Vietnamese American Oral History Project, UC Irvine

Narrator: TRUONG LE CHI
Interviewer: Thuy Vo Dang
Date: January 31, 2013
Location: Garden Grove, California
Sub-collection: Thuy Vo Dang Oral Histories
Length of Interview: 01:12:57

FIELD NOTES

I met Ms. Truong Le Chi through a colleague who works at OCAPICA (Orange County Asian Pacific Islander Community Alliance). After the VAOHP Community Reception on October 24, 2012 this colleague found many individuals with compelling life stories for me to interview. Ms. Le Chi, in particular, was very interested in sharing her experiences. We set up the interview at her home in Garden Grove. When I arrived I noticed her well-kept yard and fruit trees. She had been cooking and prepared us breakfast, complete with Vietnamese coffee which she graciously served on a pretty cup and saucer. She had “trung op la” (eggs sunny-side up) with a toasted baguette ready for me. After we ate and conversed about our mutual interest in preserving community history, she showed me to a sitting room, which was a nicely renovated patio. The room was comfortable with an oversized couch and coffee table where I set up my equipment. Besides the furniture, she also had an assortment of orchids, which she explained were plants she would nurture back to blooms. During the interview, she pulled out family albums that she had meticulously organized over the years and she also had papers printed out detailing her and her family’s experiences as refugees from Vietnam.

Our interview went smoothly for the most part, as she was a very animated story-teller. The crutch I noticed was her continuous references to articles she had written and submitted to writing contests in the Vietnamese language media. She would tell me to read more about a particular experience rather than elaborate during the interview. She also had a tendency to laugh during parts of the interview that were especially sensitive. For example, when she talked about her husband’s death, she giggled sporadically. I began to see a pattern of nervous laughter while recounting difficult experiences. It was not until parts of the interview when she talked about her children—the difficult choice she made to give 5 of them up for adoption with international adoption agencies—that she choked up and cried.

When she spoke of her eldest son, she seemed proud and somewhat in awe of his accomplishments. We agreed that I should definitely interview him (and possibly her other son who lives in Irvine). Her eldest had stayed behind while his siblings were sent to the United States and Australia. He escaped as an adult to Cambodia, married a local woman, and then escaped Southeast Asia by boat. He finished his education and became a dentist.

At the end of our interview, she gave me her son’s contact information and even set up the interview for us at his home in Fountain Valley. Ms. Le Chi lives alone and spends a great deal of her time taking classes on flower arrangement, art, or other new hobbies. She is also active with a religious organization and has hosted meetings for her group at home. Before I left her home, she gave me a tour of her backyard where she had an abundance of orange, guava, and persimmon trees ripe with fruit. I snapped her photos next to her trees and then departed.

*Weeks later (after my interview with her son, Hoang Dai Hai), Ms. Le Chi called me over because she had baked pate chaud and wanted to send some home for my family.