THU'S REFUGEE STORY

My story begins way before I was born. Digging into the past, I realised it was a rabbit hole that doesn't stop. So, I'll begin in 1969.

The North, known as the Viet Cong (the Communists), had broken through the north/south border and were slaughtering civilians and pillaging village to village. Our village, Ban Me Thuot, was the main town of Dak Lak province, closest to the border and the first line of defence. My uncles, Bac Muc and Bac Duong, brothers to my mother, were part of Neighbourhood Watch for our village. On one of their reconnaissance missions on the edge of our village they were caught and shot dead. Their bodies were taken back to the front yard of our home.

When South Vietnam fell to communism in 1975, there was a hunt throughout South Vietnam to purge men and women who the regime believed were betrayers and enemies. In our village, there were whispers of so-and-so being imprisoned, interrogated and sent to a re-education camp. Many kept their heads down and their mouths shut. But there were those who were low, weak and opportunistic, betraying their community. They turned into informants and guards for the Regime.

My father was a soldier of the South. My parents knew my father's life was in danger if they found out. Any documentation of proof was burnt, and the Badge of Honour medals was buried. After "Ban Me Thuot Spring Offensive of 1975", the South government did nothing to help fallen villages flee. They were preoccupied with saving themselves. Like many, my family was trapped in what was known as the "1km Gate", all exit ways out of Ban Me Thuot were barricaded and guarded.

Leaving behind their eldest son and daughter with Grandmother, my parents tried to leave on a Honda motorcycle, with my mother holding onto their third child, Chuong, who was barely a month old, hoping to get to Nha Trang and board an evacuation plane to America. Arriving at the "1km Gate" my parents saw bodies laying on the road. Those who dared to flee were shot dead along this gate of hell. My parents turned back home.

The oppression was severe. The Communists had stripped us, the productive people, the farmers of all resources, land, property and food. In 1977, my mother gave birth to twins, there was no food or medicine. Life was hard.
And the oppression would turn neighbour against neighbour. The suffering turned the weak into oppressors and informants: "rather you than me" as the saying goes.

My family were coffee farmers, productive and respected in the province. Our wealth was self-made, not given. There was a man name Chat in our village who turned informant and guard and knew of our wealth. In 1978 he ordered my eldest uncle, Bac Tho, to be imprisoned. My grandma was so enraged she chased him down the street, hitting and cursing the informant to the point of shame. Three days later my uncle was released and he immediately fled to Ba Ria, Vung Tau, south of Saigon, where he stayed to commission the building of three secret boats. In the first boat, Bac Tho sent his children off. They were lucky enough to be picked up by a Canadian humanitarian ship and now live in Toronto. In 1979, my uncle, Bac A, joined Bac Tho in Ba Ria to help with the second boat. Bac A sent his children in this boat, and they were fortunate to be picked up by a German ship. They went to live in Germany, and years later moved to America.

As the Communist power grew in the south and became more organised, building the third boat took longer and was harder to keep secret. My uncle had to pay bribes in gold to avoid being snitched.

Finally, in 1981, the last boat was ready. My father organised a goods truck to take us from Ban Me Thuot, 360 km south, to Ba Ria in Vuong Tau. It took us two days and nights, stopping and moving only when it was

safe to do so. We lived in Ba Ria for 5-6 months waiting for bribes to take effect and clear the path for us to leave. It was August of that year, when I was eight months in my mother's womb, that we crept, snuck, and crawled all night through paddy fields, mud and darkness for what felt like miles to my mother. There were eight of us in all: my father, my mother, my three brothers and my three sisters. Eight breaths remained silent, as it was a matter of life or death.

Both uncles, Bac Tho and Bac An, were waiting for us on the boat. Bac An had prepared water and food for our journey. The boat was nine metres long with the capacity for 50 passengers. As we got closer, we could see what my mother calls "Can Me". Can means "to time", and Me means "no money". Can Me were opportunists who didn't pay to be on the boat but took advantage of the delicate situation, and hijacked the boat. They threw over all the water and food that was allocated for us to make space. My mother was frightened at the sight of the boat barely floating with over 120 people, 70 over capacity.

Leaving Vietnam behind us, we headed across unknown waters towards fate, land and humanity. Upon reaching the deep ocean, our boat was battered with waves and turbulence. Waves kept splashing over the sides of the boat, and the men were endlessly scooping up and emptying out buckets of water over the side just to stay afloat.

