

My Viet Nam War: Oral History Project, UC Irvine

Narrator: Hải Nguyễn

Interviewer: Andrew Finney, Kevin Liu

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Transcript

[00:00:00] **Kevin Liu:** Hello. My name is Kevin Liu and sitting next to me is Andrew Finney. [And we are conducting an interview for the My Viet Nam War Oral History Project at UC Irvine]. Today is November 17th, 2021. It is approximately 1:25 in the afternoon. I am conducting this interview in person from Murray Krieger Hall in room 200. I'm here with Mr. Hải Nguyễn, who is conducting this interview across from me.

[00:00:26] **Hải Nguyễn:** Hello Kevin, hello, Andrew.

[00:00:28] **Kevin Liu:** Thank you. Um, so would you like to tell us, uh, when and where you were born?

[00:00:36] **Hải Nguyễn:** Again? My name is Hải Nguyễn and I was born in Saigon, South Vietnam at the time and Vietnam now in 1956.

[00:00:49] **Kevin Liu:** Thank you. In your background survey, you mentioned a lot—a bit about just kind of growing up in Saigon. Can you describe to me a bit of what, uh, you did as a child?

[00:01:07] **Hải Nguyễn:** Yeah, my, uh, earliest memory was probably when I was about four or five years old. And I remember I said to the—how do I call it—that it's a park. It's a pretty, well-known park in downtown Saigon. And, uh, it was very nice because I just, you know, in that urban setting, uh, we didn't see many trees or any empty space at all. So is this park, um, obviously, uh, a lot of space in the trees, shade. And I was riding a tricycle. So that's about my earliest memory. Later on that park was the game pretty much in a very nice private area of Saigon and they still exist for many years. And so that's, that's the earliest memory. And later on, it was pretty much an uneventful childhood except, uh, one time I don't remember exactly the year. It could be 61 or 62. I was 45 and six. So we heard a big speaker outside telling all the residents to stay inside, stay put. And then as a kid I was told to, you know, you need to duck under the table. Okay. So that's another event that I remember. So that's kind of really uneventful for all the way to 1968. And so you see that was 12 years old. We also moved to a different house not too far from the original home. And it was a pretty nice home that my parents built. It has three stories, like a townhouse. Nothing, you know, pretty much

what I considered [a] lower-middle class neighborhood now. Uh, but it was then, uh, that's why they—they bought it from scratch and not all anyway. So what I experienced then was the Tet Offensive as it was known later. So again, just exactly my memory. What happened was that that was a very nice—how do I say—New Year for the Vietnamese? You know, that is the—what I call the "Lunar New Year, which is what we celebrate here. And then when, by when on calendar, I guess it's around February. So that to us is that—people use to compare that as a combination of New Year, Christmas. You combine what. We as school children got about one month off see—so [it] is much longer. But I also remember that it seemed to be, it was the first time we were allowed to have firecrackers, and you know, firecrackers were part of the Tet [celebration]. But again, I was only 12 years old, so I couldn't tell exactly whether it was the first time. But it seemed like it [was.] I didn't remember any fire cracking [in] previous years. So that year there was a lot of fire cracking noise and usually it starts at around midnight. Again, many of these things are like later on when I found out what it was, and I can tell you [inaudible - 06:10]. I thought that evening that, you know, the New Year's Eve going from the end of the year to the New Year, 'there are so many fire cracking noises, and then he goes into [inaudible - 06:20] and things like that. And usually, we did that until maybe one o'clock in the morning, and then we would go to sleep.

[00:06:32] **Kevin Liu:** Yes.

[00:06:34] **Hải Nguyễn:** And early in the morning then, then we heard on the radio. Again, tell everybody to stay home and just slight [warnings]. You know, at first you didn't get all the information. And then later on things, you know, came out, the picture came out clearer and clearer. They told us it was attacks on cities. Obviously, all the children were told to stay home. They were about to go to school. So that's my memory because to children, there's nothing's better than being told you need to stay home—no school—but that's more memorable in that sense. You stay home. Now, and it turned out that we stayed home for quite some time, you know, it's not like one, a few days we were told to stay home. And I think [at the] time, we also had a TV already—a black and white TV. That's also, how we got information.

[00:07:50] **Kevin Liu:** Do you remember anything specific from that television?

[00:07:56] **Hải Nguyễn:** Yeah, so, at that time they usually only have one channel and it's the government channel. So obviously, before people got the news on [the] radio and now they say—you know, there's somebody talking about that. So for the same thing, it's that very, you know, very scratchy, [and] you hear things here and there, and you just told people to stay home. And because you grew up in the environment where you [and] not me—but though people always have a sense of, oh, there's a war going on somewhere. So when you told [people] to stay home and things like that, it's not like, "Oh shit." It's not like, "Oh my God, what's going on?" And people just think that, 'okay, something's going on and it's another thing, but it [keeps on] getting longer and longer.' People couldn't go to the market and things like that. It's very much like how we talked about the [current] pandemic. So, people couldn't go to the market. The market was not open. And at the time, I also remember that refrigerators were kind of new in Vietnam, in Saigon. It's not like it was it was available to everyone. So, my family had a refrigerator. But the habit is that—but it's a small refrigerator. It's nothing like what we seen here. But the custom, the habit is that people will go to the market every day. So, people could not go to the market for food or supplies. But one thing

that was interesting and now again, back then is that because it was a New Year's and in New Year's in Vietnam, people stock up all kind of things because it was just like a custom, you know, you stock up rice, you stock up fruit. Just anything, because for the first three or four days, you're not supposed to go to the market. And then they make all kind of cake—rice cake—all kinds of cake. And that's what kind of saved us (*laughs*) because we ate these things since you couldn't go out to the market. Yeah, so kept on eating these things. So that's kind of what I remember. It was difficult. The time we were told was probably a month, so it's not like a couple of days. It's like every night, we watched TV and [it was] getting more and more serious. Because the Tet Offensive happened two or three times—

[00:11:00] **Kevin Liu:** Yes, there were multiple attempts.

[00:11:11] **Hải Nguyễn:** Yes, there were multiple times. At least three times, because [during] the first wave, then I think we either went back to school already or it calmed down and then they came back again, you know, then you stay home again. So it's almost like the rest of the school year was gone, starting in February which is Tet, and the school year in Vietnam usually ends mid-May, and I remember that's like the whole school year. Just gone.

[00:11:38] **Kevin Liu:** Can you tell us a little bit more about what you did at school?

[00:11:47] **Hải Nguyễn:** Under normal circumstances?

[00:11:53] **Kevin Liu:** Yes. In a normal circumstance for you.

[00:11:52] **Hải Nguyễn:** Yes, in a normal circumstance. As I mentioned, I went to an all-boys school and it's the missionary; it's a Catholic school. That school, I went to that school from grade one to grade twelve all on one campus. And it's pretty much an enclosed area with buildings around it [with] a courtyard in the middle. So pretty much whatever kid[s] were doing. And my life was pretty much uneventful in that sense. Um, the only thing that I kind of had [that] is interesting looking back and finding out it wasn't very far from my home. Uh, it's only about a little bit over two miles, which is, you know, in Vietnam we use the metric system. So it's about three kilometers—two miles. But somehow to us, it's very far because we work here. So we had a school bus come and pick us up in the morning, [and] then we [would] have morning sessions [and then] we would have afternoon sessions except [on] the first day in the afternoon, [when] we were free. So, I went to school just like any other kid. Very uneventful. And I was—except for the period of time when it was a problem. What we call primary school from grades one to five [were] pretty much uneventful. And then starting with six to nine; when I was in grade nine, I was a teenager. I was 15, 16; that's when we became much more aware of what's going on out there. And the reason is that—I think if I remember correctly—it's because at fifteen or sixteen, you had to have some kind of document almost like registering for the draft. So even though [at] fifteen, sixteen, you knew that is something that is like having some type of document.

