

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Class: \_\_\_\_\_

## 'Chasing Memories' In Their Refugee Camp 40 Years After Fleeing Vietnam

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*The Vietnam War, which occurred between 1955 and 1975, was fought between the North Vietnamese army and the South Vietnamese army. It is considered a Cold War-era proxy war because the North Vietnamese army was supported by the Soviet Union, while the South Vietnamese army had the support of the United States and other anti-communist allies. The war ended with the fall of Saigon in November 1975, which marked the beginning of a period of reunification of Vietnam under communist rule. Due to the horrific violence, approximately 2 million Vietnamese people fled their country between 1975 and 1995 and were resettled in such countries as the United States, Australia, Canada, France, and the United Kingdom. As you read, take notes on the ways that the Vietnam War changed refugees' lives.*

[1] My mother's family fled communism<sup>1</sup> twice.

The first time was from China. Then, after Saigon fell in 1975, they left Vietnam.

My mother, Kuo Nam Lo, was 24 when she spent her first few months in the U.S. at a refugee camp at a military base along a stretch of the Appalachian Mountains in central Pennsylvania.

"I've always wanted to come back here," my mother told me in Cantonese<sup>2</sup> on a recent drive through Fort Indiantown Gap.<sup>3</sup> "Son, you've made my dream come true."

[5] It was the first time she had returned after she left to re-start her life in Philadelphia 40 years ago.



*"Repatriation of Vietnam Refugees 1970 - by Larry Burrows" by manhhai is licensed under CC BY 2.0.*

We kept driving until we arrived at a banquet hall on the base. About 200 other refugees and their families—plus a few Army reservists and volunteers who worked at the camp—gathered there for a 40-year reunion on a rainy weekend in late June.

Some of the former refugees stayed overnight in army barracks down the road. They slept in bunk beds and tried to relive camp life. Mary Pham, 61, said coming back felt like returning to where she started her second life as an American.

1. Communism is a political theory that supports public ownership of all property. Under communism, people should work and be paid according to their abilities and needs.
2. a form of Chinese spoken mainly in southeastern China, including in Hong Kong
3. a U.S. Army post located in Lebanon County, Pennsylvania

"In my heart, I feel like this is my birthday," she said with a laugh after greeting other returning refugees at the registration table.

Pham, who gave birth to her oldest son in the camp and now lives in Newport Beach, Calif., was one of the reunion's organizers. They decorated the wood-paneled hall with miniature American and South Vietnamese flags. Before dinner, they handed each person a copy of a meal card that refugees used to eat at mess halls<sup>4</sup> on the base in 1975.

- [10] "Every day we had to get in line and show the card to get the meal," Pham explained. "We want to do exactly like 40 years ago."

Back then, Fort Indiantown Gap was one of four processing centers in the U.S. for refugees from Vietnam. It was opened shortly after the U.S. government realized that Camp Pendleton, Calif., Fort Chaffee, Ark., and Eglin Air Force Base, Fla., would not be enough to process all of the refugees waiting to be resettled from temporary camps in Guam, the Philippines and other parts of the Pacific, according to a 1981 report on the refugee program commissioned by the U.S. Army Forces Command.

Before they were eventually taken in or sponsored out by American families, around 22,000 refugees passed through Fort Indiantown Gap's camp, which George Padar, a retired colonel in the Army Reserve, helped run.

"We understood that there were people who lost their home. This was their home for now," Padar explained. "We were here to prepare them to become good American citizens, which they have. Look at the engineers, the doctors, the singers, the young people, the grandchildren."

Padar, a refugee himself from Hungary after World War II, helped organize the reunion. These events, he said, are important to keeping family history alive.

- [15] "We want to believe that we can go back to the way things were, but then we finally realize that it's not possible. So we're chasing memories," he said. "Some people are disappointed. For others, it brings closure,<sup>5</sup> or it renews their spirits to get back into their past life."

Four decades ago, Thang Nguyen of Lancaster, Pa., was a 25-year-old South Vietnamese sailor, who came to the camp with no family and having lost a country to serve. He spent evenings looking up at the mountains outside his barracks. "Foggy and sad" are how he remembers them.

"You'd have nothing to do and just walk around," he said about his time in the camp.

