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The Vietnamese Refugees Arrive in America

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Refugee movements are perceived as unpredictable and non-repeating events, when in reality these kinds of movements have occurred quite frequently in the recent past. According to a United Nations Refugee Report in 1969, over forty-five million persons have been denied residence in the land of their birth for various political and economic reasons since 1945. These refugee movements include the European Jews displaced in World War II and resettled thereafter, the Cubans displaced between 1958 and 1968, and the Ugandans displaced in the early seventies. The most recent large group of refugees consists of those Indochinese who fled in April 1975 when South Vietnam fell to the Viet Cong. Since that time approximately 145,000 Indochinese refugees have been admitted into the United States.

Acknowledging that refugee movements occur more often than is normally perceived (perhaps a kind of amnesia is at work to prevent us from thinking about these emotionally charged events), we should learn from previous ones how to achieve resettlement most expeditiously and thus ameliorate the amount of suffering involved. This article, which represents an effort in that endeavour, reviews the case of the Vietnamese refugees. In the article, the experience of the refugees will be documented in some detail, in an effort to counteract the tendency to see refugees only as immigrants, or, as time goes on, to lump them with the "needy"-without taking into account the unique characteristics of the refugee population, the events that brought them to their present situations, and the particular stresses that they have undergone.

During the summer of 1975, the Asian American Mental Health Research Center started a comprehensive study to monitor the adjustment of the Vietnamese refugees to their new environment in the United States. While the study is still going on, only the first portion of it will be reported here. In that part of the study, 59 heads of households and 202 refugees were interviewed at Camp Pendleton, California, a Marine Corps base where the refugees were temporarily housed. The results can be presented under four categories:

(1) Description of the refugees according to their sex, ages, educational backgrounds and occupations.

(2) Their evacuation experiences including information on when they left Vietnam, why they felt they had to leave their homeland, how they accomplished their exodus, and whether they had any regrets about leaving Vietnam.

(3) Experiences while in camp including what they liked and disliked about camp life, the daily activities they engaged in, and the kinds of leadership which existed in camp.

(4) Future prospects expected in the American society, such as employment and where they would go for resettlement help.

DESCRIPTION OF THE REFUGEES

In an important article, F. Kunz points out that there are significant differences between immigrants and refugees, and then proceeds to suggest some of the characteristics of refugees, those who are forced to leave their homelands. According to Kunz, a person's "involvement in various forms of acute displacements . . . (is) governed by that person's perception of events around him, his position vis-à-vis the historical force, his ideological stance, sentiments, and disposition as well as his origin, age, sex and education." Refugees can be expected according to Kunz to be (1) high to very high in masculinity, (2) active age groups, and (3) strongly biased toward higher education.

The Camp Pendleton group of 202 respondents was evenly divided as to sex.

THE VIETNAMESE REFUGEES ARRIVE IN AMERICA

By William T. Liu

and

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it included 102 women and 100 men. This result is in contrast to Kunz's prediction that more men will escape than women. However, when the heads of household were sampled, it was found that 80% were men and only 20% were women. Some of the women stated that their husbands wanted to join them which would make the proportion of households headed by men even larger.

The Vietnamese refugees were a young population, which is in accordance with Kunz's prediction that refugees will be in the active age groups. In the Camp Pendleton sample, the median age of heads of households was 37 years of age. For the group as a whole, the ages ranged from 3 months to 73 years; there were, however, only 2 percent who were older than 63 years old, while 56 percent were younger than 17.

The large number of children and women who were able to be brought out of Vietnam during the chaotic, confused days at the end of the war is evidence of the strength of the Vietnamese family and the efforts made to keep family groups intact during the evacuation.

The size of the families ranged from 2 to 29 individuals, with a median size of 6.7 members. A family often consisted of not only the immediate family but often included in-laws, siblings, cousins, and nieces and nephews as well. Another indication of strong families is the number of stable marriages among the refugees. Among the heads of household, there were 75.9% who were married, 17.2% who had never married, 3.4% who had lost their mate, and only 3.4% who were separated or divorced.

Refugees will tend to be well educated according to Kunz. In the Vietnamese refugees sample 72.4% had completed some high school education and 18.9% had completed some university work. As a group they tended to be from the upper middle class with a median expenditure of 50,000 piasters per month at a time when the average median expenditure for the country as a whole was 10,000 piasters. Though this figure is difficult to interpret due to inflation, these families possessed more material goods than did the average family. An automobile was enjoyed by 42.4% and 10% owned more than one car. Of the sample, 74.6% owned a television, 78.9% a refrigerator, and 81.4%, a sewing machine.

