The Trauma of Escape: A Hmong Refugee's Journey to the U.S.

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Many died trying to cross the Mekong River when escaping from Laos to Thailand. (Photo: Bruno Ideriha)

Most Hmong refugees who come to the U.S. have had traumatizing experiences: first escaping the war, then struggling with cultural differences, language barriers and the everyday stress of trying achieving the American dream in this country. Consequently, many Hmong suffer from depression and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

During the Central Intelligence Agency's "Secret War" in Laos, when a secret guerilla army of some 30,000 Hmong were recruited to fight against the North Vietnamese, my father, Chue Zang Her, and my three older brothers were killed. As a young male teenager, I had to be responsible for everything as the head of the household. After the CIA withdrew in 1975, we had to join the resistance group in attempt to evade capture of our family, including my elderly mother, Nou Thao, who was blind for as long as I can remember.

Communist soldiers came to our villages at night with the firing sound of guns and grenades. We fled to the jungle and lived in huts made from bamboo, covered with banana leaves or hay thatches, and only lit fires for cooking at night so we wouldn't be detected. We would grow our crops in the jungle in hiding, but many times it would be discovered and set on fire by the soldiers. So we ate whatever was available: bamboo shoots, fruits and leaves from the jungle. Many children and elderly died of starvation. You did not know how long you were going to live. We lived in fear.

In January 1980, we had to flee Laos to Thailand. We were traveling in extended family bands of about 500 people, and had to carry food on our backs on rocky dirt trails with bare feet through the jungle.

Sometime we had to travel at night when we had to cross a major road or were near soldiers' headquarters. Many children had to be drugged so they wouldn't cry, and some died due to over-doses. I was worried, nervous and panicked about the escape all the time. After many days of traveling, my mother grew gravely ill. The bottoms of her bare feet were completely raw, and her chronic back pain from the hard work she did throughout her life was getting worse. At the end of the fifth day, my mother told me, “Son, I cannot continue any more, I cannot hold you here in the middle of the jungle. My life is at the end, your life is just beginning; I rather die here. You go find your brother Xang and tell him that I love and miss him. You two watch out for each other; the hardship will be gone with me so your future will be brighter."

Then, she asked for opium to end her life. It was the hardest moment and toughest decision in my life. I was just a teenager, I didn’t have strong decision-making abilities, and I had to face my dying mother in the middle of the jungle. In the Hmong culture, when someone dies, especially the elders, you need proper funeral rites to prevent the soul from eternal wandering. In the middle of the night, I gave my mother opium; me and my wife sat next to her, listening to her talking until early morning. Everybody had to move on, and my wife went with them. One of my cousins and one of the guides stayed with me waiting for my mother to die, so she could be buried. But by late morning she still had not died. The guide told me, “We cannot stay any longer, we don’t know who is after us, we don’t want to die because of your dying mother." So I dug a hole and placed my mother tenderly inside, carefully concealing her with bushes; then I left.

After many days, we got to the Mekong River on the border of Laos and Thailand, where many had already drowned. So many people drowned that it was reported that Thai farmers along the Mekong River would sometimes strip the bodies of silver and other goods, then toss them back into the river. My family made it across the river to the refugee camp in Thailand. Some people returned to Laos, while others were accepted as refugees to the United States, France, Australia, and Canada. I stayed in the refugee camp for nine months, then came to the U.S. with my wife, my daughter, and my brother.

It was 1980 then, and we spoke no English. I attended high school for my first time, and years later starting working as an interpreter and cultural mediator for Healthy House in Merced. Since the late morning when I put my mother in that hole and covered her with bushes in the middle of the jungle, I still remember her favorite food, her voice, and I still think about her all the time.

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