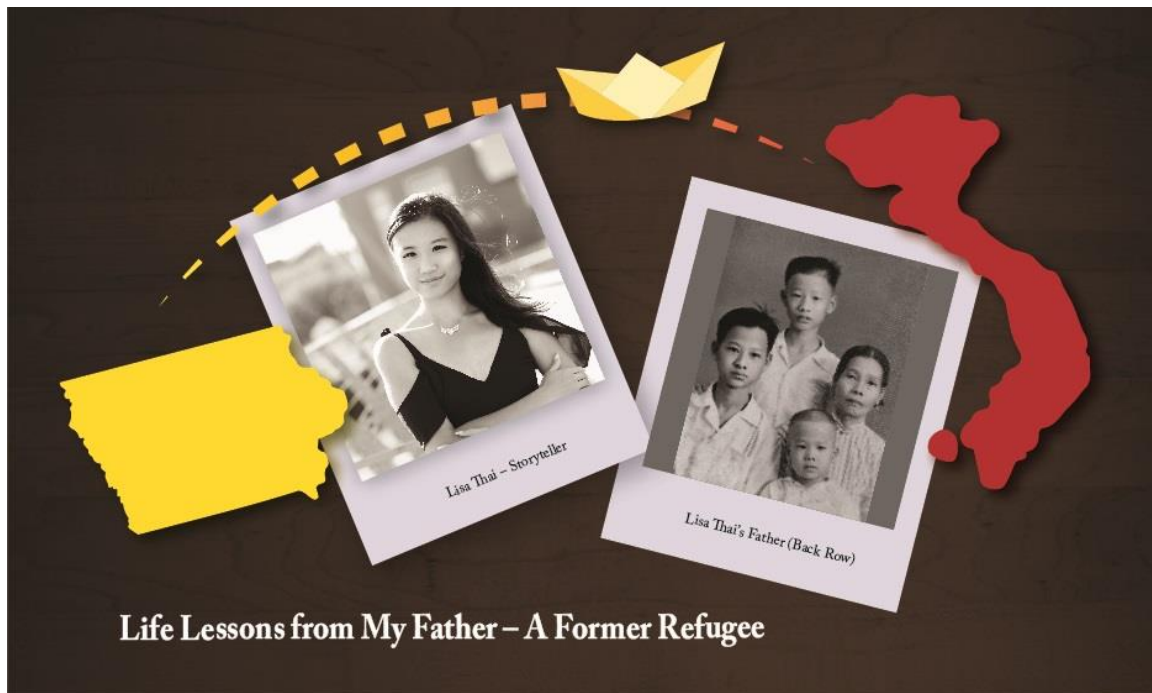


Life Lessons from My Father – A Former Refugee



Story by Lisa Thai, daughter of ethnically-Chinese immigrant parents from Vietnam, born and raised in Des Moines. Lisa is a first-generation college graduate of the University of Iowa now working as a financial advisor in Des Moines.

This is dedicated to my Chinese father who grew up in Vietnam and later escaped to the United States in search of a better life for his family. This year, he turns 77 and offers this wise advice - ***“Getting older, one should not think too much, only wish for good health and a happy body and mind.”***

About six years ago, my dad started writing his personal story in Chinese – I am still unsure if he wanted to write it down for us or whether he sought to share it with other people. Or, perhaps he was afraid the memories would fade and be lost as he aged. He’s never been one to talk about or dwell in the past. But when he did share some details, they seemed like foggy memories that were difficult to piece together.

Before my dad wrote down his story on paper, he told us little bits and pieces - like the story of the two ships leaving port to flee invading Vietnamese Communist soldiers, those ships breaking down, and then getting rescued by a Malaysian oil rig. But, he never started from the beginning or finished the tale of how he got to America – until he wrote it down. I know there are many gaps in the story, because no one’s life-story can fit

neatly onto 13 pages. Yet, I believe he wants to leave something behind – a testament as a survivor who endured a great many hardships and pain.

With the help of my parents' friend who transcribed my father's story – the characters and landscape came into focus and the details larger than life – like vivid paint strokes of painting depicting a total picture of the circumstances and consequences that led him to be the man he is today. Tangentially, I came to understand and appreciate how his life experiences and choices (or lack of them) shaped who I am – and inherited traits that will inevitably be passed down to my future children.

I will tell them everything I know about my parents and ancestors - it's important they know where they come from, their roots and the mantle of our heritage that falls to them to carry on. By knowing, they may fully appreciate the immigrant struggle of generations that came before them.

Before I turned five, we lived in a duplex on 19th Street near MLK Parkway & University Avenue in Des Moines. It was in a run-down neighborhood, and our ceiling would always leak when the upstairs condo ran their water. Later, I lived in a three-bedroom small ranch home near Windsor heights, with my parents, two siblings and grandmother. My parents chose the house because it was an easy walk to my elementary school. We had one car, and dad took it to work the night-shift.

Growing up, I didn't see a lot of my dad who worked late nights and got home after we left for school. By the time we returned, he was sleeping – resting up for his next shift. He was the sole provider and bread-winner for the family. He taught us to work hard. My mom stayed home to raise us and was around 24/7. Growing up, if we didn't eat our food, my mom emphasized that dad never had the kind of bounty he provided us at each meal. We know not to waste food. Because we never had a lot of money, we were very frugal and always looked for bargain deals - only buying necessities.