[00:14:40] **Kevin Liu:** So can you tell us a little bit more about this document? Did you need to take it with you to go places?

[00:14:45] **Hải Nguyễn:** Yes. Right. So that's the kind of just like, you know, coming here kind of a draft people have the time. I think that they also had [an] identify card, but I don't

remember [at] what age I had to carry an identity card [with me]. It could be [age] seventeen, eighteen—grade ten, nine, [or] eleven. But I remember that [in] grade nine, I had some classmates who didn't come back the following year. We found out that they were drafted. So going to grade ten for example, they got drafted. The class is usually about fifty kids—fifty boys, and a few were missing. And we find out later that after they went to the bootcamp or whatever and they came back, that we knew that they were in the army or air force. I had one really good friend and that's what happened to him. And it's because the age—people by the age, just like here, by the time you're eighteen, [you're] supposed to finish high school. So then seventeen [years old]—or grade eleven. But I didn't know that at the time it was not the custom that every kid started school at three or four, right on the clock. Sometimes kids come to school late for whatever reason. So some of my classmates would be two or three years older than me. So folks, when they hit that and they came in, they were not in the right grade. And then they got drafted. So that's—that's when you became aware of what's going on.

[00:16:51] **Kevin Liu:** Did you remember—

[00:16:55] **Hải Nguyễn:**—One more thing is that I also think around that time, grade ten or eleven, [I was] asking whether we should carry you these documents. There were always checkpoints in the city. And you went back to school— usually it's not happening in the morning; usually at dark, there's a checkpoint. They stop you; they check the paper. So that's the kind of thing that I remember.

[00:17:35] **Kevin Liu:** Have you ever seen someone get—forget their papers or anything like that?

[00:17:41] **Hải Nguyễn:** Um, obviously I don't—I don't know, because usually it's not one checkpoint. Usually they spread out like [with] six or seven [or] eight people. Eight people, soldiers or police people. So one guy gets stopped, this guy talks to this person, talks to another person. So there are always two or three people [saying] what's going on, explaining, whatever. You had no idea [who] would be detained or let go. I was stopped one time. I was with my sister, and my sister helped [inaudible - 18:30]. My papers were proper and everything, so they just let me in.

[00:18:29] **Kevin Liu:** Okay. In your background survey, you did mention you had a family that was in—involved in the military.

[00:18:44] **Hải Nguyễn:** Yeah. So, in my family, my older brother was drafted in the military. And then, I also had a brother-in-law who was in the military. And I remember that that's the time of [about] 1968. So that's what happened. So that's also the time when, as I mentioned to you, the mood was very different and so they all got leave to come and celebrate the New Year with family. And then I think that either on the second or third day, then they told everybody to report back to their posts. So, my brother had to return to the military academy. And my brother-in-law also returned to rejoin [his] post. That's when it was unsettling, because later on my brother told us that on the way there, they didn't see the actual fighting, but they did see bodies on the side of the street on the highways. It's only what, about ten, fifteen kilometers—ten miles at most. So it's like a suburb.

[00:20:25] **Kevin Liu:** So when you were sheltering in place during the Tet Offensive, who was with you?

[00:20:36] **Hải Nguyễn:** My parents—my father, my mother—my sister, my, my oldest sister was married and had already moved out of the house but during that event, they moved back because [they wanted] to live together. And that's when I also got to play with my nephew a lot. I was his babysitter in a sense. It was fun. Fun, fun job. I remember that.

[00:21:23] **Kevin Liu:** So, were you always told to stay indoors or were you allowed to go outside momentarily?

[00:21:28] **Hải Nguyễn:** Ah. If I remember [correctly], we always stayed indoors. It's very much like shelter-at-home, two years ago, when we first had that. We had to stay put because nobody knew what's going on. Luckily my townhouse also had enough room, so we didn't feel so claustrophobic. Oh, one thing that I know—I don't remember exactly which month—whether the first wave of the second wave, but the fighting was pretty bad. So about two or three blocks from my home, fighting was pretty bad. There was fire, so the whole area was burned down. You heard gunfire. When you say two, three blocks here, you think it's very close because the houses are pretty big. And then you drive the car. Two or three blocks in Saigon is very tight—highly dense. It's like, oh, it's over there, we never went there. But then, you know, we saw them, the gunshots. As I said, I don't remember exactly which month or what period we also got evacuated. Well, we self-evacuated, meaning that my father and I went to live with a relative in the center of Saigon [in] District 1. We stayed there for probably a week? I don't remember. We also have a townhouse, tall like this [*gestures a tall building*] and then, in the afternoon we went to the rooftop, and we saw smoke coming up [from a] different area of the city, not exactly where our home [was]. And then at the same time, [in] my home, my parents opened it to people who would want to take shelter in that house. So we did that. This [is a bit] of a background for you guys to be aware, you know, something about the shelter. Houses here in California, they're built with wood and drywall. But houses in Saigon were built with concrete—reinforced concrete—and brick wall. It would take—Pretty much, house like stands for a hundred years. The reason it was a shelter because [of] the artillery fire. And again, I don't know exactly what period, but everyone kind of got their sandbags and tried to put them on the rooftop in case. There were random artillery fire into the city, into the residential areas. [inaudible - 25:00] So we also got people a place to stay. So that's kind of [*trails off*]

[00:25:21] **Kevin Liu:** Did you feel that District One was a lot safer than your own district?

[00:25:24] **Hải Nguyễn:** Yes, of course, because District One is where you have the [what you] called, the presidential palace where all the important buildings, all the administration, all these things [were]. So it was pretty much well-protected in that sense. Now having said that, later, I found out that there was fighting at the U.S. embassy, which is [in] District One. But just there. Relatively speaking [in comparison], if you took shelter near Pennsylvania Avenue [in Washington D.C.], then you were relatively safe there.

[00:26:18] **Kevin Liu:** Yeah. So did they provide—did you get provided with rations in District One?

[00:26:26] **Hải Nguyễn:** Rations?

[00:26:27] **Kevin Liu:** Yes.

[00:26:28] **Hải Nguyễn:** No, nothing. It's all based on whatever comes up. Like I say, whatever food that you have in the house. You talk about food rationing, [but] no, no. There is no such a thing. You [were] your own. And that's why I stayed at that. Luckily, [during] the New Year, every family [has] at least rice and fish sauce, you know, for survival. And in terms of rice, you know very well that every house will have [rice, and] if they can afford it, always have a backup rice, unless you were extremely poor. Then you had to get rice every day. You know, things happen, otherwise, you always have a backup [bag of] rice. And especially [during] New Year's [inaudible -27:15]. They don't have anything, that people kind of survive. And then there's a lot of pickles and things like that. Pickled this, pickled that.

[00:27:30] **Kevin Liu:** Yeah.

[00:27:32] **Hải Nguyễn:** And the rice cake. I remember the rice cake because normally I would not be very fond of rice cake. It's really an older tradition because it's pretty—it's just rice, and there's meat in there. But I was not fond of that. But that's just something you have to eat, and there was always that. Every family, they give [rice cakes] as gifts to each other, people put it on the altar [for their] ancestors—[as] offerings.

[00:28:09] **Kevin Liu:** Did you meet anyone that you knew in District One while you were evacuated.?

