

Interviewer:

Is it - okay. Good afternoon. Today is June 15, 2015, and I'm here with Loan Pham, one of our summer seminar fellows. Welcome; I'm so glad you could be here.

Loan Pham:

Thank you for having me; it's been great.

Interviewer:

So that our transcriber - can you please spell your last name, your first name and your last name?

Loan Pham:

Yes. First name is Loan, last name is Pham, and spelled L-O-A-N and P-H-A-M.

Interviewer:

Well, welcome. So now tell me a little bit about yourself. Tell me where you were born and a little bit about your childhood, please.

Loan Pham:

I was born in a coastal town, really a village, in Central Vietnam in the post-war era, in the 1980s.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Loan Pham:

And I came to States in 1992 as a war refugee, and right now I am a PhD student at U.C. Berkeley.

Interviewer:

Wonderful. So born in the 1980s, that's five, six, seven years after the Vietnam War ended?

Loan Pham:

Yeah, mm-hmm.

Interviewer:

What was it like growing up in Vietnam at that time?

Loan Pham:

It was very hard. My dad was a South Vietnamese Marine Corps Officer. He was graduate of the Marine Corps Academy, which was known as the West Point of Southeast Asia. He fought up until April 30, 1975, the fall of Saigon, and he was shot by the Communists, and so today, he has a bullet exactly an inch away from his heart. My mom also comes from a military family, and so when I was born, I was essentially the child of criminals, of war criminals, in the eyes of the Communist State.

So I grew up without really family or friends, because there was so much stigma against the folks who served in the Southern government and military. And I remember going to school. There was no school, but the state decided to rent out a shack at this Catholic church to set up an elementary school, and that's where I went to school. But almost every single day, my teacher, Miss Mai, would just hit my hands with her ruler, and I always wondered was it really because I was such a bad student, or was it because I was a child of a war criminal?

Under the Communists, my dad didn't have a job. He couldn't have a job; he wasn't allowed to have a job, and my mom as well. The Communist government really penalized those who did not serve on their side, and so we had very little food to eat. It was essentially two small bowls of rice per day. When things got a bit better we had salt sprinkled on it. And so I became a food thief, believe it or not. I was always so hungry. I would always run off to the market and steal food. And I had this obsession with bananas at that time, and my mom was always so ashamed of me, because she was not capable of feeding us.

She wasn't capable of feeding me, and I had to resort to stealing food. And so I would be getting beaten up all the time at home by my mom, and I would get beaten up all the time by my teacher, Miss Mai, at school. That's all.

Interviewer:

Wow. Thatâ€™s incredible. So how did your folks manage to survive if neither of them could have a job?

Loan Pham:

It was due to the family support. My aunt was a Buddhist nun, and she lived in the hills, and so during like summer for a few months she would just borrow a bike and go to our village. Get my sister and get me, and she would bike us to her pagoda, and so thatâ€™s where we were raised, at this temple, because it had a manioc farm in the back. And I had so much fun - I could be a kid. I could run around, climb trees, and I could eat a lot of manioc. Iâ€™m scared of manioc today. Manioc is cassava. And so I have really good childhood memories of living at that pagoda. And then there was also my grandma, my maternal grandma. She took us in on the weekends, because she knew that we were not allowed to have food, or we didnâ€™t have food.

When I was in the government, my last trip to Vietnam I took a side trip and went home to my village. And -

Interviewer:

When you were in the U.S. government.

Loan Pham:

Yes, in the U.S. government.

Interviewer:

Okay, right.

Loan Pham:

And I learned of a - and I heard the story from a neighbor. I was just hanging out with my relatives at my grandpaâ€™s house, and this woman said, â€œOh, hi, youâ€™ve just come back home.â€ And I said, â€œHello,â€ and I didnâ€™t know who she was, except she was just a neighbor. And she said, â€œWould you like to come over and eat? Iâ€™ll feed you again.â€ And I was like, â€œWhat? Why is she saying sheâ€™ll feed me again?â€ So I went home that night to my grandma, my maternal grandma, and she said that when I was growing up, there wasnâ€™t enough food to eat. So my mom had to pay a neighbor money so that when I went over to that neighborâ€™s house to play with her kids, that neighbor could feed me. Because my dadâ€™s mom, my paternal grandma, didnâ€™t allow us to eat.

Interviewer:

Wow.

