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Interview with May Lor Vang

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Hmong Oral History Project - 2002

Interview with May Lor Vang
(Tou's grandmother)

Interviewer: Tou Thao
Translator/Transcriber: Peter Chou Vang
Editor: Paul Hillmer

-What was your life like before the war? (:10 sec)

I was married during the start of the war. I lived in Poa-Ing. I moved to another place for about 10 years before the war started. When the war began, we heard that Kong Le was coming our way. One day, while we were steaming some rice, we saw many soldiers marching into our village. We did not know what to do, so we fed them and they went on their way. The soldiers continued into the village of Von-Via. It took them half a day to march out of our village. When we heard that the Vietnamese were winning, we decided to run. The Vietnamese were at Pong-Dong and they were fighting everywhere. We moved to San-Tong, then to Moun-Pieng, then to Long Cheng. After Long Cheng we decided to move to Pa-Kaig and lived there for 10 years. The Vietnamese came once again and we moved to another area. It was our first glimpse of the tough Vietnamese soldiers. The Vietnamese held on strongly to the territories that they won. Once the Vietnamese won the war we moved to Thailand and lived there for three years. We didn't live in the refugee camp, but in a Thai village called Asolow. (3:12)

-Did you like living in Thailand? (3:18)

Since we were refugees of war, it took us one month and 24 days for the Thais to accept and to feed us. There were lots of Hmong where we first stayed. When we first arrived, there were 6,000 Hmong at Asolow already. We stayed in No-Kai for a year. Some of the Hmong moved to Na-Pong and from Na-Pong to Vinai. We decided to sneak into Vinai, and we stayed there for another year before coming to the United States. (4:04)

-Where were you when you first heard about coming to the US? (4:11)

When we were in Thailand. (4:37)

-Can you explain about Laos, when you started to run away from the Vietnamese, how did you feel? (4:45)

The day we fled to Thailand was when the Vietnamese overran Long Cheng. We heard their military vehicles coming, so we hired some taxis to take us to Vientiane (Capital of Laos). (5:17)

-At that time, what did you carried with you? (5:20)

I could not carry anything with me. I carried two sets of cloths and two pots of rice. We tried to find food wherever we stopped to rest. I left everything else back at our house. I was very sad that I left everything behind. There was little food, and just the money that we had with us. (5:59)

-At that time, were you scared about what was going to happen to you? (6:10)

I was too worried to be scared. We just wanted to follow Gen. Vang Pao wherever he went, because all my sons were still serving as soldiers for him. There was no warning about the fall of Laos to the Communists. All we were told was that Vang Pao left. At

first there were just Hmong who tried to convince us not to go to Thailand [Hmong who though it was better to stay behind and live under Communist rule]. The Vietnamese were still scattered around. The Hmong who wanted to stay stayed, and for us who wanted to go, we went. Sometimes, if we couldn't get any taxi then we just walked. We just wanted to follow our leader [Vang Pao]. (7:23)

-So you had no thought of staying in Laos at that time? (7:25)

I had no feelings or thoughts of staying behind. We knew that the Vietnamese were taking over our villages and we could not go back. We traveled for one month but we could not catch up with General Vang Pao. [He had flown into Thailand already.] The Vietnamese took over the village of Hang-Her. We walked another nine days before the road was blocked. They put a rope over the road and threatened to kill any one of us who crossed over it. Our Vang clan crossed over the rope and they started to shoot at us. There were many who were killed and there were those who survived. I was still far behind the roadblock when I heard the shooting. Someone told me that it was too dangerous to go forward, so we decided to stay back. Our father was very sick at that time, so we tried to ask for some medicines from some of the Hmong leaders who were still in charge of their villages. We stayed in Laos for another month waiting for my father to get better. It took us all day to get a taxi to take us to Vientiane. My father almost died on the way there. When we reached Vientiane, we were welcomed by my grandmother who lived there. There were many Hmong refugees in Vientiane. I bribed the Laotian boatmen 100,000 kip to take me across the Mekong into Thailand. (10:16)

-Did Vietnamese soldiers harass you? (10:20)

No, actually they were scared of us also. They guarded the roads but they did not seem to care about who was staying or leaving. Some of our ex-Hmong leaders who stayed behind did not want us to leave. They told us that the country was getting better and that we should stay with them. We did not believe them. Once we were in Thailand, we filed the proper papers for us to stay, and we stayed in Thailand for 2 years. (11:41)

-How did you know that you were coming over to America? (11:45)

We did not really know. We knew that General Vang Pao was coming over so we decided to follow him. We were given the option of staying in Laos or coming over to America. We had nothing left in Laos. We left all our villages, farms and livestock. We wanted to follow our leader wherever he went. We were allowed to come over because the men in our family served as soldiers for General Vang Pao [and the CIA]. (13:36)

-Are you sad that there were many who could not come to America? (13:43)

Yes I was, but there was nothing I could do. I was more concerned about my family's safety. We told people in our refugee camps in Thailand before we left. When General Vang Pao came to America, we were hopeful that he might return. Once we realized that he was not, we wanted to come and follow him. Some of our relatives were in America already and they sponsored us to come over. There were other countries that were willing to take us in. There was a building set up for those who wanted to go to France [also Australia and other countries that were allies of the US during the Vietnam War].

(16:23)

-How do you feel about living in America? (16:32)

Since I have many sons, they were able to provide for our family and we were not worried. We are glad that here in America, although we are poor, our sons are able to provide for us. One of our sons was here in America for 2 years and he had a job already. He saved up about 4-5,000 dollars to support us before we arrived. I was happy that I would not die in America but have a good life. That's why I decided to come to America. (17:22)

-Were there some things you needed to change or adapt to once you came to America? (17:32)

Since I was very old already, I realized that I don't need to work or to adopt much of the American culture to survive. I will just follow my sons and daughters wherever they go. (17:55)

-How different are the Hmong youth growing up here compared to the Hmong youth in Thailand and Laos? (18:07)

America is a very rich country and there is less poverty. The government provides for you so that you don't have to suffer. The children growing up here are in good shape and we are not worried. We want our family members still in Thailand and Laos to come and experience this prosperous country with us. Even though we cannot work and make money we are very glad to be here. There is more than enough to go around, even when we older folks don't work. We are glad that we followed our leader into this country. (20:03)

-How do you feel about General Vang Pao? Is he a good person? (20:09)

I believe that he is a good leader who took care of us. General Vang Pao took care of us even when we were leaderless. That's why we followed him wherever he went. (20:59)

-Do you have any words to say to the future generation of Hmong? (21:12)

I am very old. I am already 72 years old [in 2002]. We followed General Vang Pao here from Laos. We want everybody to love everybody else. We must learn how to love and cooperate together. This is what I want. The older ones must show respect and must love the younger ones. This must pass on from one generation down to another. When we do this, others will know that we care about one another. (23:09)

-Anything else would you like to say? (23:10)

No matter what, we are still Hmong. Whenever you are on a trip and see another Hmong, you become really happy. It is not so with Americans. We must all learn how to love one another. There will be more generations of Hmong; we must learn to live together until the end of time. I am old and my words may be foolish but this is all I have to say. (25:10)