[00:28:13] **Hải Nguyễn:** No, basically we were—My father and I were only with our relatives. Like I said, people minimized [their presence] on the streets because they had no idea what was going on.

[00:28:36] **Kevin Liu:** Did you still celebrate Tet with your relatives in any way or was it all kinds—or how, what was the mood kind of when you were evacuating?

[00:28:43] **Hải Nguyễn:** Oh, that's like all, any past the celebration already. Celebration is the first one or two days, but it's already happened the first day. So practically, there was no celebration. And after that everyone would—just anxiety and just not knowing what's going on.

[00:29:09] **Kevin Liu:** Were your mother and sister with you?

[00:29:11] **Hải Nguyễn:** No, they were at the house. So that's why it was open to shelter for other people. But only me and my father were evacuated to District 1. My brother, when he went back to the academy and [his] barracks.

[00:29:34] **Kevin Liu:** So after the Tet offensive, did you move back to your home in the third district?

[00:29:37] **Hải Nguyễn:** Yeah. So that was only like, I think it's only about one week or ten days, but that's why I'm—like I say—you got on the rooftop and you saw—you saw action. And then at night, sometimes you see flares. And you see [them]—they shoot them in the sky—you [see] the tracers. You see all these lights, you heard the [inaudible - 30:04]. But it's getting [better]; like, it gets pushed out further for them. It's not that—it was a surprise, but they grouped and pushed them out. You saw all that. And then like here with the pandemic, life slowly resumed normality. And we wait on the TV [to tell us] what's safe to do. And my home, my parent's home was not that far from the market—the open market—there were no supermarkets. Now, again, as a kid you wouldn't know any of these things, but all the food supplies all came from the countryside. If they were able to secure the road to the city for food deliveries, things like that. The situation got better.

[00:31:09] **Kevin Liu:** So how long did it take for you to—for them to start sending kids to school again?

[00:31:18] **Hải Nguyễn:** Yeah, so I don't remember whether it was after the first month or forty days, forty-five days. And that's when my memory was very, vague. I don't even remember whether we did go back to school or we just stayed home the whole time, all the way to May. My memory was quite blurry.

[00:31:49] **Kevin Liu:** Did you get to meet your friends again after the Tet offensive?

[00:31:52] **Hải Nguyễn:** No, not until the school year resumed in September.

[00:32:00] **Kevin Liu:** So when this school year resumed, did you just kind of carry on?

[00:32:04] **Hải Nguyễn:** Yeah, so it went by and we returned to normality just like anything else. You know, they tried the best. They, meaning the government forces, to best stabilize the areas so that life could resume. So that's [what happened] in Saigon. Now, I understand that—from the TV—there was fighting in the center of Vietnam—the central area of Vietnam. So there was much more serious stuff going on [towards] the top of the country. I could only tell you what was going on in Saigon.

[00:32:53] **Kevin Liu:** Did the checkpoints change or were they a lot more strict? How did they change after the Tet Offensive? [Pause] If they changed at all?

[00:33:13] **Hải Nguyễn:** I think relatively speaking, [it was] calmer for a year or two, but then slowly when I was sixteen, seventeen—that's [when] I became much more aware of the checkpoints. But before that, I didn't pay attention to the checkpoints. [At] Fourteen, fifteen [years old,] you're just a kid. But after sixteen— But I [rode] the school bus all the way until I was 14, 15. So on the school bus, there's no checkpoint. But after that, when I had my own life—then I was aware of them. One event—and I think I was maybe fourteen, fifteen—I thought it was really odd. But this was during the day and not too far from my school. At the time, I don't know if you guys remembered the hippie movement in the [United] States.

[00:34:43] **Kevin Liu:** Yes.

[00:34:44] **Hải Nguyễn:** And they have a lot of flowers decorating the buses and things like. So I had a small motorbike—not a motorbike like what you know here—it's probably a thirty-CC engine, very small. It's better than a bicycle. It's a French model. And so, I had a few flowers decorating my bike, and they stopped me. And then they told me to remove all these flowers, all these decorations. Right? You know? Broad daytime. Because they didn't like it. I could, you know, I think [I know] what's going on, but that's just my memory and not just me—and I saw also, I think that's maybe the time where people wore bell bottoms and things like that. Those flowers—because they were sold as decal—[were] very fun, very pretty, things like that.

[00:35:54] **Kevin Liu:** How aware of you of things happening in the U.S. at the time?

[00:35:59] **Hải Nguyễn:** Not at all, not at all. Okay. You had no idea because again, it was considered wartime, and [there was] censorship, be a thing. And I didn't know much English, no. We listened to American music and things like that on the radio—the radio had music. My English was not good enough to listen to the news or anything. And then by spring, when I was sixteen, seventeen, [or] eighteen. I knew there was Times Magazine and Newsweek. But [there] was always censorship. [If there was] something that they didn't like, they just removed it from the publication.

[00:36:53] **Kevin Liu:** Sorry, but did you read any newspapers or did your parents read any newspapers?

[00:37:00] **Hải Nguyễn:** Yeah, we read newspapers when life resumed normality. We got a lot of newspapers, and that's the only way you get information, whatever information. We read newspapers—with the TV and the radio. But mostly the TV because the TV was new and everybody loved it; everybody gathered around the TV to get the news, and there was always the newspaper..

[00:37:30] **Kevin Liu:** Did you work while you were in school?

[00:37:29] **Hải Nguyễn:** No. Uh, actually in—at my time—that's not a practice. Not like here, you get a part-time job or anything like that, so, no.

[00:37:47] **Kevin Liu:** Okay. So you mentioned that you had, you took the school bus to and from the school, right? [*Hải nods*] Did you ever have time after school where you would kind of just go around and do your own thing?

[00:38:08] **Hải Nguyễn:** Yes and no. Okay. I was supposed to do all my activities at school because school has sports: soccer, ping-pong, all these things like that. And my parents were pretty protective. Once I came home—because we lived in a fixed neighborhood with fighting not too far. They knew, but to me I didn't know or didn't care. So it was not completely like you come home, you cannot go to see your friends—like that. But later on, when I was sixteen, seventeen, eighteen—yeah, I could do all of that. It was pretty much calmer. Like around 1970, 71, 72, 73—with my bike, I could go see my friends—that's normality. But [in] 68, 69—you better stay home. Don't get you out.

[00:39:12] **Kevin Liu:** What activities did you do in school?

[00:39:14] **Hải Nguyễn:** Hmm?

[00:39:16] **Kevin Liu:** What activities did you do in school?

[00:39:18] **Hải Nguyễn:** Oh, in school, I played soccer; there was basketball, but I was not very good at that. Also, because I was very nearsighted, and my glasses—it was glass—so I [had] broken a few pairs of glasses. And after that, no more basketball. The ball hit you, and things like that. I played a lot of ping pong—there was a ping pong table—there was foosball. You know foosball? [*Kevin nods*] There were probably like twenty foosball tables, and it was one of my favorites. I remember that it was my favorite activity—playing foosball with friends. And then ping pong later on. I loved ping pong. But that's about the limits of—when I got to 11, 12, there were other clubs. There was some electronic club, you know, people learn about radio and things like that. I don't remember any musical [clubs]. I remember the electronic club.

[00:40:31] **Kevin Liu:** Was the electronic club especially meaningful to you?

