

OUR ESCAPE TO FREEDOM

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Our long story "Escape to freedom" has never been written down, until today, as I had no time to tell it. The story below is only a much summarized version as I cannot remember all the details of our perilous journey to freedom.

After the Communists took over South Vietnam on April 30, 1975, the new regime imposed many hardships to the people in the South. The new regime sent hundreds of thousands of South Vietnamese officers and officials to hard labor camps, to "re-educate" them, as they said, "in ten days". These poor people ended up in prisons for years, some three or five, others 10 to 15. In these communist labor camps – or gulags - they endured and worked like slaves to survive and the rules were harsher than in any other prisons. The communists were ready to execute anyone they considered dangerous to the new regime. There are innumerable stories about the lives of vanquished southerners at that difficult time.

We – i.e. my wife and I - were high school teachers, so we had to attend many classes in which they brainwashed us with Marxism, Leninism, and other communist theories. After finishing the classes, that took about 4-5 weeks in the summer, we had to write incriminating essays about our guilt and to confess our mistakes. We also had to praise the goodness of the new regime. They evaluated us based on what we wrote down and on how much we had been "illuminated" by the "revolutionary ideals." In the mean time, the economy of the country was worsening. Living under such mental, physical, and physiological pressures was like living in hell. So we decided we would escape whenever we had the opportunity.

At the time we lived in Dalat, a small city in the western highlands, about 300 km north of Saigon, the capital of former South Vietnam, where I had friends with plans to escape. They bought a small fishing boat and were preparing the trip in secret, for fear of being discovered by the local authorities, and being arrested before the plan could be implemented. Our boat was anchored in a branch of the Mekong River. On the night of June 26, 1977 we



departed southeast toward Malaysia. Our small group consisted of only 16 persons: 5 women, 10 men, and my son of 27 months. Our boat was a tiny fishing boat 9 meters long and 2.5 meters wide equipped with a 10-horsepower propelling engine, which was not powerful enough for going on the high seas. But according to the fisherman who helped prepare our escape, the boat could take us to Malaysia in about 10 days if the weather was good and the sea not too rough, We were at the end of the dry season and the monsoon would be there soon, so we had to hurry and we started our journey without delay.

As we intended to go to Malaysia, we planned to sail southeast for some time and then go southwest. But on the morning of June 27th, we met a strong typhoon, the waves were so high and the sea became terribly rough. Our small boat could not maintain the right direction anymore and we were driven by the wind and the waves toward the North. At 10 PM that same day, we had to drop the anchor, and in the process, the rope of the anchor which was of about 1" diameter got caught in the propeller causing the engine to stall. On the morning of the following day we saw an island, and looking at our map, we knew that it was the Phu Quy Island, and we realized that our position was about 150km from cape Varella, in the South China Sea.

Since our engine no longer worked, we were helpless. We had to wait for the sea to ease to cut the rope, but for 10 consecutive days the wind remained very strong, and somehow in the afternoon of July 5th, the rope and the anchor fell down into the depth of the sea. We were into a desperate situation: our boat was floating aimlessly and we completely lost control of it. We didn't have any navigating experience and did not know what to do.

We had about 400 liters of fresh water and 20 days of food but much of the food was spoiled by the seawater and the fuel leaking from broken plastic containers. After about one week, we ran out of food and a great amount of fresh water was lost because several plastic containers broke. And after about 20 days, we didn't have any food left; we survived only on the fresh water that we spared in some cans. The water was actually dirty but we had to drink anyway. As our group was small, we had enough water. I had secretly saved some rice grains in 2 small cans for my son and twice a day, I chewed 2 spoonfuls of it uncooked and feed him from my mouth.

There were some more typhoons and the waves, as high as a 2-story house, continuously lifted our boat up to their peak and then brought it down for as long as 3 hours. Luckily our boat, small but sturdy, didn't break apart. During



that frightening time, all the men had to use cans to scoop the sea water out of the boat to prevent it from sinking. My wife held firmly my son in her arms and I held both of them in mine. All of us were completely drenched but thanks to these typhoons we were able to collect the rainwater with our raincoats and have fresh water.

We were getting weaker and weaker, and I thought that if my son and my wife died, I would kill myself to be with them as we longed to always be together. Most of us had scabies all over our bodies, and as we were very depressed, we resigned to put our destinies into the hands of Buddha and God. We waited for some ship to see us and come to our rescue. We had

seen about 30 ships pass by but only one had stopped. The sailors on that ship looked at us and asked if we were in trouble. We tried to explain our situation, but perhaps the captain didn't understand and about 1 hour later the ship left us without giving us neither food nor water! We were very disappointed and death was coming closer and closer. Day after day, we lost hope and only prayed for a miracle. And that miracle happened on the 27th day of our nightmare, on July 22nd.

In the afternoon of that fateful day, after a big typhoon, the weather cleared and we could see the horizon far away. At about 3:00 PM, a ship saw our small SOS flag and approached us. I myself climbed up the ladder of the ship to talk to the captain. The man saw that we were all dying, and felt pity for us, knowing that we would all perish had he not rescued us. He also saw that there was a fissure at the bottom of our boat and sea water was leaking in. Rain had also started and the sky was getting darker and darker, a premonition that another typhoon was coming.

Eventually we were allowed to board the ship at about 5:30 PM. From the deck we saw our little fishing boat drifting away on the immense ocean like a tiny bamboo leaf. The ship continued its way to Indonesia. At about 7:00 PM, the captain invited me to his cabin to let me know that a weather message he had just received said that a big storm was coming from Philippines and that its center was where we were rescued. I thanked him for his compassion, hugged him dearly as tears came out of my eyes. I was crying out of joy. If it were not for him to come at the nick of time, we would have all died in the ocean soon later.

It took 16 more days for that Korean ship to reach Bangka Island. There the sailors and local laborers did the very hard work of loading logs onto the ship; these logs would then be shipped to Korea on the return trip. From the ship, we wrote a letter to the High Commissioner of Refugees to report of our situation and ask for help. On the 16th day that we stayed on that ship, Dr. Sampat Kumar, Commissioner of Refugees at Kuala Lumpur, came on board to see us, and we were classified as political refugees, and as so, we were allowed to go onto the Indonesian land.

We left the Korean ship with tears in our eyes. A small vessel brought us to Bangka Island, and from a small local airport we took an airplane to Jakarta. At Jakarta airport, Dr. Sampat Kumar said goodbye to us as his mission has ended; the Indonesian authorities took care of us, we were transferred to a refugee camp near Bogor, at about 60 km north of Jakarta.

We stayed there for 6 months and on January 25, 1978, we were admitted to the USA.

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