day, we received a letter from a distant uncle who lived in Paris, France, saying that our oldest sister and three brothers were alive and were staying in a refugee camp in Indonesia. One more time, the Klassens showed their kindness to us by being willing to sponsor my siblings from Indonesia to Calgary, Canada. In January, 1980, My Loan and I were reunited with my three brothers and my oldest sister. Our sponsors then purchased a house and rented it to us to live in.

During this time, we were grateful to receive full support from the sponsors and the church family in helping us to settle into a new life in short time and without much of difficulty. Two years later, in 1981, with a letter of guaranteed employment I was qualified to come to the immigration office to apply for the rest of our family still living in Vietnam (they consisted of my parents and six sisters) to be reunited with us in Calgary. Among the six sisters, was physically and mentally handicapped. In the fall, 1985 our family of fourteen was finally together again in Calgary after six long and dreadful years of separation. That was the first time for a long time that I was truly happy; my whole family of fourteen was together again. It was like a dream to me.

How did it happen that an atheist who did not believe in any gods became a servant of the Living God? It is impossible. But yes, with

God all things are possible. My life is the evidence of this.

Currently, I am the lead pastor of Calgary Vietnamese Mennonite church which was established by Rev. Ezekiel Wong in 1981. Looking back thirty two years in Vietnam, I recall that at age fourteen I got a gospel tract talking about God and salvation in Jesus Christ. Upon reading it, I was not interested at all. On the contrary, I was angry and blasphemed God. My older sister was a first hand witness and caught this act of mine. But God has His way to turn and use the stubborn people like me to be his tool and for his purpose. Through the repeated attempts to escape Vietnam and dangerous life-changing journey at sea my hardened heart was softened.

As a young man, my life's philosophy was simple: "me, myself and I". Not only did I not want to rely on someone else, but also I just believed in myself. During the time at the sea, however, I realized that if the boat ever sank in no way could I save myself. I could swim, but not from the middle of the sea. For the first time I felt helpless

My next experience was the time when my sister and I landed in Bangkok in 1979. There we received the warm and hospitable service from Christian volunteers. It was the same when we came to Calgary. All of these experiences caused me to re-evaluate my spiritual life. Added to these abundant blessings from God, He led me up to a new and prosperous life, with my family and me reunited in Calgary. All of these things caused me to surrender my life to Him and make the decision to accept Christ as my Lord and Saviour in 1983. At this time, I attended the Calgary Vietnamese Mennonite and was nurtured by this congregation.

Being an electrician, part of my job was to restore power and light to people who had trouble with the electrical service. I became focused on the thought that the people I served still lived in spiritual darkness. Every day, when I finishing my work, I felt guilty for leaving those people in spiritual darkness. This conviction gradually increased in my heart until spring of 1993 when I talked to my wife about giving up my career to become God's servant. She did not only agree but also had the same conviction. So by the end of fall 1993, we moved to Regina to attending Bible College. After graduation in 1995, we came to Edmonton for church planting. The result is that today there is a Vietnamese Mennonite church in Edmonton, one that celebrated its 10th anniversary in October, 2005.

God is faithful and keeps his promise through all generations. My wife, Donna and I have been supporting the churches in Vietnam in many ways and have followed the crises and persecutions which the Mennonite churches are facing. We were back there twice to see God's seeds growing by His grace and love. In conclusion, I would like to quote Paul letter to the Philippians: "being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion

until the day of Christ Jesus.” The amazing grace is that God turns a wreck into a useful tool for his honour and glory.