One Vietnamese Refugee’s Experience on an Unforgiving Sea

by HIEN LE

Boom! Be Thi Luu stumbles as the hard metal floor of the ship beneath her starts to sway.

Boom! A second blow to the ship’s left thrusts her up against the railing on the right as waters from the Gulf of Thailand splash onto the deck.

Boom! As soon as Luu hears the frightening hollow sound for the third time, she knows it will be the last. Mustering whatever strength she has left, she grips onto the rail as the right side of the ship crashes into the turquoise waters below.

Silence.

For a brief second, Luu hears nothing but the eerie sound of the sea as the waters drown out all other noise.

Cough, Cough, Cough.

When Luu resurfaces, she is overtaken by hysterical coughs as air rushes back into her lungs.

All around her, hundreds of people fight to keep their heads above water as the waves as it threaten to pull them down.

Floating in the water, Luu can feel her arms and legs begin to numb from fatigue and hunger. Images of her four young children flash in her mind as she closes her eyes, going to the sea.

Flash-forward 32 years, (period) I am sitting across a table from Luu at the Immaculate Conception Church located in downtown Seattle. It is the week of Luu came to Seattle three weeks ago during Ash Wednesday, and Luu – now a resident of California – is visiting as a part of the church’s Catholic Unity program.

Luu, now 75 years old, was among a group of 100 Vietnamese escapees making their way to a nearby refugee camp when their ship was seized by Thai pirates. Pain, sorrow and fear are plainly etched on her face as she recalls the memories of that day.

“We were headed to a camp in California – is visiting as a part of the church’s Catholic Unity program. Knowing that leaving Vietnam would not only provide a better life for her children but it also free her of the marital obligations she has left, she grips onto the rail as the right side of the ship crashes into the turquoise waters below.

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Kids. But I loved my husband very much and getting married would have meant betraying him and my children.”

At the time, Luu had heard of many stories of a secret anti-government group who were helping Vietnamese families flee to another country. Knowing that leaving Vietnam would not only provide a better life for her children but it also free her of the marital obligations, Luu spent the next few weeks tracking down the organizers of this group.

“It took me a long time to find any information about them,” she said. "The people who did know didn’t want to talk because they were afraid that the Viet Cong soldiers would find out. It wasn’t until just a month before I was to wed that I found an old lady who was willing to tell me.”

That old lady was Trang-Ngoc Nghiem. She lived near Luu’s house in central Ho Chi Minh City, formally known as Saigon. According to Luu, Nghiem’s daughter had escaped through the help of this organization just a couple of months back.

“This day, I still appreciate everything that Trang did for me and my children,” said Luu. “She told me that I reminded her of her own daughter and helped me bring her some peace. My only instructions from Trang were to go home and pack, that she would take care of the rest.”

And Nghiem kept her word. On Sept. 20th, just four days before her wedding, Luu and her four children left Saigon to Kien Giang, a nearby city where they were instructed to go and meet the organizers of the escape.

By the time they reached Kien Giang, it was around 10 p.m. The organizers led Luu and her four children into an old shack where they were told to wait until midnight.

“While Luu and the rest of the refugees were sitting in fear, waiting for whatever would happen next, they noticed the pirates leaving the ship and going back onto their own.”

“When I ran up to my mom,” said Minh during a phone interview, “I knew that she would know right away that two of us were missing. I just didn’t know what to tell her.”

Luu, however, was not as pleased. She was already married and once bore four children with her husband, who died in the war. She explained that it was hard for widows to remarry, so when the opportunity came, her father didn’t hesitate.

“I didn’t love that new man,” she said. "I know my father only agreed because he was thinking about the well being of me and my family.”

At night, Luu’s daughter had escaped from the ship and went to a nearby refugee camp when their ship was seized by Thai pirates. Pain, sorrow and fear are plainly etched on her face as she recalls the memories of that day.

“We were told to leave the rest of our stuff, that we wouldn’t need it,” said Luu. “On the way up to the deck, we saw what happened to the organizers of the escape. They had pieces of cloth stuffed in their mouths and were tied to the railings.”

While Luu and the rest of the refugees were sitting in fear, waiting for whatever would happen next, they noticed the pirates leaving the ship and going back onto their own.

“When I saw them leaving, I was so relieved,” said Luu. “Looking at them always makes me happy.”

Relief washed over everyone’s faces. Moms and dads were hugging their children, some sobbing quietly.

However, the feeling of elation did not last long.

“We saw them drive their boat away,” said Luu. “Some of the refugees started to unlace the captain and the rest of the organizers. We wanted to get out of there as soon as possible, with everyone helping any way they could.

“It was then that we noticed their boat had stopped. Minutes later, we heard the sound of their ship was getting bigger. They were coming back. And they were coming back fast. No one on the boat could move. I think we were all scared.”

Boom! The pirates drove their ship right into the left side of the refugee’s boat. The tension on the ship broke.

“When I heard that, I knew exactly who they were,” said Luu. “There were people screaming and running around to find their family. The ship was rocking dangerously in the water after the first hit. I knew it wouldn’t be the last.”

BOOM! Just as Luu predicted, the pirates dealt another blow to the ship.

“BOOM! When we were hit for a second time,” she said, “the impact was so great that I was separated from my children. It was the worst feeling. I all could think about was finding them.”

But before she could, the pirates were back.

“BOOM! Chinh, can we have some green bean ice-cream?” Luu’s youngest daughter asked. “Chinh, can we have some green bean ice-cream?”

This was the last memory Luu has of her two daughters.

When Luu opened her eyes she was back on a boat. She knew immediately however, that it wasn’t the same boat that had brought them thus far. At that time, her son, Minh, ran up and hugged her. He had tears streaming down his face. Behind him was his younger sister, Hong. Both were safe and unhurt.

“Where is Ha and Loan?” Luu asked, trying to fight back tears.

No one answered. Right then, Luu felt her world crumbling down. Tears started to run down her face as she hysterically called out for her missing daughters.

“I try not to think about that moment,” said Hong during a phone interview. “I try not to think about that moment. I don’t know what would happen next, they noticed the pirates leaving the ship and going back onto their own.”

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