

VOICES FROM SOUTHEAST ASIA

The Refugee Experience
in the United States

JOHN TENHULA

ELLIS ISLAND SERIES



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MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

FRONTISPIECE

Camps in "first asylum" countries, such as those in Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand, are temporary hosts to newly escaped refugees, who wait there to be placed in permanent locations. Those pictured here walk just outside the Nong Khai camp in Thailand.

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SOUTHEAST ASIA

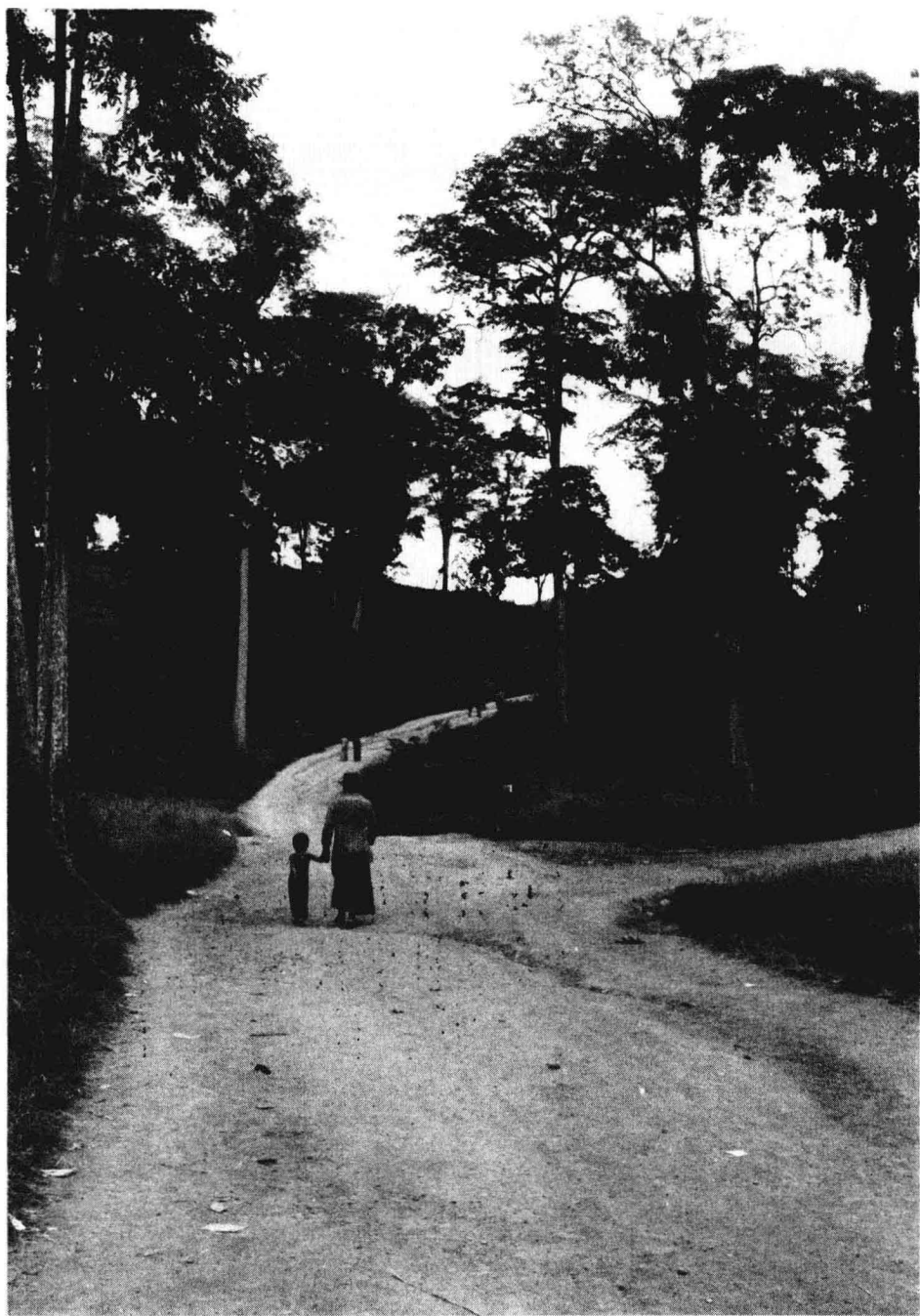


Photo: John Tenhula

THE ELLIS ISLAND SERIES

*I*t has recently been pointed out that revisionist historiography in the United States, including the “new immigrant history” and the “new ethnic history,” has fundamentally changed our historical perspective and broadened the meaning of the American experience. The Ellis Island Series was conceived as part of that revisionist wave. Each volume offers a unique new perspective on the social, cultural, and economic aspects of immigration and on the role of immigrants in shaping a pluralist, multiracial society in America.