Loan Pham:

Yeah. And so after, after I came home one day from playing, and I told my paternal grandma what happened - â€œOh, there was neighbor feeding meâ€ - my mom was beaten seriously. And so she went out and got rat poison, and she was going to commit suicide, and she was going to feed my sister and me this poison as well. She thought it was better to die than to live with starvation, to live with the stigma. This was when my dad had left us. So the war really destroyed the family, the Vietnamese family structure. He didnâ€™t have a career. He didnâ€™t have anything. And so he was forced to migrate south to the Mekong Delta to work with his sister and brother.

And so essentially it was my mom who was left with two young girls, a deserted woman with no means to really provide very basic care to her kids.

Interviewer:

Right. And how did - was it just people who knew you, knew that your father and your motherâ€™s family had served in the war, and thatâ€™s how they knew to target you?

Loan Pham:

Yeah. Thereâ€™s this term called gong wei, meaning the child of the enemy soldier, and so I was the child of the enemy soldier, and the Communist government after the war kept very detailed records of who had served in the war and who had not.

Interviewer:

Wow.

Loan Pham:

And so my dad and his family - us - we were penalized at all levels.

Interviewer:

What happened to your dad right after the war? You said he was shot, right?

Loan Pham: Yeah. So people thought he died, because his wounds were so serious, but then he was rushed off to a hospital. But just days after, or even several weeks after the war had ended, he was sent straight to reeducation camp. It's really known as the Soviet Gulag. A lot of people were killed, a lot of people died, and a lot of people just committed suicide. So my dad served in these reeducation camps for almost six years, and he was beaten to the point that he became deaf on one side. Yeah.

Interviewer:

Wow. Now, you said at one point he left you to go down south and work. Did he ever rejoin the family?

Loan Pham:

Yes. He rejoined the family later on - sheer accident.

Interviewer:

What's that?

Loan Pham:

It was an accident, yeah.

Interviewer:

Oh yeah?

Loan Pham:

They actually had meant to divorce permanently, but the fact that my mom had married to his family meant that she was a shamed woman, and she was not permitted to return to her home village. I was the child of my father, and so I had to stay in his village, and so my mom stayed with us.

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm. And so eventually - okay, eventually he came back, and -

Loan Pham:

Yeah, he came back to visit one holiday, and they decided to try to make it work.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Loan Pham:

But just growing up, it was - it was a very almost like a violent household.

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm.

Loan Pham:

They were always, always fighting. Because when you struggle with basic things such as food -

Interviewer:

Right.

Loan Pham:

You really can't maintain a family.

Interviewer:

Sure. Did the stigma lessen over time, or did you always feel like there was a stigma over your family while you were in Vietnam?

Loan Pham:

There was always a stigma when I was in Vietnam. For example, my cousins would never play with me. My uncles never allowed me to go into their homes. And we lived in the same village. In fact, my parents never had a home to start with, so we just kind of bummed around. Yeah.

Interviewer:

Yeah. And in '92 you came to America.

Loan Pham:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer:

And you were about eight years old?

Loan Pham:

I was about eight years old in 1992.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Loan Pham:

And what happened was that the United States realized that there was much repression, political repression in Vietnam against the former South Vietnamese government officials and military officials, especially those who had served in concentration camps. And so what happened was that the United States decided to start a refugee program to bring the former South Vietnamese government officials and military officials over to the States. And the fact that my dad had served in concentration camps for six years - but there was really a minimum of three years - meant that we qualified for that program. It took us almost a decade to pay back the money that was required for this refugee program.

Because my parents had no money to travel to Saigon to be interviewed, to have all those vaccination shots, and just getting all that paperwork done. It required a lot of money, and our family could never afford to become the boat people. Typically, when you're a boat person, you had the means to buy yourself your way out of the country. My family didn't have really anything, so it was really due to just great luck, and really just the compassion of the U.S. government, that we end up here. So I, my family and I took the train to Saigon. We stayed there for about six months, and then we were sent off to a refugee camp in Bangkok for a couple days. And we stayed in this gym-like center. I had never seen so much concrete in my life.

You know I grew up in a very lush oceanside village, like it's just very verdant, very just beautiful, very natural. And then all of a sudden I land in Thailand, it's just all concrete. It was just very different from the world I had grown up in. And I remember seeing this, the shower room, and I was like, "Where is the water coming from," right? Because there were all these pipes all around on the ceiling, and I just couldn't understand why there wasn't like a body of water. Like you know the river where I used to bathe at, or bathe in. And so it was very weird. And then we lived in like clusters. The Thai refugee camp didn't allocate rooms to people, and there weren't separations at all. You had to just kind of live in like a little group.

