

Background Reading: Vietnamese Re-Education Camps

By Quyen Truong

After the Fall of Saigon on April 30th, 1975, every South Vietnamese man, from former officers in the armed forces, to religious leaders, to employees of the Americans or the old government, were told to report to a re-education camp to “learn about the ways of the new government.” Many South Vietnamese men chose to flee on boats, but others had established lives and loved ones in Vietnam, so they willingly entered these camps in hopes of quickly reconciling with the new government and continuing their lives peacefully....

Excerpts from My Father’s Oral History

The best way to describe these camps is through the words of someone who lived through it.... Here are excerpts from accounts of [my father’s] seven years in re-education camps:

“I was married for less than eight months before I had to go to re-education camp. Communists said one thing—only ten days! They wrote that we’d only need to pack clothing and food and money for ten days, so everyone believed. We all signed contracts that said this! But after ten days, after three months, after six months, after being moved from place to place by the Communists, I knew we were in for the long haul. In June of 1975, they brought me to Hoc Mon, then transferred me on a cargo boat to the North.”

My father believes he was kept at the reeducation camps for seven years because of his Military Intelligence (MI) status. “Communists were afraid of Military Intelligence because we could reveal information, so they brought MI to the North.” Here, the re-education camp became known as labor camp due to the notorious back-breaking work forced upon prisoners. “Their main goal was not to teach us, but only to detain us. Many of them didn’t even have an education beyond the 8th grade; how could they teach us?”

The time of imprisonment was physically demanding and morally disheartening. “The Communists put people like me into the jungle so that we would get sick and slowly die off. That was their goal... Everyone was miserable. Many people died of sadness... One week I’d see one gravesite. As the weeks went on I saw more and more graves.”

Prisoners endured long days of menial labor and physical pain. ...“We were broken up into different labor units. The building unit made houses, the equipment unit made spades and there was a unit that grew wheat, a unit that grew vegetables, a unit that culti-

vated tea... In camp, our unit’s specialty was building. I would carry cement, wood and everything needed to make buildings. I had to carry 16 pieces of brick, or carry tureens full of water and walk barefoot on a steep road.... It was heavy work, especially carrying the water. Sometimes I had to walk with the water for 1-2 km.”

The fatigue wore down the men and made them more susceptible to accidents. My father relates, “People who didn’t know how to cut bamboos properly died when branches they chopped fell on top of them.”

...“Each person got two hands’ span of space to lie down. To do this, we had to lie like canned sardines. One person lay one way, the adjacent people lay the other way to have enough room to lie down. In each little room there were about 60-70 people, sleeping on a floor that was a little elevated over the bare earth.”

...Besides the constant fatigue, my father remembers being very hungry. “We ate very little. Every day, we ate a portion of rice as small as a quit (small fruit, like an orange) and some salt water. They didn’t give us much because they feared that people would hoard food and escape... We ate just enough to survive.”... Even with his positive temperament, my father was miserable and constantly fearful of death. He speaks with resentment about the lack of food. “I was very weak when I came home (from the labor camp in 1982). During the time I served for the South Vietnamese army, I weighed 53 kg. But after two years in the camp, I weighed only 39 kg!”

...Occasionally, the prisoners were allowed to communicate with loved ones. “Every three to five months, we got permission to write home.” However, my father did not trust the Communist postal services. “I was never sure that your mother received all the information because sometimes they would send the letters, sometimes they wouldn’t. Many times, the Communists did not send the letter to Saigon but kept it at the reeducation camp. I know because a Communist man asked me why I bothered to write; then he showed me the pile of letters.”

... Despite the conditions, men found camaraderie and entertainment in each other. “One time, there was theater in camp, and I had to act and dance.... We went to a theater and practiced.... I dressed up as a woman, wearing a dress! We only got 5 weeks to practice and then perform the play. In the morning, we would practice, and in the afternoons we would work. In prison camp we only had this form of amusement.”

NOTE: This is an excerpt of “Vietnamese Re-Education Camps: A Brief History” by Quyen Truong.

This reading is available online at www.choices.edu/resources/supplemental_vietnam_camps_lesson.php.