[00:40:40] **Hải Nguyễn:** I was curious at the time, but I—you know, it's over there. It's not like you have access to a lot of material and parts and things like that. It required that. So I wasn't interested. Nobody in my family would—you had to buy soldering guns, little [inaudible - 41:00], things like that. It was also expensive, but what's funny is that [it] was considered an afterschool [activity]. There was a father of one of the classmates; he was an accountant working for a pretty big bank. So he taught after school classes in accounting, but actually it was bookkeeping. I don't know how he had access, but he had access to [an] American textbook. So then, I took those bookkeeping classes I think when I was fifteen [or] sixteen, and I really enjoyed it. And the book was wonderful; usually, when we would see American textbooks, you could smell the paper and that was fresh in my memory. So I took accounting, if you [can] call that after school fun.

[00:42:19] **Kevin Liu:** Did it influence your choice of career later?

[00:42:21] **Hải Nguyễn:** Ah, that's also. I don't think that accounting influenced my choice in anyway, somehow I was always interested in the economy and business. Asian parents always don't think much about business and commerce; they all want their children to be [a] doctor, engineer, or lawyer. Everything else is like, “just don't do it.” My family was no exception. I was very much into the—I don't call that the business thinking, but more like economic thinking. The reason I say that is, for example, during the time when I became aware of that, there was always talk about shortage. Shortage of food. Shortage of sugar, shortage of cooking oil. Shortage of this and shortage of that. And then inflation. There's always inflation, and people don't really know what it means. Even [if] you ask people now what [it is, they] don't have a good definition of that. But what it meant to my mom, my parents is that when you buy sugar or cooking oil, it was more expensive. More expensive. [And] more expensive. So even though my family anyway, somehow—my parent's financial management—I certainly think they had to cut back on all kinds of things to the bare minimum. We were not starving or anything [during] Tet. We lived very simple, not like we lived in extravagance. But to the other folks, it was a hard time, especially soldiers'

families—even officer’s families because the pay was low. And so it’s really a big impact. And the reason I mention that is that it piqued my interest—inflation: why is [there] a shortage? I think I was maybe about 13, 14. There was—after school, I take some classes, some courses after school. And in Saigon, there are only two seasons: the dry season and the wet season. When it rained, it rained like crazy. So I had someone in the neighborhood who had a cycle [carriage]—you know about the pedicab? So somebody [would] sit in the front, and he would pedal you. So distinctively [I] remembered that moment that I was in there, and it was raining like crazy outside, and he pulled a cover on me so I wouldn’t see anything—it’s like a tarp. He was in the back [with] his poncho on. [inaudible - 46:10] So he took me home. So then like I kind of became aware of the condition of people—working people—and that’s kind of somehow, somehow, influenced my thinking. So later on, I went to study economics to address the question of poverty. What can we do—things like that [about] food shortage, inflation. So it was my thing, and I wanted to answer those questions.

[00:47:02] **Kevin Liu:** Did your parents ever—did you know anyone that ever joined the military willingly?

[00:47:11] **Hải Nguyễn:** Anyone who joined the military was willing.

[00:47:14] **Kevin Liu:** Like they chose to join.

[00:47:20] **Hải Nguyễn:** Uh, I cannot speak for them. I only knew it in my—it's like at the time, I'm sure there was [something] like over here. People were [probably] commissioned, volunteered, and there were [probably] people from the draft. But later on I became aware of that for the people who volunteered, they went to a different academy. It’s like West Point [in Vietnam]. It’s a four-year school. But people who didn’t join—who got drafted—they [went] to an academy that was only [for] one year. They called it the “reserves” school, but you didn’t know when you got out. When you’re reserves—you don’t know. So that’s the people who got drafted. They go to that military school.

[00:48:08] **Kevin Liu:** Was that the case for your brother and your brother-in-law?

[00:48:16] **Hải Nguyễn:** Yes. But I also have one relative who went through the military academy for four years. So, you know, like professional soldiers.

[00:48:24] **Kevin Liu:** So, you mentioned how you had a friend that would take you back and forth to places with the carriage. Right?

[00:48:338] **Hải Nguyễn:** Can you repeat that?

[00:48:37] **Kevin Liu:** You mentioned that you had a friend who would take you back and forth in a carriage, right?

[00:48:48] **Hải Nguyễn:** Oh no, no, he wasn't a friend. He was a worker. That’s his job. He lives in the neighborhood.

[00:48:53] **Kevin Liu:** Okay.

[00:48:55] **Hải Nguyễn:** It just happened that he lived, you know, like we were out here, they maybe [lived] in a small house inside of the neighborhood; it's like a taxi service. So if you know that there's somebody—you know, like an Uber taxi service, so you use that service. Yeah. So, but that's his job. That's his main job. It's not a friend of family or anything.

[00:49:14] **Kevin Liu:** Did you ever leave district three outside of just going to school?

[00:49:22] **Hải Nguyễn:** Did I ever leave District 3—

[00:49:25] **Kevin Liu:** For reasons other than going to school.

[00:49:27] **Hải Nguyễn:** Oh yeah. You know, like later on when I was sixteen, seventeen eighteen—the last three years, I was old enough. I started with a bike—a bicycle—and then I lost that bicycle; it got stolen. I went to the bookstore [and] parked it outside. I came out. It wasn't there. So it was stolen. Right. But with a bike, I already gained my first kind of freedom. My parents let me—with the bike—roam around, go anywhere where I want to, and then after that I got a little moped. And that's the one—the moped—that kind that had all the flowers that got removed. And so I think that was probably [when] I was sixteen, seventeen and then my last one was—I have a scooter so [with] that I go around. I go to, let's say maybe ten, fifteen kilometers outside of Saigon—outside of the center. And then I had friends. I had friends that lived in [a] different area. So I went to see them. So I was not—this idea that you would go see your friend—was no big deal. I think about that.

[00:50:45] **Kevin Liu:** Did you go out with your friends to certain places?

[00:50:50] **Hải Nguyễn:** Yes. I only remember one time my parents let me go to [the] seaside. It [was] a one hour bus drive from Saigon. It's about a hundred kilometers, which is [about] sixty miles. Something like that. It's a pretty well-known seaside resort. And only one time my parents let me go. It's a school—it's a school outing, [being at] the seaside for a week and things like that with classmates, people my age. And even that, like I say before—my parents—it was always concerning [to them] that the road wasn't safe. And what I mean by “it wasn't safe” is that they stopped the public bus and took people out, and they'd be done.

[00:51:52] **Kevin Liu:** So did, were these like very rare trips?

[00:51:53] **Hải Nguyễn:** Yeah. I only got to go one time to the [inaudible - 52:55]. One time with the school and one time with the family.

[00:52:10] **Kevin Liu:** Were your parents particularly worried about something happening while you were either traveling in the city?

[00:52:21] **Hải Nguyễn:** In hindsight, looking back, I'm sure that my father always worried. My parents, my father—my father always worried [about me]. But you just had to weigh [your options]. You cannot lock up your kid at home all the time. So, they must have felt pretty good, very safe in order to get me a moped later on. I think some things got better after 71, 72, 73, and 74. Things got better. [The danger] could be outside of the city, but in the city,

it was pretty safe. But they wouldn't feel comfortable if I said, "Oh, can I go to the seaside with my friend?" No. So [I] had to think about that.

[00:53:19] **Kevin Liu:** Going back to kind to the seaside trip, what did you do there?