That's what my family did. And I was just so happy, and so content. Like people wanted to be my friend for the first time. It was such a wonderful feeling, and I'm seeing like magic happen, like water falling from the sky, right? And I had food. I guess it was through I.O.M., the International Organization for Migration, so they were the middlemen for the United States, you know helping to process these refugees. And later on, we landed in Oakland. We landed in San Francisco, and we made Oakland our home because that's where our sponsor was. And I went to school - I went to public schools in the ghetto of Fruitvale, Oakland, and yeah. Life took a very different turn.

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm. And so this was your mother, your father, and your sister with you?

Loan Pham:

Yes. It was my father, my mom, my sister, myself, and two brothers.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Loan Pham:

Yeah, so it's and then later on, they had another kid, so there were five kids total.

Interviewer:

Are your brothers younger than you and your sister?

Loan Pham:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer:

Okay. And how much older is your sister?

Loan Pham:

My sister is a year and a half older.

Interviewer:

Okay. So you probably have very similar memories, then.

Loan Pham:

Thatâ€™s my - yeah, we have good memories, just because we tell each other these stories. â€œDo you remember this? Do you remember that?â€ â€œOf course, yeah, you played here,â€ or â€œYou climbed this tree.â€ You know, â€œI was beaten here.â€ My sister and I are very close because we faced - we had very similar experiences.

Interviewer:

You shared the same suffering.

Loan Pham:

Yeah. Yeah. But we wouldnâ€™t really think of ourselves as like, you know, having suffered in Vietnam -

Interviewer:

Sure.

Loan Pham:

Just because we were just kids. We knew that we were short on food. We knew that our extended family didnâ€™t recognize us. We knew that, you know, our parents had a lot of issues. But we were still just innocent kids.

Interviewer:

Right.

Loan Pham:

We werenâ€™t conscious of all the political issues that really imposed upon us.

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm. So how was elementary school for you? Did you know any English when you arrived here, or did you have to learn English?

Loan Pham:

No, I didnâ€™t know English when I arrived here, and so I had after school English lessons, so that was really helpful. And I remember Miss Martinez - she was my English tutor in the third grade - and we were learning the alphabet one afternoon. And weâ€™re studying the letter F, and then she said, she asked me, â€œWhat are some words that start with an F?â€ and I said, â€œFuck.â€

Interviewer:

And youâ€™re right. [Laughs]

Loan Pham:

And then she asked me like, â€œWho taught you that? Thatâ€™s not a word.â€ And I said, â€œNo, I hear kids say it all the time Iâ€™m at the playground.â€ And she said, â€œDonâ€™t ever say that word. It doesnâ€™t exist. Trust me.â€ So yeah, I have very good memories -

Interviewer:

Yeah?

Loan Pham:

Studying English with Miss Martinez.

Interviewer:

Now, you said it was a long time before you talked. That was back when you were in Vietnam, right?

Loan Pham:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer:

Okay. So youâ€™re going through school, and did you do well in school?

Loan Pham:

I didnâ€™t do well in school, just because I really struggled with speaking. There was a large Vietnamese community, refugee community, that landed in Oakland, and we lived surrounded by a lot of Vietnamese, of course, and there was really not any need to learn English.

Interviewer:

Right.

Loan Pham:

And so I, a lot of my teachers thought I was deaf up until high school. I just refused to speak.

Interviewer:

Yeah. Now, were your experiences in the Oakland Vietnamese community different than your experiences in your village back home?

Loan Pham:

Yeah. It wasâ€¦yeah, it was very different, just because itâ€™s a different culture. Itâ€™s a different society, and my parents at first initially landed jobs as dishwashers at a Vietnamese restaurant. And later on, my mom started doing nails, and my dad started doing construction work. Yeah.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Loan Pham:

Sorry. Oakland was a bit challenging just because where we lived was really gang-ridden, and it was dangerous. It was very dangerous.

Interviewer:

Okay. In Oakland.

Loan Pham:

In Oakland, yeah.

Interviewer:

Who did you have the most problems with? Were these like Vietnamese gangs, or were these other gangs?

Loan Pham:

I didnâ€™t reallyâ€¦I was justâ€¦

Interviewer:

Yeah, you were still young, huh?

Loan Pham:

Yeah. I didnâ€™t really have problems with anyone. Itâ€™s just that there were some pressures to be cool. You know, for the girls, for example, a lot of them end up joining gangs, and my parents - my mom especially - didnâ€™t let me dye my hair or wear baggy pants, because she thought that was one step closer to being a gang member. And a lot of my friends, my childhood friends, for example, became baby mamas. Oakland was a rough, rough place to really grow up as a refugee because of the social pressures to become a baby mama, and to really join a gang if you were a guy.