EVACUATION EXPERIENCES

Kunz differentiates between "anticipatory" and "acute" refugee movements. In the "anticipatory" kind of refugee movement, the refugee decides to leave his homeland and does so in an orderly and well-prepared way. In "acute" refugee movements, people are forced to leave because of massive military and political upheavals. They primarily desire to escape and do not have any knowledge as to where they are going or for how long.

The Vietnamese were caught up in the "acute" kind of refugee movement. Their mass escape was accomplished within the week of April 25 to May 1, 1975. In two days, April 29 and 30, 75% of the

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refugees departed from their homeland. The preparation time was very very short. There were 29% who responded that they had "no time at all" or "less than an hour" to prepare for their evacuation, 54% had an hour and 83% had less than a week to prepare to leave home.

Apparently, the military and political situation deteriorated so quickly in April 1975 that the refugees were caught off guard. Provinces fell rapidly and fighting engulfed the heavily populated areas. A complete news blackout added to the confusion. Seventy-three percent of the refugees stated that they had no alternative but to leave Vietnam. They gave two main reasons why they had to leave.

One reason was to escape from the Communist shelling. When the homes of the refugees came under attack, they felt they had no choice but to vacate and go to a "safer area, away from the firing." Their plan was to get away from the shelling, but often they would return home intermittently to check on things and to see if it was safe to return. They did not plan to leave their home permanently.

The second reason many respondents gave for leaving was because they feared Communist reprisals for their past activities. In the past the refugees had tangled with the Communists. Many had lived north of the 17th parallel prior to 1954 and had fled once before from the Communists. They could recount instances of crushing blows to their families such as, "My father was killed because he worked for the French. Our home was destroyed."

Refugees who felt they would be subject to Communist reprisals were often military personnel, those who worked with the police, those employed by Americans, and Catholics. Statements made include: "Because I was in the ARVN (there would be a) threat to my life during the changeover," "Being an educated, high ranking officer attached to the police state I was afraid I would die at Communist hands," "My husband is a high ranking civil servant, trained in the U.S. and working with Americans in Vietnam. We were afraid of reprisal and death," and Catholics have coexisted with the Communists before and (we) know we would not be spared."

About 22% of the refugees did consider remaining in Vietnam. Their thoughts included hiding, moving to new locations where no one knew them, and committing suicide. They eventually did leave their homeland simply because they wanted to avoid the shelling.

Where could the refugees find safety? More than half of the refugees chose the United States as a place to resettle. However, many others wanted to find a haven close to their home, so that they could return when the fighting was over. They chose destinations nearby and in Southeast Asia. Over a third of them had no country of preference. They just wanted to avoid the shelling: "Did not think of any country. Only wanted to go offshore to avoid shelling," and "No country. Did

not even think of any nation when aboard the ship."

Some Refugees made deliberate plans to get away from Vietnam. Those who were in the military, worked for American companies, had high positions in Vietnam, or knew relatives or friends in the right places were able to get out of Vietnam easily. Refugees in these situations made the following kinds of statements. "was allowed to be evacuated because I worked for a U.S. company," "My brother, a colonel in the ARVN, took care of the paperwork for the entire family to leave Vietnam," and . . . "I had all (the) papers. (My) daughter got the papers for me, took me to the TSN airport, got inside help from (a) brother, who was a security agent for MACV, then got processed out."

Some of those without the proper connections to leave easily became quite desperate. They were "ready to pay any price, suffer any hardship, even at the risk of death." Some refugees were successful in bribing their way out of Vietnam. Others did suffer death. For instance, "I saw people jamming the door (of an airplane) and women and children could not get on. The shelling came closer and then the plane took off with people still hanging at the door, and then . . ." Tears followed as this woman recalled this dreadful, unforgettable situation.

American ships were waiting offshore to take refugees to safety. It was not easy, however, for the refugees to reach and board these ships. One refugee reported that he had "no car to take the family to the harbor, (so he) used a motorbike and took many trips back and forth." Those who had the easiest time reaching American ships were those who had access to boats. Commercial fishing families could depart at anytime and often "had a boat ready stacked with food and fuel." Others rented boats.

Some of the refugees were then swept up in the chaotic panic and never made a conscious decision to leave their homeland; they said that they only boarded ships to get away from the shelling. One man stated that he saw "people on the street running. He and his brother . . . followed the crowd. They were picked up. All they had at that time were the clothes they wore, absolutely nothing else." Others were not even aware that it was an evacuation. "Friends wanted me to come along for fun. I did not know it was an evacuation," and "I saw people rushing to get evacuated. I joined them and did not know we were going to the U.S. until we arrived in the Philippines."