The books in the series focus on specific immigrant groups, and examine the immigrants’ experience in the United States in the light of their prior history and expectations. The scope of the series encompasses the major waves of American immigration: the movements from Britain, Ireland, and the German states during the early and mid-nineteenth century; the mass migrations from Eastern Europe and Italy at the turn of the century; and the current wave from the Third World.

Drawing on a wide range of documentation, including firsthand accounts such as letters, narratives, diaries, and oral history, the series considers the personal, psychological, and social aspects as well as the cultural, political, and economic issues accompanying migration, resettlement, and acculturation. Thus each volume explores important matters that are not often documented: What did the immigrants, or refugees, expect of life in America? What were their dreams, myths, illusions, fears, and hopes? What was it like to leave their homes and what was it like when they arrived here? How were they received and how did they fare? What did they think about and how did

they feel? In these volumes, the immigrants have the opportunity to give their side of the story.

It is particularly fitting that John Tenhula's book on Southeast Asian refugees should be the first in this series. *Voices from Southeast Asia* tells the extraordinary story of a major new immigrant group that is helping to transform the cultural landscape of the United States, much as the European immigration had done in previous generations. Tenhula's work also reminds us that the conditions governing immigration have changed over the last hundred years: like many of the current newcomers, Southeast Asians are refugees, not immigrants; and the author's examination of the experiences and problems unique to refugees is especially timely and enlightening. This book is also compelling oral history; the highly personal narratives, dialogues, and poems—recounting experiences of migration, resettlement, alienation, and acculturation—present the human perspective of the new Asian immigration. Moreover, the descriptions of immigrant networks, and encounters with hostility, prejudice, and restriction, while unique and contemporary, are also reminiscent of earlier immigrant experiences. Ultimately, this volume in the Ellis Island Series chronicles the basic patterns by which generations of immigrants have formed—and continue to transform—our society. In sponsoring this series, Holmes & Meier is responding to the need to explore, understand, and rethink this fundamental aspect of the American experience.

The editors would like to express their gratitude to the late Max Holmes, who provided so much of the inspiration for this series. He was a man of extraordinary qualities who had a passionate personal and professional interest in the field of immigration and who profoundly believed in the importance of ideas.

Ira A. Glazier
Temple-Balch Institute
Philadelphia

Luigi de Rosa
Istituto Navale
Naples

Series Editors

This book is dedicated to the Southeast Asian
boat and land people who died seeking
freedom and a new life.

The world is spun to turn as heaven bids;
Men grope their way like walkers in the night.

—Nguyen Gia Thieu, 1741–1798

I dreamed a deep dream of Sayavarman. I was with all my ancestors for the conquest of the Mekong and saw hills north of Angkor where the Khmers conquered Champa. My dream continued with voices that spoke in French and then the bombing of my beloved Phnom Penh and the devastation and destruction of all I have known this period on earth. I awoke and thought for a long time that we are a lost and forgotten people. Yet that was only for a short time of history. But still we have a story to tell. I heard so many voices. Who will listen to these stories? There are many voices from Indochina.

—O. Pham, Cambodian refugee
San Francisco, 1986

Foreword

Liv Ullmann

Voices from Southeast Asia is a very moving book filled with stories of hopes and dreams and ghosts of refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. It is a history of the journey of many who have come to America, those who still want to come, and the whispers of those who died trying to come.

Everyone's life is a journey. For a refugee, part of that journey is in our hands—yours and mine. I write those words thinking about the tens of thousands who have escaped Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos since April 1975, but also of the many thousands still in camps in Thailand, Malaysia, and Hong Kong. The journey for all of the refugees has been a traumatic one, and for some, extremely difficult and with few promises of a better tomorrow.

In January 1990, as part of a human-rights fact-finding team, I visited the detention camps in Hong Kong. I call them concentration camps. What I saw shocked me. The world seems to have begun to close not only its borders but

also its mind to those who are fleeing wartorn countries of Southeast Asia that continue to violate basic human rights. Most shocking was the forced repatriation to Vietnam in December 1989 of over fifty people, mostly women and children. Although this is a violation of international law, we have heard that such repatriation would become mandatory for those who were judged also to be economic refugees. And the “voices” of these people go unheard as if they, too, had been lost at sea or killed in fields mined with bombs.

But what of those who survived, who were given a second chance? *Voices from Southeast Asia* so clearly speaks to us about them—about their successful journey to a safe haven and, often, their successful transition to a new life in America. There is magic and poetry and eloquence in the statements made by the refugees interviewed for this book. In many ways my heart was lifted by their courage and determination to succeed—to not even consider failure a possibility. Many of the interviews were haunting—young people who endured so much hardship and lived to share it here—through often poignantly candid descriptions, and the very old people who would never again be sure of themselves, taken away from all that was secure and real for them. All of those interviewed seemed to talk about courage and an inner strength that manifested itself in different ways now that they have been given a chance for a new life.