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm.

Loan Pham:

And so I grew up with an extraordinarily like a conservative family. My parents made sure that we werenâ€™t going to become those rough kids.

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Loan Pham:

Although they didnâ€™t really demand for us to become good academics. Yeah.

Interviewer:

Yeah. So for our viewers, can you explain baby mama?

Loan Pham:

Oh - yes. So baby mamas would be the young teenagers who get banged up, and who have babies.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Loan Pham:

And they end up quitting school. They end up marrying very young. They end up having a very kind of destructive life.

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm.

Loan Pham:

Yeah. It's just that cycle of poverty.

Interviewer:

Yeah, sure.

Loan Pham:

And my parents really made sure that we weren't going to become like them.

Interviewer:

Right.

Loan Pham:

There's something called the Pham women curse. During the war, for example, the Pham guys all joined the military, and the Pham women, a lot of them became prostitutes. So we served the war in multiple ways, and my mom always feared growing up that we would be hit with the Pham women's curse, just because she didn't want us to ruin our lives. She thought we would just kind of fall apart like all the other Pham woman. Yeah.

Interviewer:

But then - so things started going well for you, and you graduated high school, right?

Loan Pham:

Yes, I graduated high school, and then I went to college.

Interviewer:

Where'd you go to?

Loan Pham:

I went to a small liberal arts school, and I studied I.R., International Relations; right after that, I started working at the Pentagon for SAF/IA, Secretary of the Air Force for International Affairs. After that I went back to California to U.C. Santa Barbara, and continued with my master's in International Relations, and immediately I got a job with the Office of the Secretary of Defense Policy, OSD-POLICY. In this position I was the Southeast Asia Country Director, and I advised senior Pentagon leadership on foreign and defense matters in Southeast Asia. So this was about, yeah, 18 years after I departed from Vietnam.

Interviewer:

Okay. And when was the first time you went back to Vietnam?

Loan Pham:

The first time I went back to Vietnam was in 2000, for my grandparents' funeral.

Interviewer:

And how was that?

Loan Pham:

It was - it was emotional. Yeah, it was very emotional.

Interviewer:

The funeral, or the returning home?

Loan Pham:

Just the return home; and of course the funeral.

Interviewer:

Sure.

Loan Pham:

Just because the grandma who just passed away, she was very unkind to my family. She didn't want to really embrace her kid who had served in the South Vietnamese Army, or military, and she didn't want to embrace her grandkids, who were the child of this war criminal. So. But overall, my trip back to Vietnam in 2000 was emotional, because I could see the lingering destruction of the war in our village, right? Entire families perished, for example. People still lived, you know, mired in poverty. There was still repression. Folks, anyone who was affiliated with the South still suffered.

And I felt their pain. I know this sounds corny. And that's why I pursued a major and career in International Relations. I wanted to do humanitarian work.

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm.

Loan Pham:

I wanted to do something for those who had suffered in the war, in this war and in other wars.

Interviewer:

Sure.

Loan Pham:

And so for me, you know, it's always been this lifelong mission to really understand, you know, the causes of war, and the conditions for peace, really.

Interviewer:

Have you seen any healing occur in the South since the war, or since you've been - how many times have you gone back?

Loan Pham:

I've gone back many, many -

Interviewer:

Okay.

Loan Pham:

Many times, just because I travel to the area so often in my job, previously.

Interviewer:

Have you seen healing occur?

Loan Pham:

Somewhat. It's really rare for people in my family, for example, to have gone to college; to have even finished high school. There are systemic ways for the Communist government to continue to penalize those who had served in the South Vietnamese Army, which all my uncles did. And so with limited opportunities, with limited, you know, finances, my family, my broader family didn't really thrive in the post-war era. They still haven't thrived.

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm.

Loan Pham:

So I'm sure there's healing for some people, but that's if, primarily if, they are affiliated with the Northern regime. For the Southern regime, especially in the rural areas, has life gotten better for them in the post-war era? It's a mixed bag.

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm. What do you think it would take to create positive change?

Loan Pham:

I can see ways, yeah. It's easy for me to say, "Start a revolution." But my personal opinion, and I'll be frank with you, as long as there is a repressive regime that really addresses the concerns, at least the concerns of Party families, then there can't be any reconciliation. We've got half a country that fought for the enemy. A lot of them are still penalized today. You know, those records will never be erased by the Communist regime, so I'm not really sure how life can get better for just the ordinary masses.