So it can be seen that the refugees were victims of the situation. They did not have any opportunity to plan for their relocation but were in danger and had very little control over the situation. Therefore it is understandable that many of them would express regrets about their leaving. Many were bothered by the separation from their families, the loss of their fortunes, and the separation from their homeland. Some refugees were dreaming of returning home: "Had to flee against my wishes. Hope one day will have the chance to go back home," and "Do not part . . . forever from my native land . . . did not expect to come to America."

CAMP LIFE

Several camps were set up as temporary shelters for the refugees with the intention of releasing them to an American or Third country sponsor as quickly as possible. Camp Pendleton was opened first on April 30 with just twenty-four hours to prepare for the arrival of 20,000 refugees. Fort Chaffee in Arkansas was opened to accommodate 24,000 refugees and Eglin Air Force Base in Florida accepted 5,000 in May. Indiantown Gap in Pennsylvania was the last camp to open.

At Camp Pendleton, the 24-hour prep-

(Continued from Page 7)

aration time forced the Marine Corps to work around the clock to establish tent areas, install plumbing to bring water to the tented areas, bring in food, and establish a security system. The refugees arrived on the California beaches in the middle of a record cold night with only light jackets. This represented another step of the long fear-filled journey from Vietnam to America. The Journey took an average of fifty days, with a range of 3 days to 122 days. So even though 93% of the refugees left Vietnam between April 25 and 30, only 20% of them arrived in Camp Pendleton in May. Another 67.8% arrived in June and July.

Living in a camp which provided for all the basic needs left the refugees with a lot of free time. They spent their time waiting in food lines, studying English, and in leisure activities. About four hours daily was spent learning English because they realized that it would be essential as they prepared to find jobs and to adjust to lives outside of camp. They felt that adjustment to the American way of life would be easier for those who were able to speak English.

What the refugees liked about camp included American generosity, lack of worrying about the basic necessities of life, and the presence of fellow Vietnamese. More than half of the respondents indicated there was nothing they liked about camp: "I do not like anything, on the contrary, I am very depressed in this camp." Others were more resigned: "Since this is only a temporary shelter, we can accept and endure any hardships. No complaints."

The refugees' dislikes about camp life included food unsuitable to their taste, lack of convenience and privacy, the treatment from some Americans, the behavior of fellow Vietnamese, often as a result of the clashing lifestyles of different social classes, and the fact that they were restricted to the camp.

Yet the refugees appeared to adjust to the camp situation quite well. When asked, "During the past week in this camp, did you have the feeling that anyone in your family or someone else living with you now had a disturbing problem?", "No" was the response of 76% or 157 out of the 202 respondents, which left only 22% of people living with them were facing problems. Those troubled worried about sponsorship, family strains and fights, family members still in Vietnam, and health concerns.

The refugees were next asked to whom they would turn to for assistance in solving their problems. About a third of them would ask camp authorities and staff members for help. They stressed the characteristics "competent" and "responsible" in the individuals they would seek out. They felt they could rely most on themselves, their family and their long-time friends from Vietnam.

Vietnamese leadership in camp was assessed by the question, "Do you think that there are some Vietnamese people in camp that you can look to for leadership, that is, to speak for the others and to get things done?" The majority (59%) did not know of any leadership in camp; 27% stated that there were no leaders in camp, and only 13% could name some leaders. The refugees for the most part felt that they couldn't trust leaders anymore since the leadership had handled the evacuation so poorly. It was felt that they were corrupt and greedy. Now they insisted that the leaders prove their capabilities. They could rely only on "spiritual leadership, no other kinds."

FUTURE PROSPECTS

After camp, sponsorship to begin a "new life" was the next step for the Vietnamese refugees. The months of July and August were filled with pressure from

Congress to speed up the sponsorship program. This step was not always welcomed by some refugees because there existed a fear of the uncertain future and reception in American communities, and camp provided a sense of security. However, all camps closed on schedule: Elgin Air Force Base on September 15, Camp Pendleton on October 31, Indiantown Gap on December, and Fort Chaffee on December 31, 1975. On January 1, 1976 responsibilities for the Indo-China Refugee Resettlement Project passed from the Inter-Agency Task Force to the Department of Health, Education and Welfare Sponsors — Individual families, congregations, and other groups — could select refugees. Sponsorship meant assuming responsibility to provide shelter and food until the refugee could be self-sufficient, provide clothing and pocket money if necessary, help in finding employment and schools for the children, and in providing ordinary medical costs or medical insurance.