[00:53:23] **Hải Nguyễn:** Oh, the seaside is fun. It's love[ly]. It's like, you know, people [going] beach, uh, It is a lot of fun. It's like the first time you [being] outside of the urban setting. You see a golden beach and the feeling I had at the beach there, I had never gotten here in California because the water there was warm—a tropical beach compared to how cold it is at a beach here. So I remember—I was like ten, twelve years old. After the Tet events, so maybe 70, 71. I went there; you could be in the water for the whole day; you didn't want to get out. And then, you had no idea about sunburn [*chuckles*]. We were city boys; we had no idea—we got sunburned. I mean, it was—it just burned—we couldn't sleep; it hurt so badly, and you had no lotion, no sunscreen, no nothing! You had no idea about these things. You just suffered. And then I came back here, and my [skin] was like charcoal. My skin was like charcoal—two weeks later, it peeled off, but those were wonderful childhood memories that I had. We had a relative living in the city—in a town that was about eight miles from the beach—so we stayed with our aunty there and they had a little cab, not even [a] truck or everything. My uncle took us. I had a cousin my age—he was one or two years older—and a couple younger, so we were all at the beach and we used those [inaudible - 55:35], and that was just wonderful. That's the best childhood memory I've ever had growing up in the city.

[00:55:50] **Kevin Liu:** When you got back to the city, did you—what kind of rules did the government put on you? Like, did you have a curfew or anything of the sort?

[00:55:57] **Hải Nguyễn:** I think I remember vaguely about some curfew, but nothing that is concrete in my memory. But again, the idea is that curfew or no curfew, you don't want to go out in the evening unnecessarily. You could go out in the neighborhood fine. But not—like I said, we got stopped one time. One time—at the checkpoint—I got stopped. That's the kind of thing at night. That's when they did all these things. And then the older I got—like sixteen, seventeen, eighteen—[it was] definitely my turn. Somebody [had to] be with me. There was—we don't know if it was true or not. There were rumors and things like that, that if you got stopped at a checkpoint you got—and then you didn't know where your kid was taken to. And then two months later they came back, [and] they were saying, "who cared?" So that's the kind of environment. But again, I was luckier than most.

[00:57:14] **Kevin Liu:** So changing the subject a little bit. Did your mom—did your sister attend school?

[00:57:26] **Hải Nguyễn:** Uh, yes, but they were a little bit older than me already. So, uh, they finished school [already]. So, when I attended school, it's not like I was there with my sibling or anything like that. They were older than me. And so they moved on. They moved out already; I was the youngest.

[00:57:46] **Kevin Liu:** What did your sister and mom do while you were at school?

[00:57:54] **Hải Nguyễn:** It's the same event [and happenings] at the time. You just sheltered in place and had to take care of kids—things like that. Nothing in particular, nothing special

during the time. Later on, when I say that life resumed normality, just like here, they go to the market, they help prepare the meals and things like that. That's pretty much the full-time occupation of my sister [and mother].

[00:58:29] **Kevin Liu:** Were you or your father ever worried about your mother or your sister?

[00:58:32] **Hải Nguyễn:** Much less than they had to worry about [when it came to] the boys. So much less. They were not in any harm's way.

[00:58:54] **Kevin Liu:** So what did your parents work as during the war?

[00:59:00] **Hải Nguyễn:** My mom was a housewife. Like most of the women at the time. My father worked for a private pharmaceutical company as a staff—nothing special. We were not—my family was not associated with the military or the business or anything.

[00:59:34] **Kevin Liu:** So for your father, right? What kind of—you mentioned that he had like some career goals for you, right? Did he ever push you towards doctor, lawyer?

[00:59:45] **Hải Nguyễn:** No, my parents didn't have any career [goals for me]. I didn't get any pressure from my parents in terms of career goals. I was just saying in general.

[00:59:59] **Kevin Liu:** Yeah.

[01:00:01] **Hải Nguyễn:** All parents wish, but my parents, they didn't—actually my father just said, yeah, don't worry about [it], you do what you like to do. I know my mother was kind of disappointed, but it's not like it was obvious. It's not like, why didn't you go to school? Or why didn't you go to law school and things like that. So maybe they did, but for them, I knew that in their mind, why would people need to go to a business school, to run [a] business? Say the idea is that you open [a] Starbucks—a coffee shop—why would you need to go to a business school? You see what I mean? [*chuckles*]

[01:00:42] **Kevin Liu:** Yes.

[01:00:44] **Hải Nguyễn:** And then in term of the economy, it's something too big for them, bigger than they could have imagined. They don't know what an economist does; they're pretty simple people.

[01:00:56] **Kevin Liu:** So was it in their plans for you to study abroad?

[01:01:00] **Hải Nguyễn:** Was it in their plan? Uh, yes. In the sense that for most people—most people who attended my school—many of them would go abroad to study. So that's was kind of their wish—their hope. Yeah. So in that sense, they say— [Maybe] you want your son to be a lawyer. Yeah. But there are many steps, many milestones before that materialize. You better get into a good program, better get some good grades, better get a good GRE score, get a good LSAT [score]. Every milestone like that. So I, I knew my parents would

secretly wish, [but] it's not like they would say, "You have to go here [and] you have to do this." But I think that—I remember that they always pushed me to study, and they had practical reasons for being [this strict]. You say that in any circumstance that you can always—[there's] this expression—you can always sell your knowledge to make a living, and that's between your ears. People cannot take it away from you. And that's kind of the way they put that, and since I am also the [youngest,] they also encouraged me. But they encouraged me to study. Not that you had to achieve this in order to do this. But as things got more concrete—like I approached high school and things like that—and I did well. At the time, you had to pass an exam to finish high school. [It wasn't] that you would graduate automatically. And that was considered pretty tough; as a matter of fact, that was the toughest exam I ever had. *[laughs]* Considering all the academic training I had, it was tough and very stressful because if you fail, you had to repeat the whole year. And in my case—well, not exactly in my case—[but] for many people, if they failed, they would end up in the army. The draft. When you [hit] 18 years old, and if you don't take it—but in my case, because my brother was already in the army, I was spared. Just like the other [inaudible - 01:03:48] If you were the only son left, [the government] moved on. So that was the pressure—the pressure to do well. And then your [inaudible - 1:03:59] came, and it's not easy to enroll overseas. There were all kinds of requirements. There were requirements like language training—you had to be proficient at a certain level. You heard of the TOEFL test?

[01:04:19] **Kevin Liu:** Yes, definitely.

[01:04:21] **Hải Nguyễn:** If you wanted to go to America or Australia, you needed to achieve a certain score for the TOEFL. If you wanted to go to France or French-speaking Europe, there were [requirements] like that; you had to achieve a certain proficiency for these things. Then you had to get admission from the university there. So it's a whole dossier, a whole thing that you have to apply in order to [attend]. It's not like you wish [for it], and it would happen. It's like, okay, what's that? Better cross my fingers.

[01:05:02] **Kevin Liu:** Did wartime ever interrupt your studies? We already talked about—a bit about—how the Tet Offensive kind of canceled the rest of the school year.

[01:05:12] **Hải Nguyễn:** Right.

[01:05:14] **Kevin Liu:** Were there any times where you got interrupted—

[01:05:16] **Hải Nguyễn:** Luckily, there was no interruption of that until high school. Except, like I mentioned that sometimes, you didn't see your friend come back. Either they got drafted or—another thing is that—many of them [went] to another school at night and then tried to skip class. They [would] be in the tenth grade, and they would take classes so that they could be in the eleventh grade. And if they made it, they would fall into the right bracket, and they wouldn't get drafted in the next year. See what I mean? So some of my friends did that. It was either that they were a year older or that they wanted to go overseas a year earlier. But I was just at my age [and grade level]. Now, speaking of that, I did realize how lucky I was because had my parents enrolled me in school a year later, I would have had to do all these things. That was very stressful and [inaudible - 1:06:27]

[01:06:33] **Kevin Liu:** So you went to university in Paris, correct?

