

Goodbye Saigon

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The Review of Vietnamese Studies. 2001. 1(1): 8 pages.

April 1975: Everyone knows the Communists will over run Saigon, but no one expected it to happen so fast. Over the last month the sound of gunfire and explosions have slowly increased in frequency and force. We are so used to it that it has become a sort of background noise no one pays any attention to. Despite this I remember waking on April 30th, alarmed at how close the sound of gun-fire and explosions was to our neighborhood. The city was in chaos, dark smoke blanketed the horizon as people ran with what ever belongings they could carry. But as I watched it seemed that very few had any idea of where to go.

My family and I hurriedly packed some clothes and fled to a friends house in another part of the city called Cho-Lon which was safer. We could no longer stay in our home because it was near an army camp and therefore dangerous. My father was not with us because he and my mother had separated years earlier. Adding to our anxiety was a rumor that the Communists had threatened to flatten Saigon if

there was resistance. By noon the presidential palace had fallen and we knew it was all over. I was only 7 years old at the time and did not realize how bad the situation was, so I innocently told my mom that now Vietnam would be one country again so she could go back to North Vietnam to see grandmother. My mom was delighted with the thought.

Later that afternoon we drove to the harbor to see what was going on since the radio station had been captured by the Communists and we no longer were getting any news. As we drove around the streets were now completely deserted and an strange silence had fallen on the city. The only people we saw were a few people left still burning records and documents in front of some government and military installations. More ominous was the fact that in the harbor most of the navy and merchant ships had already left. I asked my mom what was going on but she seemed lost in her thoughts, maybe she was thinking of the harsh choice she would soon have to make.

My uncle and his wife had been staying one step ahead of the Communists since they fled the central highlands. Because of the speed of the Communist advance, the roads were jammed with refugees fleeing south, making progress impossible for vehicles. Even though they did not want to be separated, my uncle was forced to put his wife on one of

the boats heading to Saigon because she was pregnant and would never be able to keep up on foot. When he finally made it to Saigon a few weeks later, he found out that his wife had not arrived and not knowing where she was or what else to do, decided to stay with us in the hopes that she would find him. Later we learned that the boat she was on had unexpectedly dropped everyone, including his wife, off at Cam Ranh Bay (another city in the central highlands) to go back north for more refugees. My poor aunt was unable to find a way to get to Saigon until after the fighting was over and escape was impossible.

Meanwhile for the rest of us, time was running out. We knew that if we were going to leave it had to be now. We waved down one of the few remaining navy boats which was headed out to sea. It stopped to pick us up. At this time not everyone was willing to escape by boat so while it was crowded, there was none of the panic and fighting such as I saw in the photos taken at the American Embassy that day as the last helicopters were leaving. The gun-fire was getting closer and my uncle was torn between staying to look for his wife and escaping, he was worried that he and his wife would face retribution if he stayed because he had been in the army. My mother was hesitant to get on board because she had to choose between leaving with us or staying so

that she could see her mother for the first time since 1954 - when north and south Vietnam were separated. Finally she decided to stay and promised to find us after the war ended.

As the boat pulled away I can still remember my mother standing on the dock, crying and waving to us. I was yelling : "Stop the boat, go back and get my mom", but it was too late. In those few minutes my family was torn apart and I saw Vietnam for the last time. As my mother watched the boat leaving with her children she was overcome with grief and changed her mind. Desperately she stood at the dock for five hours waiting for another boat to take her out to our ship, but none came.

On the way out of Saigon, we saw hundreds of returning boats and some of them warned us not to go on because troops were shooting at any boats trying to escape to the open sea. The people on our boat were very determined and decided to take their chances and leave. Many of the boats we saw leaving were severely overloaded and one of the ships had run aground in shallow water. Our smaller boat pulled alongside the old, rust-streaked ship and an agreement was reached that everyone who wanted to could transfer from our boat to the ship, and in return our boat would help pull the ship into deeper water.

After struggling for three or four hours, both vessels finally reached deep water and all of the passengers were transferred. The small boat turned back toward Saigon, taking a few people who had changed their minds and decided to go back. The ship, even more overcrowded than before, slowly headed out to the open ocean for the long dangerous voyage ahead. Even though we had made it out of Saigon there was no celebrating, everyone was dwelling on what they had left behind and what the uncertain future might hold. That night was pitch black, there were no lights on our ship or on shore. We watched fireworks shooting up from the coastal villages into the dark sky. The Communists were celebrating their victory and we could hear one of the generals broadcasting a new set of rules which he called "the ten commandments". These commandments were to govern life for those left behind in the new Vietnam. Our intended destination was Singapore and we slowly headed south. The weather was good and if it were not for the grim circumstances I might have been able to appreciate the beauty of the blue ocean and the small islands we passed. At one point we saw some whales which terrified everyone because they were nearly as large as our ship and came very close. When I look back on

this event, I think that everyone leaning over one side to watch the whales was more dangerous to the ship than the whales themselves.

Things started to go seriously wrong a couple of days into the journey when our engine broke down. I guess this was not very surprising considering how old and decrepit our ship was to start with. Several small boats from coastal villages followed us and dumped additional refugees onto our ship each day. The water started coming in from an existing hole on the side of the hull of our ship which was now below the waterline because of the weight of all of the refugees. After drifting a few days, our food and water were running out, making an already bad situation very desperate. People started to fight over food and water. Everyone was being very careful to ration their water and food with the exception of a very popular singer from Saigon who would use a great deal of her small supply of water to wash her face each day. Obviously some people are more afraid of being unattractive than they are of dying.

Everyone thought that we were going to die slowly and horribly, despair settled over the ship like a numbing fog. A man near me decided not to wait and shot himself in the head. I remember hearing the screaming when his blood and brain tissue splattered on me. On the crowded deck there

was no where to store the body so there was no choice but to toss his body overboard and within minutes the sharks were fighting over it. As days passed, so great was my fear and loss that I felt neither hunger or thirst. My mind had cut off my ability to feel or comprehend what was happening around me, which was maybe a good thing considering what life was like onboard. Even though the ship was extremely overcrowded there was very little talking, everyone seemed wrapped up in their own misery. My brother and sister sat nearby crying and hugging each other. The crowding was so great that one night when I stood up to stretch, I found that I could no longer find a space to sit back down so I ended up standing the entire night until I collapsed. I learned my lesson. I did not get up again until we were rescued.

Despite our SOS signals and desperate attempts to get their attention, many ships passed us by without stopping but finally after floating what seemed like forever we were picked up by a Danish freighter out of Thailand on its way to Hong Kong. After being left by so many other ships, everyone was afraid that if we did not get onboard the freighter fast enough it would leave without us. Most of the people started to panic and there was a lot of pushing and shoving to get on board. Some fights even broke out

and many passengers left their personal belongings behind in the mad rush. One man's leg got crushed between the two ships when they collided into each other. Many others fell into the water and drowned during the rescue. By the time we were rescued, I could not move my legs because I had been sitting in one spot for so long; I had to be carried up to the freighter by a member of the ship's crew. That night as I was resting from my ordeal someone stole all of the cash and jewelry that my mother had given me.

So when it was over, all I had left of Vietnam were memories of people and places that had been left behind. For many years afterward, I would get angry when I thought about what had happened and what I lost. I was not angry at anyone in particular, rather I was angry how events and ideologies which I did not understand could take me from everything I knew and loved. With my mother and other members of my family having moved nearby in recent years, I finally have had the chance to once again get to know the family I lost twenty years ago.