If the history of the war continues to be distorted; if the government continues to repress the former enemies.

Interviewer:

How is the history of the war distorted?

Loan Pham:

The history of the Indochina wars, according to the Vietnamese State, is basically this: it was a nationalist struggle by Ho Chi Minh, Uncle Ho, that tried to liberate Vietnam from foreign occupation. It's distorted because we never hear about totalitarianism in North Vietnam. We never hear about child fighters in North Vietnam. We never hear about the men's sacrifices, patriotism, nationalism in the South. It's distorted because it is official Party propaganda. It serves to legitimize the Party.

The history that is written by the Communist State - and the only history that is permitted to be written and that's permitted to be publicized - it's a history that really serves the interests of the Party. Definitely not representative of the actual history that's experienced by the Vietnamese masses. It's very politicized.

Interviewer:

Okay. Has your father found any community of veterans in America that he -

Loan Pham:

Yeah. So my dad is a community leader for the Vietnamese-Americans in the Sacramento area, so he works to commemorate those who sacrificed their lives, and he also commemorates like the Battle of Hue, for example, the Tet Offensive. He is forever scarred by his experience; really the biggest Vietnamese nationalist, patriot I know. For him, South Vietnam will forever exist. It may not be on a map, but it forever exists in his heart. You know, he was born in 1952, State of Vietnam. My mom was born in the Republic of South Vietnam, and I was born in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

And so you know, for him, South Vietnam will forever be the country that he kind of directs his love and energy toward.

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm. Does he - and as a community leader, he shares this with other immigrants that have come to America?

Loan Pham:

I don't know if they actually collaborate with other -

Interviewer:

Well, not collaborate, but like American veterans' organizations, like the V.F.W., or the American Legion. Does he have a support network of -

Loan Pham:

Yeah. This is -

Interviewer:

Of comrades?

Loan Pham:

The Vietnamese war veterans, they're a sizable group, but then they don't really reach out to other veteran groups such as the American war veterans. I really don't know how -

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Loan Pham:

They've - I don't know why. Maybe it's because they feel more comfortable just -

Interviewer:

Sure.

Loan Pham:

Speaking with themselves.

Interviewer:

Yeah. So now you're working on a PhD.

Loan Pham:

I am.

Interviewer:

Tell me a little bit about that.

Loan Pham:

So at Berkeley, I am pursuing a project that analyzes the international history of the North Vietnamese Communist Army. I'm looking at Soviet, French, American, and South Vietnamese, and North Vietnamese sources. These are the languages that I know, and I will be able to leverage, and I'm really seeing, what I'm really finding is that the North Vietnamese Army wasn't necessarily fighting a civil war, like the State has, it's tried to kind of advertise.

The Northern Communist Army was really fighting a transnational war that leveraged the assistance of the Soviet Union and China, Laos, and Cambodia. So I am seeing that South Vietnam, and even the Republican states of Laos and Cambodian at certain points, were really invaded by the North Vietnamese forces, supported by their Communist brethren.

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm. And how far along are you in your research?

Loan Pham:

It's never going to end. It's a multi-decade project.

Interviewer:

[Laughs] That's -

Loan Pham:

I am entering my fourth year at Berkeley, and I've already done field work in D.C., New York, and in North Vietnam, and I'm hoping to return there, to Vietnam, in August, staying for about a year, year and a half, to do more kind of research and oral interviews. So hopefully this dissertation will finish in - Insha'Allah - three years.

Interviewer:

[Laughs] Yeah. I hope so. And when you go back, will it be a fresh start for you, when you go back?

Loan Pham:

To?

Interviewer:

To Vietnam. When you go back to Vietnam to do your research, will you be going back to your village or will you just be staying at some of the larger cities?

Loan Pham:

I will do archive research in Hanoi, just because that was the base of the Communist Party, the base of the Communist Ministry of National Defense. And I really wouldn't want to put my family at risk by staying with them -

Interviewer:

Okay.

Loan Pham:

As well.

Interviewer:

All right. Well, is there anything else that I haven't asked you that you'd like to touch on? No?

Loan Pham:

I think you've been very comprehensive.

Interviewer:

Well, good. Well, it's been an honor and a privilege to speak with you today, and thank you for sharing your story with us.

Loan Pham:

Well, thank you for having me. Thank you for listening to my story.

Interviewer:

Itâ€™s an amazing story. All right, well.