Sponsorship was set up to encourage a dispersal rather than a concentration of the Vietnamese refugee population. This concept was favored by those states who had expected to receive many refugees.

A number of voluntary agencies (VOLAGS) were contacted by the government to handle the resettlement in the United States. They were: United Hias, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, Tolstoy Foundation, International Rescue Committee, Church World Services, American Fund for Czechoslovak Refugees, United States Catholic Conference, Travelers Aid International Social Service, and American Council for Nationalities Service.

Resettlement agencies operated offices in each of the four refugee camps. The government gave each VOLAG \$5 for each refugee placed, but no guidelines for use of this money was made. Some times the refugees were given a small amount of cash at the time of departure and transitional allowance. Sometimes money was retained by the agency for follow-ups or continuation of services as support. Overhead costs could be taken from the money.

Each refugee had the opportunity selecting a resettlement agency. For those who had no preference, an agency was assigned. The selection of the agency which would handle the sponsorship was most critical decision, although the refugees were not aware that the agency policies for determining the abilities of sponsors to fulfill their financial and moral responsibilities, or for processing and financial assistance were not uniform, and that each agency set its own policy.

The majority of refugees who had sponsors were interviewed by case workers to determine their job skills and preferences. Then sponsors and refugees were matched on the basis of availability of sponsors and jobs.

In an assessment of the resettlement program, a spokesman for one voluntary resettlement agency said publicly that Vietnamese refugees represented the easiest group to resettle that they had countered in the past 30 years.

Returning now to the Camp Pendleton Survey, it was found that at the time of interviews, only one-third of the refugees had possibilities of sponsorship, meaning that the majority had no sponsorship prospects. For assistance in resettlement half of the refugees stated that they would seek help from the church and clergy. This finding is congruent with the fact that half of the sample were Catholics, various religious groups were given first priority to assist in the relocation of refugees. It is interesting to note that governmental agencies were only slightly preferred over private sponsors, a fact which may suggest the lack of inter-

mentality" among the refugees.

In terms of their job prospects, about a fourth of those questioned did not know what kind of job they might perform in the United States, a fourth thought they would be doing jobs similar to that which they performed in Vietnam, a fourth wanted to seek different kinds of work to that they had done in the past, and a fourth did not plan to work for various reasons (they were students or housewives). Those who wanted to do similar work to that in the past cited new qualifications they needed: English language skills and an upgrading of their technical skills. The Vietnamese were realistic in knowing they needed to have further schooling and training even for similar fields of employment.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the refugees from Indo-China must be viewed in terms of a number of unusual circumstances. And their presence offers valuable lessons to the government and to the peoples of the United States.

First, in spite of the beliefs of many politicians and community workers to the contrary, refugees and new immigrants differ in the problems they face in their initial adjustment in a host society. Refugees do not make adequate preparations nor are they sufficiently motivated to make the difficult adjustments necessary. Their new lives may be totally and permanently affected by their initial handicaps as refugees. There is ample evidence in recent human migration history to support this statement.

Second, the scattered sponsorship program may have been well intentioned, but the net outcome has had irreparable effects on the individuals, particularly if sponsors had, from the very beginning, exploitative motivations. The initial ill effects may have permanently damaged the refugees' feelings towards the American people and towards those who really meant to lend them a helping hand. At the

same time, the scattered resettlement has by and large destroyed the opportunity for refugees to establish a viable community life of their own.

Third, in the beginning of the Evacuation plan, the selection of evacuees was based on a single criterion—namely, the most vulnerable segment of the population. This meant that persons who worked for the American military and persons who were CIA collaborators became the selected evacuees. Because of their particular background, many of the refugees harbor strong suspicions toward each other. Cohesion among the refugees is still based on their kinship lines, which, among other things, made it difficult, if not impossible, to form a cohesive ethnic community in which mutual-help groups are given a viable chance to continue and survive, in spite of the various efforts among service providers to foster these activities among refugees.

Finally, there is an urgent need for both the federal and local governments to carefully re-examine their programs of assistance, including job re-training, housing, bilingual education, welfare, and so forth, to see if such programs, which were designed and established primarily for the inner city poor and under-educated populations, are in fact suitable to take care of the refugees. It seems that the whole concept of human services needs to be reexamined when it is applied to refugee populations.

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