My mother became terribly seasick and went into labour in the early hours of the morning. During the scramble of bodies climbing on the boat, the medical bag that had been prepared for my Mum was misplaced, so my father lit a flame to search for scissors to cut the umbilical cord. The light soon caught the attention of the spotters on Con Son Island. Shots were fired at our boat, and we quickly snuffed out the light and had to carry on fumbling in the darkness. A nurse called Co Lan helped deliver me one month premature. I came out motionless, with no sound and no breath. A jungle machete was used to cut the umbilical cord and both mother and child were covered in blood, but there was no fresh water to clean us up. Bac An's wife said, "For sure this girl is dead". My father took me from my mother's arms and went up to the deck. Just as he was about to throw my body over, I cried out for the first time. Perhaps, G-d was taking his holy time swiping left on Soul Tinder, until he found me and kept me for this life.

After sailing south for another three days and three nights, no breast milk came from my mother and no land was in sight: hunger was our pain. The men began to squabble amongst themselves, scared and angry that we were sailing to our deaths. Some wanted to go west towards Thailand, but Bac An was warned by our fisherman relative, Bac Ri, to stay clear of Thai waters for fear of pirates. Thailand and Malaysia at the time had a "Push Policy" which did not to allow Vietnamese refugees to come to shore. The monsoon storms came and many boats were shipwrecked. Thailand's coastline remains a gravesite for many Vietnamese refugees.

As the sun was setting one day, the men spotted an object off in the distance. They steered towards it and found an American oil rig with a tanker and helicopter pad. Initially, the captain of the oil rig did not want to get involved. Co Lan, the nurse could speak English and French. She persuaded him to at least help the newborn and the mother. Though he was sceptical at first, he went onto our boat to see for himself the blood-covered newborn. Compassion flooded his soul. He immediately brought the mother and child up for care but left everyone else on the boat.

The Captain had ordered his helicopter to bring a doctor from Jakarta, Indonesia. My mother and I were washed, cleaned and fed. Back at the boat, the people were begging to be allowed onto the rig and started scaling up the sides. The captain gave in and allowed them to get cleaned and fed. Many felt they were in paradise.
That night a monsoon storm came and violently smashed our little boat to pieces. Many believed G-d was watching over us. The storm lingered for two days. When it finally died down and the ocean was calm, the captain sailed us all to the closest Indonesian refugee camp on the island of Kuku in the Anambas Islands.

Mother and I stayed at the makeshift hospital. On the second day, the captain of the oil rig came to visit Mother and me and brought us tins of biscuits. Mother was so appreciative and cried. She hoped he would be my Godfather and help us with citizenship to America, but he politely refused.

There we stayed for ten days, to deal with paperwork and get vaccinated. My parents tried to obtain an Indonesian birth certificate for me, but the authorities denied it. Food, clothes and medicine were plentiful since humanitarian aid was being delivered daily. Our shelter, hospital, church and temple were made of sticks and tarpaulins. For Westerners, this may sound like horrible standards, but considering the danger Vietnam posed to our lives, my mother's memories of Kuku Island were happy ones.

The humanitarian ship that came past regularly picked us up from Kuku Island and took our family to Pulau Galang Island, the largest refugee camp in Indonesia. While at Galang, we were given everything we needed, including a small allowance. Having a large family meant that we had plenty of rice and tinned food, and we would sell our leftovers to buy fresh vegetables.

My older siblings went to school, and they were fed well there, which helped us save more food for swapping. My father worked as a writer for the Vietnamese newspaper on Galang for extra money, and it was while he worked translating English news articles into Vietnamese that he came across information about Australia and its open policy to Vietnamese refugees. While everyone else was hoping to go to America, my father saw that there were opportunities to work in Melbourne, so he decided to apply for Australia instead. We were in Galang for about three months before we got approval to move to Australia.

We were then sent by boat from Galang to Singapore, where the last of our paperwork was processed and stamped. Finally, we boarded a plane bound for Melbourne. When we landed, buses were waiting to take us to Midway Immigration Detention Centre in Maribyrnong. There we met a nun, who we called Ba Su Bong Bong (meaning Bubble because she was plump). My mother giggles when she remembers her, saying she was lovely but strict. She took us in and spoilt us. My siblings loved the taste of butter, and she would often tell them off for eating too much, saying it would make us fat and have high cholesterol.

The nun introduced us to Mr and Mrs Collins. They were beautiful, everyday average Australians, doing G-d's work, helping us and many others integrate into Australian life. I remember as a little girl going to the funeral of Mrs Collins, the church was flooded with so many Vietnamese immigrants who were touched by her loving kindness. Mr and Mrs Collins weren't activists going out on the streets screaming. They were quiet and gentle people who just did what they did and gave without a fuss. These are the people who make the biggest impacts on lives and the world. Thank G-d for making these kinds of people who give meaning and hope to humanity.
Thu is a member of our Kehilat Nitzan community.