Perhaps most enlightening for me were the interviews that were observations of American life. As an immigrant from Norway, I, too, could share some of those thoughts. America can be a cold and tough place in which to begin a new life and career. One is exposed to a new set of social dynamics that are unsettling: materialism, racism, differences in family structure. These interviews discuss differences between East and West. The ways in which the Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Laotians dealt with those differences were often insightful, amusing, painful, yet resourceful. And, again and again, even the refugees best describe themselves as “survivors.”

The chapter expressing views of the war seemed to highlight the voices of Southeast Asian military people who never felt a part of the American military involvement. “Americans never listened to us,” they keep repeating. And now, fifteen years after the war, the wounds have not yet healed, and the politicians are still not listening to the people. I am reminded of the terrible situation in Kampuchea today, with the real possibility of yet another “killing fields” in the future. Of the West’s tacit support of the Pol Pot’s Khmer Rouge army and their seat in the U.N. Have we learned nothing? Have we even begun to listen to the real people who must endure this possible new anguish?

Can a tragedy be avoided? These are some of the questions I asked myself when I read these interviews.

But we must not forget the refugees' stories of success and happiness. In stories that amuse, comfort—even warm us—they tell of continuing contributions to the American immigrant mosaic. Here are men, women, and children who have overcome the shock of war, dislocation, and the transfer to the States and who have begun a new life. Refugees who are contributing as new Americans. While there are many happy stories, I was very much taken by a theme repeated throughout the interviews—a deep concern for those left in the camps, those friends and family still suffering in the countries they cannot escape from. These unheard voices also echo in the reader's ear. The journey of these people may have no beginning, or end. I still believe that this journey is in our hands—yours and mine.

The author does a fine job of explaining to the reader what defines a refugee, a term which, as used today, connotes a difficult and highly political status. Refugee rights, like human rights, now seem to be interpreted in a variety of ways, thus putting in jeopardy thousands of innocent victims of war and oppression. People tend to forget that Nazi Germany or Pol Pot's Kampuchea took place so recently, that such tragedies could even exist. People tend to forget that every day lives are torn apart—lives that we can do something about. We must not turn our backs on refugees or we turn our backs on all humanity.

Many years ago, my ancestors from Scandinavia had a dream of North America as the good land. Their descendants proudly described them as strong, brave people, setting out on a journey to the unknown. But today those with similar dreams and hopes are shamed, discouraged. Why? How did we change? What happened to us? The dream did not change.

Voices from Southeast Asia shares many stories of dreams—dreams and realities that are part of the history of *all* refugees coming to a safe land, not just those from Southeast Asia. I am deeply struck by the eloquence of the voices I hear in this book.

Finally, let me share with you a poem written by a sixteen-year-old girl, Cindy Cheung from Vietnam, one of the unheard voices in a concentration camp that I recently visited in Hong Kong:

I Am Sorrow

Who will listen to my feeling?
Who will listen to my useless land?

After the war, my skin had been damaged,
There are craters in my body.
Although I was sad, sorry, and suffering
Who will listen to my feeling?
I am sad, sorry, and suffering
Who will know my feeling?
I am not sad about my harmed body
I am sorrow because of the people
who can't use me rightly.
Who will know my feeling?