[01:06:37] **Hải Nguyễn:** Yeah. So, first I wanted to go to [an] American university, [but] then they have a requirement that you have to have somebody here to sponsor you. And we knew nobody [*chuckles*] in America. This chicken or the egg issue. Now this, I think it was both from the U.S. government's requirement and the Vietnamese government's requirements. Because before I think that it had been much easier, but then they realize that, well an 18-year-old kid, here all by himself, living on campus—there were a lot of psychological issues. But then by the time I was applying for that, they said, “Oh, you better have somebody that will vouch for you.” Take care of you on the weekend, things like that. I didn't have any [sponsors], so I couldn't go to the U.S. even though I had met all the requirements—I met all the requirements. Actually, [rewind] back a little bit. The last three years of high school, I, [using] my moped, was able to go to take English classes after school. So that's how I met all these [requirements]. But I couldn't go to the U.S.. We knew somebody in France, so then—a relative—this guy [said,] “Okay, I will vouch for this person.” So then I was able to go to [France]. You see, that's why I said it's not that simple. You can think about it, but all of a sudden there's a new requirement. [Another] new requirement. [And another] new requirement.

[01:08:19] **Kevin Liu:** Did you take English classes at a different school that wasn't Lasalle Taberd?

[01:08:25] **Hải Nguyễn:** Ah, good question. There was what you called the Vietnamese American Association in Saigon. Actually, there was a language center like—I don't know about here—if it was a [inaudible - 01:08:40] or German institute? So there is one for English, and I took those classes after school. So you see, all the time, it was really preparing for academics; there's no time to play because you have to accumulate as many skills as possible.

[01:09:12] **Kevin Liu:** So, you mentioned that once you left Paris, you started collecting some newspapers and journals about what was happening in Vietnam.

[01:09:19] **Hải Nguyễn:** Well, so I went to Paris a year before the fall of Saigon, so that by the time it got to April, we saw it in the news. But as a student there, I had no access to a TV. So we always had to go and find somebody who had a TV and watch the news. We had access—they sell them everywhere—[to] kiosks selling newspapers and magazines. Every magazine at the time was about the Vietnam War. You couldn't [not] see it. So I saw those copies, and I bought them. Somehow, I thought of it like a [inaudible - 01:10:20]—so there were recordings on TV about the fighting. What was memorable to me was the nightly news [where] they kept on coloring the map red to show the advance of the Communist forces. It was very depressing for me and my friends. A couple of our friends looking at—watching these things—was very depressing for us.

[01:10:57] **Kevin Liu:** Were there a lot of Vietnamese students at your university in Paris?

[01:10:56] **Hải Nguyễn:** Yeah. Uh, when you say a lot, it would be—I don't know—maybe a few hundred, but they're all spread out too. Just to show you how difficult it was to connect to people. I lived in a boarding house, and there's only one phone in the hallway—one telephone. People [don't] have phones—no portable, no nothing—but the way we got connected to each other was—we always had to go to the cafeteria to eat. So throughout

Paris, there were several campuses. Each campus had a cafeteria. If, for example, you lived in District 3, there's a cafeteria for students there. So you meet a few people who're [attending] the campus there. And then on the weekend, they usually closed—they opened—how can I say, what's the expression? If there were four in Paris, they would close three and only open one. So everybody had to go to that one to eat. And that's when you [were like,] "Oh, ok," [and] met a new face.

[01:12:26] **Kevin Liu:** Did you have contact with your parents from Paris?

[01:12:29] **Hải Nguyễn:** Oh, my [inaudible - 01:12:34]? The mail took [a] minimum [of] two weeks—one week to get to Vietnam, one week to return to France. So that lasts two weeks. But it's funny because the first month I was there, there was a strike [at] the post office. So, [for] one month, my parents had no news from me. I had so many things to deal with in the first month, so I wasn't thinking much. But I am sure my parents were worried sick about that. It's like, I went to Paris, and they didn't hear from me for a whole month. No news, no nothing.

[01:13:17] **Kevin Liu:** Did you and your [parents] maintain kind of regular contact up until the fall of Saigon?

[01:13:19] **Hải Nguyễn:** Yeah. So again, after that for them, you know, that's the only thing I know is [to] write, right? Every week, I [would] write. And then they would write. And so every week I got a letter that was like—I come home, and that's all I wanted to see. Mail from Vietnam. That was the only comfort that I had. I came back from school, and we got mail. And then I would also go to my friends to [inaudible - 01:13:52]. The hardest thing was when I went to Paris, all of my friends stayed behind. Some of them went to other countries, but we had no idea where. It's not like there was Facebook; it's not like you had [a map]. So whoever remained there, I wrote to them, [and] they wrote to me. So the only thing that sustained morale at the time was the mail from home.

[01:14:23] **Kevin Liu:** So when did you start reading newspapers or collecting things about Vietnam?

[01:14:30] **Hải Nguyễn:** Yeah, I mentioned—when it got to around March, then they stopped reporting on these things and then [*trails off*]. But that was just reporting on the fighting, and then it really got intensified in April. And then after April, that's when you know—whatever that the, uh—because the French reporters or, you know, the Germans, they had no problems staying in Vietnam. So they stayed behind and were able to send some reports out. But the Americans probably all left already by that time. From over there, we were able to get some news. I think there were almost like blackouts in May, June—blackouts [for the] news. So then whatever I [saw] in magazines that had an article or some [information], we just checked it over there. We just [went] to read, browse through [to see if] there was something there. I would buy the magazine to keep. It's not like I was rich or anything. You had to be—you had to watch every dime [you] would spend. So I only got a few magazines.

[01:15:58] **Kevin Liu:** So after the fall of Saigon, did you and your parents still manage to keep regular content?

[01:16:03] **Hải Nguyễn:** Ah, that's a—that's a good question. No. So I had no idea. In my mind. I just thought that, okay, my family was stuck there. Oh, they did show on TV, you know, all the chaos—chaotic scenes in Saigon the last few days. And I say, “Well, I am hopeful, [but] my parents are old; there’s no way they could make it out.” People fighting to get on the ship, the plane; and they had no relationship with the Americans or anybody [for the matter]. I kind of [*pauses*] basically lost hope after that. And I said, “Okay, I’m on my own now.”

[*BREAK*]

[01:17:01] **Hải Nguyễn:** I had a classmate who lived in a town in France outside Paris, about 100 kilometres from Paris.

[01:17:13] **Kevin Liu:** Mmhm.

[01:17:14] **Hải Nguyễn:** And so I—around March, April, I decided to move out there to be with him.

[01:17:25] **Kevin Liu:** Mmhm.

[01:17:23] **Hải Nguyễn:** [*inaudible* - 1:17:27] because, you know, cost of living was very expensive in Paris. Aside from [*inaudible* - 01:17:44]. So I have some friends [around]. There was maybe a few—a dozen—Vietnamese students in that town. And then, near I think, either the first week of May, there was some guy who had a car, and he had to go to Paris. So he asked, “Anybody want to go to Paris? I can give you guys a ride.” Otherwise, it would cost—I think—about sixty francs or something like that for the ticket. But the round trip could be [about] a hundred francs, which was a lot of money. To give you an idea exactly [how much money] it was, it cost two francs and fifty cents for a meal. So if you had to spend a hundred francs for a round trip, you can just divide—

[01:18:35] **Kevin Liu:** Yeah.

