

*Interview between Teresa Mei Chuc and her mother on their experience surviving three and a half months in the South China Sea on “Hai Hong,” a freight boat that carried about 2,450 Vietnamese refugees escaping Vietnam in 1978. Interview date: February 3, 2015, 5:06 p.m. Translated from the original Cantonese into English by Teresa Mei Chuc.*

## **Vietnamese Boat Refugees**

October 21, 1978. Your aunt’s sister let us borrow around three thousand dollars to get on the boat “Hai Hong.” She had a business in Vietnam and had money, but your aunt didn’t have any money. We were very poor and had no money. She left with us on the boat. She couldn’t bring the money on the boat, so she let us borrow it to pay for our passage and when we arrived in the U.S., I had to pay her back the money. They wouldn’t let you bring so much money on the boat. If you tried to bring the money, if people found out, they would take it or if the boat was attacked by pirates, you would be robbed. So you would be scared to bring so much money on the boat. When I got to the U.S., I had to repay my debt to get us on the boat. I had a very, very hard time then. I had to take out a loan and pay her back and then every month repay the loan.

One morning, I heard people on the boat say, “Last night, a small child fell off an upper deck and died.” And there was an old man who died too because he was too old and sick. They wrapped the bodies in blankets and threw them overboard during a Buddhist chant.

We almost went crazy on the boat for three and a half months. We always had to run and get food. There was so little to eat. We would get water. Drinking water was divided among the passengers and we would get water and bring it back to our family. When it was time to eat, they would give us some canned food, curry and sardines. We would bring it back to our family, and open it to eat. Sometimes, they would boil a big pot of rice porridge and we would bring it back to the family to eat. We were always running here and there. The Red Cross brought us the food.

We weren’t allowed on the land when our boat’s engine stopped working in Malaysian waters. When we were finally able to get on the land through refugee resettlement arrangements made by different countries, we went straight to the airport and flew to the U.S.

The kids ran around in the boat. When we slept, there was hardly any space to sleep. Your four cousins slept on the table. Back in Vietnam, we boarded on the first day of boarding the boat so we found a space with a table at the restaurant section of the boat. Your aunt, uncle, brother, you and I slept on the floor next to the table while your cousins slept on the table.

We were lucky to be on a big boat so we did not experience pirate attacks. It would be difficult for pirates to control such a big boat with about 2,450 refugees. Your other aunt was on a small boat and was attacked by pirates with guns. There were eight separate pirate attacks on your aunt’s boat. The pirates raped the women on the boat and robbed everyone on the boat. Your aunt was eight months pregnant at the time and had to sit next to the engine. She just lost her baby and was bleeding a lot, so they did not rape her. One man resisted when pirates were

raping his wife and they threw him overboard. Your aunt, uncle and your cousin had to stay in a refugee camp for months in Malaysia.

Staying in refugee camps was very difficult. It was very sad there. Some people had to stay for a year or longer before they could leave, because those refugees already settled on land, so people didn't care about them. However, we were in the middle of the ocean and our boat's engine stopped working so they had to take care of us first. The Malaysian government had insisted on towing our boat out to open waters and leaving us to our fate. Finally, various countries convinced the Malaysian government to delay towing our boat out into open waters until resettlement plans were made to take in the refugees. It took about seven months for everyone to leave our boat, "Hai Hong," to countries that allowed the refugees to resettle. If other countries didn't want the refugees from our boat, the U.S. would take them. We were lucky.

If the communists came a few days later, our family would have gone to the U.S. by plane from Vietnam. We were on the waiting list to go on a plane. Your paternal grandma left a few days before the communists came. We were on a waiting list and there were too many people. We would have had to go to the island where all the people had to go before they left Vietnam.

One of your uncles, your father's eldest brother, left on a small boat in 1975 after the fall of Saigon. Your uncle left with his sister, your aunt, and her husband. It was very difficult for them to leave. Your uncle tried to escape Vietnam three times before he was successful. He left on a small boat to Thailand. The government didn't know that your uncle, aunt and her husband were escaping. If they knew, they would have killed them. It was very dangerous. Only on the third try, they were able to escape.

At first, we arrived in Indonesian waters and they didn't let us stay. They made us leave, but they left us some food - big metal boxes of crackers. There seemed to be a box of crackers for everyone. We never had enough food. You were crying all day. You were not even three years old. You were a baby. There wasn't enough food for you. Every day we had a little bit of canned curry. There wasn't much; everyone was skinny. There was just enough for you to survive.

In Malaysia, the captain was very kind. You were coughing a lot. He got liquid cough medicine for you. I was crying. I said, "My daughter is coughing so much and I don't have medicine for her and I don't have any money to buy medicine." I had no money at all. At the time, the money we had left was already spent in Vietnam. I told him that I didn't have any money to buy medicine. The next time the captain came, he bought some liquid cough medicine and gave it to you. He was a very good guy. Do you remember when you were small, you always coughed? You were born about a month after the due date. You were very small and your lungs were weak; you coughed a lot. And when you were coughing so much on the boat and didn't have any medicine, I was very worried. I was crying and so the captain got me the cough medicine for you. I had a very hard time then.

Later that year, in 1979, I was in the U.S. and read on the news about a boat with Vietnamese refugees that landed on an island with no food and the boat wasn't working. A girl had died of starvation and the other refugees ate her body because they were starving and the mother of the

girl also had to eat her daughter's body in order to survive. When the people on the island died, their bodies dried up from the sun. The sun was very strong on the islands. The people ate the meat from the dead bodies the way they would eat dried meat or jerky. I think two people from the boat survived on the island before they were rescued.

*This interview will be published in Teresa Mei Chuc's poetry book, Song of Bones, forthcoming from Many Voices Press in 2016.*