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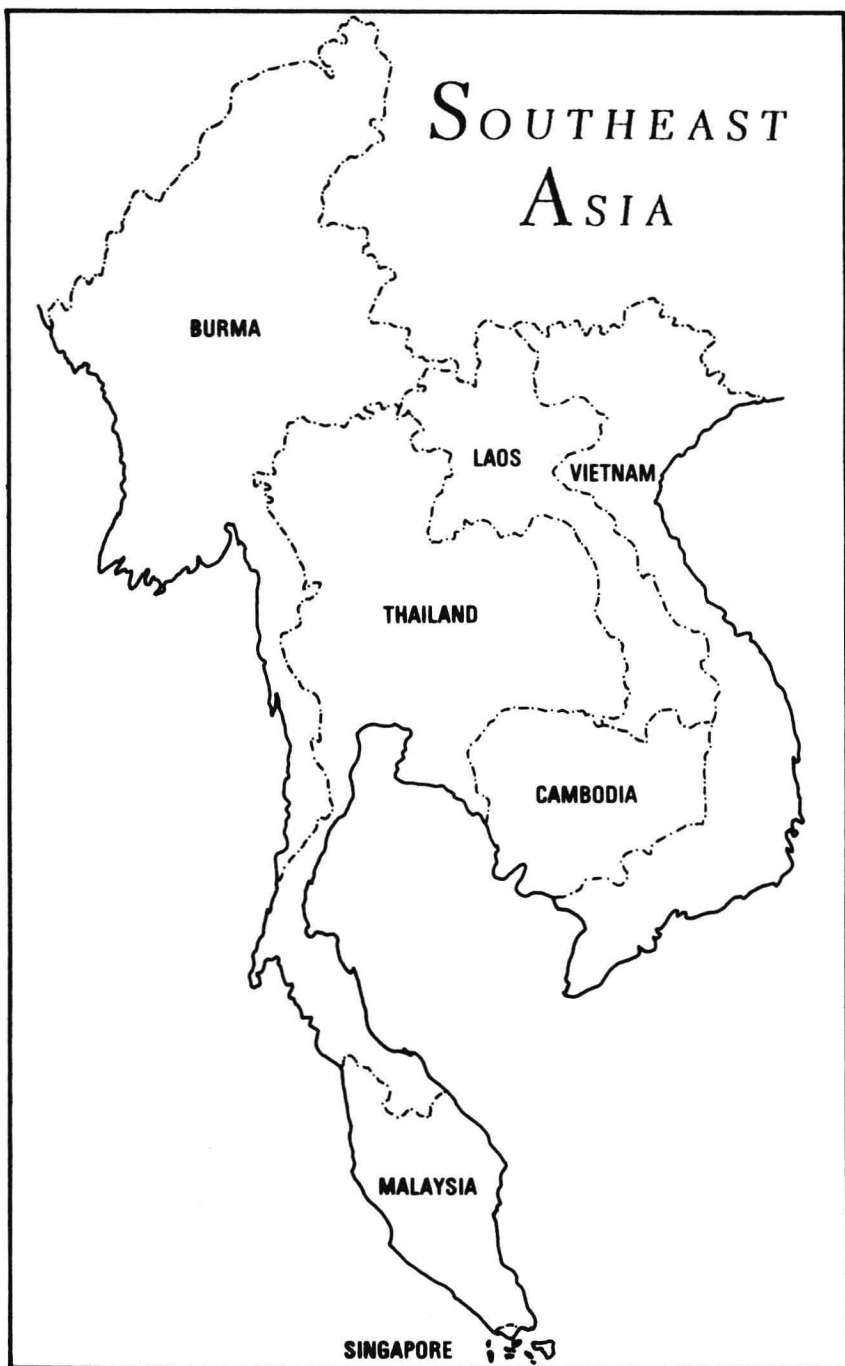
*T*he idea for this book grew out of my work as a graduate student and adjunct professor at Columbia University and through my work for the National Council of Churches and the United Nations. I wish to thank the Presbyterian Church, and in particular Rev. William DuVal for a generous grant to complete this book. I also want to thank Charles W. Curtis, a former student at Columbia, and my friend Phat Mau for their research and editorial assistance in preparing the history of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos that appears in Appendix A. I am also grateful to Diana Bui, whose help has been invaluable. The tapes and transcripts of the interviews that follow will be donated to the Archives of Folk Culture Project, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

My purpose in this book has been to document through oral histories the experiences of Southeast Asian refugees who have arrived in the United States since 1975, letting them tell their stories from their own perspectives and in their own voices. In the course of completing the research and writing, I have made many friends, unfortunately too numerous to be named here, many of whom have taught me a tremendous amount about human nature and the will to survive. A special, warm note of appreciation and thanks must be given to the many people whose interviews I recorded but was unable to use here simply because of space limitations. Finally, for interviews that were included in the book, I wish to thank those who patiently, sometimes painfully, shared their stories with me.

VOICES FROM

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CONTENTS

FOREWORD BY LIV ULLMANN	xv
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	xix
MAP OF SOUTHEAST ASIA	xxii
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 1 EAST AND WEST	13
MONK PHEN ANONTHASY: East/West Values	14
MONK DONG TA: Philosophical Differences	16
FATHER DOMINIC LUONG: Philosophical Coexistence	19
SUZANNE PHAM: On Coming to Peace with Change	23
SAMPHY IEP: Dreaming in My Own Language	27
Poem, "Cambodian Dancer"	30
CHAPTER 2 AMERICAN INVOLVEMENT	33
NGUYEN VAN MO: Army as a Career	35
GENERAL VANG MO: PAST AND FUTURE	38
Poem, "About Vietnam"	39
GENERALS HOANG DUC NAM and TRAN VAN TAT: Starting New	40
Poem, "From a Vietnamese General"	43
CAM BA DONG: Comparing the French and Americans	44
SAM SON: Cambodian Secret Bombing	46
Poem, "No Trust"	47
Poem, "Vietnamese History"	48
LE XUAN DUC: American POWs	48
SANG SEUNSOM: Thanking America	50
	xi