[01:17:23] **Hải Nguyễn:** [And] see how many meals you can eat. But he gave me a ride and a few others. So I went to Paris, and then I went to the embassy, because people said, “Want to see if there was any news or anything like that?” So together with them, I went to the [American] embassy. The embassy was in the process of closing. And then, I saw a distant relative that I didn’t know very well, but they were [*inaudible* - 01:19:18]. They also happened to live in France. And they said that they heard that my parents made it out okay. That’s all I heard from them. They gave me a number [and] said, “You want to know more, call this number in the U.S..” And I remember distinctively—I went to a florist a few doors down from the embassy. A florist. And I go to the lady there, and I said, “Is there any way you would let me use the phone and just find out if my parents made it?” And they knew; they saw all the commotion at the embassy and [they’re probably] thinking ‘what’s going on.’ They said, “Sure,” and it was very nice. Now, one thing you need to understand [is] that in France at the time, [when] you made a call, there was no line item. You had no ID, you just got a bill. And it was a very expensive call, those calls. It’s not like here, it will say, “This call will be four dollars, five dollars.” So they didn’t have billing like that. But I knew that it was an expensive call. But they told me, “Yeah, go ahead and use it. Call [it].” So I called; I

called, and later on, I found out that it was somewhere in Downey. You know the city of Downey?

[01:20:54] **Kevin Liu:** Yes.

[01:20:42] **Hải Nguyễn:** And then the people there told me that yeah, they saw my, uh—well, that’s the house of a lady, and her parents also made [it] out. She lived with them for a few years already, so she said that she heard that [inaudible - 1:21:18] made it out of the camp “How to contact them,” she said, “I have no idea.” There’s no camp; it stopped there. But at least you know that they got out, and I said, “Anybody else got out with them?” And they said, “I don’t know.” That’s about the only piece of information they [had]. And I [took a breath] of relief. But at first, that’s a relief; and it’s how the human mind works—because after the initial euphoria [of], “Oh my parents got out alive!” the next thing you [think about] was ‘what they gonna do [*laughs*] to live in America? They’re old, they don’t speak English, they have no job prospects [*laughs softly throughout*].’ That [was] the next set of worries. And that’s how I felt at the time. And you constantly ever since—that’s the question of survival. And then, I was going to—so knowing that, again, I paid more attention to whatever they reported in the magazines, newspapers—because usually, newspapers don’t have pictures. They only have news. But Times Magazine, Newsweek—they had pictures. So I paid more attention to those pictures because they probably reported on the refugees, how they arrive here, camp out—all these. You get an idea of what’s going on. So I saw these things. When I went to the U.S. embassy and asked if I could come to the U.S. on a tourist visa, and they said, “No, it’s too chaotic right now. You have to wait until things stabilize, and then come back. When? We don’t know.” So then that was it. You just had to wait, [bide] time. You got the news, the TV, the magazines; like the magazine, it was like a blackout [of] news in Vietnam, things like that.

[01:22:38] **Kevin Liu:** Yes.

[01:22:40] **Hải Nguyễn:** But in the U.S., they started reporting on the refugees. So—

[01:23:46] **Kevin Liu:** After all of this, did you celebrate Tet in Paris?

[01:22:17] **Hải Nguyễn:** Ah, so in February? That’s, again, around the time of Tet. I did go with the one Tet party there, but it [had] a somber mood because by February people already got the sense [that] it’s getting serious. So wasn’t exactly a very good celebration—just more like comfort [in] seeing people in [a] similar situation—like you. But in Paris, they always had a big celebration every year. But that year—that was the first time I attended. And I could tell that it was not a fun time. Everyone had something, [everybody] tried to ask someone [else] [inaudible - 1:24:50]. Speaking of that, it’s also interesting that once after April—so I moved—

[01:25:01] **Kevin Liu:** Mhm.

[01:25:02] **Hải Nguyễn:** To outside Paris—I moved to [inaudible - 01:25:02] with my friends—and then there is a French education system. People have an organization that takes care of students, so they call us up and they give each of us a few hundred francs. Yeah. This was nice. Because they knew that we [wouldn’t] get any—[were] cut off all the financial

support from family and things like that. So they just give each of us a few hundred francs. And I made—my friends, actually—he went a year earlier. He was one of those that I told you had taken classes at night.

[01:25:47] **Kevin Liu:** Yes.

[01:25:49] **Hải Nguyễn:** So he made it out a year earlier. So he was already in school. He finished up the first year successfully. So he made plans—for him. And then since I joined him, let me join his plans. He said, [in] previous years, he went to Paris and worked as a dishwasher, and it was too tough [*laughs*]. He said, this year we should each get a bicycle—get an old bicycle. And we go to the post office and we get—we ask for a part-time job. Because in France, usually in August, everything goes on vacation. And so that's why they use a lot of students [for] part-time [work] to deliver the mail. But that was his plan for him; we [would] work in the post office instead of going to do dishwashing. [*laughs*]. And so that was our plan. And I—he got me a room in the dorm, which was late at night, [it was] I mean, so much nicer than in Paris. It's like an American dorm here you see, but the French—very interesting is that [it was] one student, the room—no roommate. And it was sad, you know, it was very lonely. You had no roommate. Nobody to talk to. But that's [how it was] over there. He and I stayed in the same dorm. He got me a room; I was qualified for a room because I [had] a student status, and it was not like [it was] fully occupied. So we were talking. And, oh man, I got to take a shower. [*chuckles*] Thinking of that, you think it's funny, but in 1973, 74, that was when there was an oil crisis.

[01:27:48] **Kevin Liu:** Yes.

[01:27:49] **Hải Nguyễn:** I don't know if you knew that. So in Paris, energy prices quadrupled or whatever. So technically, there's hot water [and] cold water. And I turned on the hot water, [but] it kept on being cold. I [left] it for like fifteen minutes—it's still cold. I mean, practically there's no hot water and it was the winter.

[01:28:15] **Kevin Liu:** Yeah.

[01:27:16] **Hải Nguyễn:** Very cold and I only had a sink in the room. That's a standard student room. Only a sink. The bathroom is out in a hallway—it's shareable, but there's no shower. So in order to take a shower, you have to go to some public places. So I got a little bit clever—I saw there was a student gym at school. And I remember, you had to pay seventy-five francs for membership. So I paid seventy-five francs—again you calculate that based on the two-fifty a meal to see how much it is. But I got to take a hot shower in the gym. But funny that there was no hair blower. I never see any French people use hairblowers. So, we all had wet hair, and I had to put on my coat, my scarf, [and opened up] my umbrella in the rain. And then we would walk home with wet hair. So that's how life was like in Paris. When I moved to the town—it's like a dorm here, you have things like that—and they had hot water. Oh my gosh, it was like heaven compared to what we experienced in Paris. So that's the time after—in May, June. May [and] June. That's how I spent time with those people there.

[01:29:50] **Kevin Liu:** How—

[01:29:47] **Hải Nguyễn:** And then we commiserate with each other. Give each other moral support, [getting an idea] of what we need to do to survive the next three years.

[01:30:01] **Kevin Liu:** Was living in Paris—how did that compare to living in Vietnam?

[01:30:09] **Hải Nguyễn:** I was too young to know how lucky I was to be in Paris. But just to compare the standard living—the conditions—I wrote [to] my family. I said, “Yeah, I got to take a hot shower at home, but here in Paris— This'll give you an idea. The first month, I didn't take any showers [*laughs*] but that's the standard of living for students. Very expensive. The shower is not something that you consider a standard. Now in Vietnam, it's not like we were rich or anything. It's not like we had a shower either. Like you have a basket of water—there's always water. And then you, I remember—

[01:30:51] **Kevin Liu:** Yeah.