From his translated story, I learned my father was born in the fall of 1942 in Saigon, Vietnam to Chinese parents - a large Chinese population was present in Vietnam prior to the war, mainly Hoa (aka "overseas Chinese"). Prostitution, gambling, alcoholism, unemployment and opium was prevalent in the country at the time. Doctors were lacking. So, when he became ill at age two, his mother relied heavily on herbal medicine and cooling tea to save his life. His father was a carpenter who built furniture, beds, closets, etc. But, he worked, too, hard and lost his life much younger than expected and left behind my grandmother - a widow with five children. My dad was only ten-years old when his father passed away.

From that point on, life was riddled with hardships. My grandmother sold syrup to make a living and pay off accumulating debts. Schooling required money - my father was the only one of his siblings to complete 7th grade. At 16, he became a plumber, but because work was scarce, he sold furniture, reconstructed stoves, repaired bikes and built suitcases instead.

But the most formidable challenge confronted the family in 1954, when South Vietnam elected a president in favor of overthrowing the communist regime in the north. North Vietnam was supported by China supplying food and supplies and the Soviet Union supplying weapons. Meanwhile, the United States sent troops and equipment to aid the South Vietnamese.

Shortly after New Year's Day of 1968, the North's offensive reached Saigon. And while it wasn't looking good for the South, they didn't succeed. Short on manpower, the South instituted a draft; anyone who was of age had to join or face arrest. His little brother was drafted and soon lost his life after his boat was hit by an artillery shell while rescuing fellow countrymen.

A cease fire negotiated by the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) nations (United States, South Korea, Australia, Philippines, New Zealand, Thailand, Khmer Republic [later overthrown by Khmer Rouge], Kingdom of Laos and Republic of China [Taiwan]) lasted a short while. Soon after, the US lost allies in the fight against the North and devised a new strategy in which B-52 bombers bombarded the 17th Parallel that separated North and Central Vietnam, but later halted due to humanitarian reasons. The North leveraged this decision in its favor and was then able to invade the South. The war's end was soon near; the North invaded and the sound of screams and guns lasted what seemed an eternity for my father and my remaining relatives.

They tried escaping by boat. Travel by water was arduous and hazardous. On one occasion, the boat capsized and the tide kept working against them. For eight hours, they evaded capture, but supplies were diminishing. It was futile. Finding themselves on a new boat filled with other refugees, access to potable water was becoming critical. With water in short supply, the engine stopped working. All seemed lost until rain came down to quench their thirst, but it wasn't enough.

These continuous reversals of fortune played on as a Japanese merchant vessel came near, but the sped off in the other direction. A smaller boat of refugees that had been traveling with them travelled ahead and tried to find rescuers for my father and the other passengers. But, profiteers jilted them with false promises.

Meanwhile, back on my father's boat, people were sending SOS signals with mirrors, but to no avail. He and others continued to repair the engine, and they reconnected the shaft being held together by wires. It worked, but the boat moved very slowly. After a few days, they cast off cargo and oil drums to lighten the load. It was pitch dark when they eventually come across a Malaysian oil rig. Many shed their clothes and lit them on fire to be seen. By dawn, they were all rescued and in the nick of time. The boat sank into the ocean as the last person disembarked.

From there, they were taken to an island where many refugees were encamped temporarily. The first day on the island, it rained and many got sick. Next to nothing was provided; refugees built their own shelter with primitive tools, and there was a hole in the ground that served as a toilet. Food was provided by the United Nations and Red Cross,

but it was minimal and often rotten. For the majority of the time, my industrious father and others gathered food from other places and sources. Drinking water was provided – water for everything else, like showering, cleaning, etc. was done in a nearby stream where the water turned black. Sanitary conditions were bad throughout the camp and sickness was rampant.

Their lives continued like this for some time. Countries accepting refugees would come every two weeks - but it was on a first-come, first-serve basis. Countries had restrictive selection criteria: England only wanted English speakers; Australia wanted skilled and educated workers like nurses and mechanics. Sweden, Italy, Holland, and Switzerland accepted very few refugees. Nearly a year later, my father's wait ended. He and my relatives had applied for sponsorship in Canada and America. They were told Canada had already met its annual quota. But, a church in the United States, in the state of Iowa, was willing to sponsor them.

In December 1979, they traveled eight hours from the refugee camp to a suburb of Malaysia. From there, health examinations and vaccinations were administered, and they were taken to Hong Kong by a commercial flight. The next and most life-changing flight was to Seattle where they officially became immigrants of the United States.

The rest, as they say, is history... I definitely think as a first-born, first-generation American, raised completely immersed in Chinese culture, I have strong, deep roots in it. Ethnically, I'm 100 percent Chinese, and I don't quite see myself as Vietnamese - I don't speak any Vietnamese and I don't know the culture or traditions.

As US immigration policy dominates today's headlines, I think I have a skewed view of America, as I know what my parents had to go through with immigration to get to America. I can sympathize with refugees and other displaced people in the world right now. Whereas, the average American many times removed from their foreign-born relatives and ancestors might not have the same empathy. This is not a condemnation; I understand they aren't close to these issues – they haven't experienced it themselves or know of someone close to them going through these types of hardships and suffering. But this is a choice – illumination may be only one conversation or volunteer opportunity away.

In order to survive, my parents and relatives lost everything and forged a new life in a strange land. With new-found resiliency, they made Iowa home. Only bad memories are what was left in Vietnam. It's doubtful that my parents have completely adapted to American culture, but they know the day-to-day operations and are good, productive citizens. They leave it to my siblings and me to carry on our heritage and their stories. I don't plan to let them down.