None of these immigrants spent more than six months or so at Fort Indiantown Gap. But a persistent pull to reconnect with others who were there remains strong.

After the reunion ended, my mom told me that she was disappointed. "Not a single person I knew was there," she said in Cantonese.

- [20] Sixty-six-year-old Be Nguyen (no relation to Thang Nguyen) told me he, too, felt let down. Before he left the camp in 1975, he passed around a notebook and asked his friends to each write a farewell letter.

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4. a room or building where groups of people, such as soldiers, gather to eat

5. a comforting or satisfying sense of finality

One of his friends, Phung Quang Hoa, wrote in Vietnamese: "I do not know what to write while there is a feeling of emptiness in my mind."

None of those friends who wrote letters came to the reunion. Be Nguyen, who now lives in Harrisburg, Pa., said he only knows their names.

"I hope that I can see more of my friends before my life ends," he told me.

Refugees like him, he said, left the camp like birds fleeing their nest, scattered in different directions. Now, 40 years later, he's not sure what or where everyone calls home.

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## Text-Dependent Questions

**Directions:** For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. What is the Lo Wang's main purpose in writing this piece? Cite evidence from the text in your response.

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2. PART A: Which of the following best identifies the central theme of this interview?
- A. Refugees who traveled to the United States to avoid living under communist rule widely consider their close friendships with other refugees critical to their happiness.
  - B. Vietnamese refugees who fled communism often have trouble reconnecting with friends from refugee camps and, more broadly, reconciling different stages of their lives.
  - C. The time spent by Vietnamese refugees at Fort Indiantown Gap and other U.S. processing centers was defined by boredom, sadness, and discontent.
  - D. Efforts to bring refugees together years after they have gone their separate ways are vital to ensuring they feel comfortable in their new lives as American citizens.
3. PART B: Which phrase from the text best supports the answers to Part A?
- A. "In my heart, I feel like this is my birthday," she said with a laugh after greeting other returning refugees at the registration table." (Paragraph 8)
  - B. "He spent evenings looking up at the mountains outside his barracks. 'Foggy and sad' are how he remembers them. 'You'd have nothing to do and just walk around,' he said about his time in the camp." (Paragraph 16 and Paragraph 17)
  - C. Before he left the camp in 1975, he passed around a notebook and asked his friends to each write a farewell letter. (Paragraph 20)
  - D. "One of his friends...wrote in Vietnamese: 'I do not know what to write while there is a feeling of emptiness in my mind.'...None of those friends who wrote letters came to the reunion." (Paragraph 21 and Paragraph 22)

4. How does Paragraph 21 contribute to the development of the ideas presented in the text?
- A. It demonstrates that many people in the camp were unwilling to provide contact information for friends to reach them after they had settled permanently in the U.S.
  - B. It provides a meaningful counterpoint to the previously expressed idea that the time the refugees spent in the U.S. camps was characterized by great joy and relief.
  - C. It advances the notion that Vietnamese refugees yearned to return their home countries and were never able to feel at home in the United States.
  - D. It connects the sense of emptiness experienced by the refugees while in the camp to their inability to meaningfully unite their past experiences with their present-day lives.
5. What does the phrase "persistent pull" most closely mean in paragraph 18.
- A. ambivalence
  - B. indifference or lack of care
  - C. regret
  - D. strong desire

## Discussion Questions

**Directions:** *Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.*

1. Why do you think the former refugees “tried to relive camp life” (Paragraph 7) by sleeping in bunk beds and eating in mess halls, even though the experience was described as “foggy and sad” (Paragraph 16)?
2. What do you make of the mention that one woman attending the reunion “gave birth to her oldest son in the camp” (Paragraph 9)? Do you see it as a symbol of assimilation into U.S. culture and the securing of a better life for a new generation? Is it unsettling to think of a family celebrating so momentous and joyous an occasion at an inherently unstable time in their lives?
3. Based on the text and your knowledge of historical and current events, what challenges do immigrants face in adapting to their new homes? What cultural differences might present barriers to assimilation?
4. One attending refugee described the processing center as the place “where she started her second life as an American” (Paragraph 7). In the context of this article, what makes you who you are? Does it have more to do with where you are born, where you grow up, or where you live out your adulthood and perhaps start your own family? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.
5. In the context of this article, how are we changed by war? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.