[01:30:52] **Hải Nguyễn:** We boil hot water and then you pour it down, mixed, with cold water to the right temperature. And then we take a bath. But at least we've got to do that everyday because it was very hot and humid. You had to have a shower. Like I said, that's my comparison of the standards of living in Paris versus in Saigon. I didn't get to shower every day. [*laughs*]

[01:31:19] **Kevin Liu:** Yeah. So when did you move to the United States?

[01:31:24] **Hải Nguyễn:** Okay. So as I mentioned that I needed—uh, I couldn't get a visa. And then, one weekend [*pauses*] in July—I think that was around the middle of July. I went out to celebrate the French independence day, July 14. Then after that, somehow, I got [a] telegram. [It told] me to contact the duty officer of the U.S. embassy. Immediately. So in France, at the time, they sent telegrams. And the telegram—they have a very fancy system that came back all [the way] to the post office. It used the tube; it used the pneumatic tube [system]. So you put it in there and send. It would get to whatever district near where you lived—and that's how I got that. So I called, and the duty officer told me that I had twenty-four hours to decide whether I would go to the United States or not. And if I did, I would not be able to return to France. It was one-way. And the reason [was] because my father was very ill. [*pauses*] He was in the hospital. We called them—later a humanitarian [organization]—I think [it was] the Red Cross. So then, I contacted them and they gave me twenty-four hours to respond. But I contacted them, and I said, “Okay, I will go.” That was how I started the motion—and then, they said, “Okay, you need to gather all your belongings; when [can] get you that?” I had to go and—I had some savings from the post office [job]. That was the weekend, and they had to make me—make you—go to a central place to withdraw your money. And then I also asked a friend—a French person, a French friend—ahead of time. That person took me there [to] withdraw my savings. And then [he] took me to the U.S. embassy and dropped me off there. And so I went in; I got to the officer—the embassy officer—that took care of my case. Pretty early, but I think her name was Nancy Green. And so she said, “Ok, [we're going] to start the process for you to go to the U.S..” And I had to [do] the oath and all the things. I had no idea what she was saying, and I just nodded ‘yes.’ [*laughs*] And then she got a taxi, and she accompanied me to the airport. Then, we couldn't find a flight because that was in July. Crowded and a lot of tourists. So I kind of saw [her] calling somebody, and then something like—she probably asked [like], “What am I going to

do”—all kinds of movements, things like that. And it seemed like either she said to me or she said to the [inaudible - 1:35:30], I don't remember, something about, “Even if we have to move [to] first class”—something like that. But she was able to find an economy class for me. So she got me on the airplane. I remember riding the taxi in the back with her. I asked her where she's from, and she said she's from Ohio. So she took care of me [and] put me on the plane. I had no idea where I was heading—even on that plane. I knew I was going to America. [pauses] I knew—I didn't even know I was heading to Los Angeles. So I was on the airplane—oh, Ms. Green told me—she gave me a yellow envelope. Those big envelopes that we use here. She gave [it] to me and said, “When you [arrive] in the U.S., give it to the official that [will] come and see you. That's all she said. So I was on the airplane. I remember, I was sitting next to a couple. They [were] probably coming back from vacation in Paris. So they asked me, and I said that I came to join my family. So they could tell—I told them that I was Vietnamese and blah blah blah. But they were very nice. I remember that they got a [set of] headphones for me. Those things were roughly—at the time—you had to buy [on airplanes], and I had no money. So they could afford to listen to music and whatever. So, when the airplane landed in New York—New York City—they said goodbye to me, wished me with luck, and all these things. So I just stayed on the airplane. I had no idea; the airplane was all empty. Everybody left, and I was the only one sitting. And there were three gentlemen in black suits [that] came. One of them, I think, was Asian, so I don't know whether he was the main person or— He came straight to me and they said, “You have anything for us?” So I gave them the yellow envelope I got. And he opened it, he read it, and then he said, “Your sponsor is waiting for you in Los Angeles.” That's the first time I knew that I [was going] to Los Angeles. That was—what a relief. I had no idea. I don't know whether— Oh, I did know that I was going to California. But my sponsor lived in a very small city, and it's not like you had Google Maps that you could tell. I looked at a map in France and couldn't find the town. So I had no idea where in California I was [going]. So that was the first time I knew I was going to Los Angeles. So that's my kind of—that was July something.

[01:39:07] **Kevin Liu:** Okay. When you arrived here, did you celebrate any major holidays with your family? Did you get to?

[01:39:17] **Hải Nguyễn:** Well, speaking of that, as I mentioned, the reason I came because my father was very sick.

[01:39:27] **Kevin Liu:** Yes.

[01:39:28] **Hải Nguyễn:** So there was no—nothing fun about that. I remember the first Thanksgiving. It was very hard; My sponsor's families are trying their best to—how do I say—enliven the mood? But everything was so bad. [*He speaks more softly.*] They came over for Thanksgiving. And they had eggnog; I remember that. But it was a very somber Thanksgiving. Thanksgiving was the end of November. My father passed away in January. So you could see, he was very ill at the time, but he made an effort to come. At the time, the hardest thing for us was—we lived in a suburb—you just didn't see anybody. You just didn't see any people. In the evening one year, it's like [there were] no people; everybody stayed indoors because it was cold. I came from Paris; you can walk out and you see people just like [that]. But in the suburbs it's no—everybody stayed inside. It's cold. We knew nobody, and we had no way to contact anybody. Here was the hardest time for my parents and for me too. Me especially—I was able to speak English. Speaking of that, let me share with you how I

picked up English. As I mentioned, I did take English in Vietnam. I passed the exam, blah blah blah. But the moment I got to the airport here, there's no way I could understand whatever they [were] saying on the speaker. No way. I could understand all the reading words, the signs and everything—but when they talked, it was just too fast. I [had to] get used to that. So what I learned is that—we stayed in an apartment, so we always had free newspapers, like the daily news—so at night, I watched the six o'clock news. Six to six-thirty—that's when they have the main news. The thirty-minute news with the best anchorman or anchorwoman. If I pressed [channel] one, they spoke evenly. So I listened to that, and then I read those free newspapers—because they also had some of the news—so when you read that, you see through the world but you don't know how to say it. So then at night, they repeat some of the main news; then you can say, "That's how you pronounce it." So that's how I got it. And after three months, I got familiar with listening too—and speaking. That's how I learned English at the time. Everything came back. [When] you learn, you learn the vocabulary and all these [other] things. Something else that's interesting is that we learned English in Vietnam, but we learned formal English. So, for example, I never learned that you could say "hi;" we only learned that you could say "hello." So when I came here and people said "Hi," I thought that they [were] calling my name. So I didn't know that was a "hello." So then a lot of idioms and all these things. So these are the hardest things for immigrants or refugees or whatever—it doesn't matter how much English they know when they come here. When people speak with idioms, they have a hard time. But [for] me, that's how I picked up English.

[01:44:06] **Kevin Liu:** Thank you for telling us this story.

[01:44:09] **Hải Nguyễn:** Hm?

[01:44:10] **Kevin Liu:** Thank you for telling us this story.

[01:44:13] **Hải Nguyễn:** Yeah, I thought it was interesting, you know, to share with you guys.

[01:44:15] **Kevin Liu:** This will then conclude our November 17th, 2021 interview with Mr. Hải Nguyễn. Mr. Hải Nguyễn, thank you again for participating in this project.

[01:44:25] **Hải Nguyễn:** You are very welcome. I'm glad I can share some of my story with you guys. [I hope this] meets your objectives.