



Newsday photo by Audrey Tiernan

Life and Times of Le Van Minh

BY IRENE VIRAG

Le Van Minh was not quite 4 years old when Saigon fell to the Communists and the last Americans left Vietnam in the spring of 1975. He doesn't remember the sound of artillery fire and rockets exploding at dawn. He doesn't remember the burning buildings or the communist tanks rolling down the streets or the soldiers in green pith helmets who would transform Saigon – once known as the Paris of the Orient – into Ho Chi Minh City.

Le Van Minh had been fighting a personal battle. His enemy was polio, and it left him scarred and broken. It turned him into a child whose twisted body forced him to walk on all fours. “Sequellae of poliomyelitis acquired at 3 years of age,” medical records would state years later. “Flaccid paralysis both legs . . . Unable to walk unaided. Normal mental development.”

If Minh, now 15, has detailed memories of the years that followed, he says little about them. The picture of Minh's past comes together like an impressionist canvas – in specks of shape and color. It has been pieced together from his own brief, sometimes reluctant, recollections and from the sketchy medical and government documents that were handed over to Rep. Robert Mrazek (D-Centerport) on the day he carried Minh onto a plane in Hanoi.

For the first 10 years of his life, Minh lived with his mother – a farmer from the south named Le Thi Ba – in a poor neighborhood on the outskirts of Ho Chi Minh City. He has a vague memory of a great-grandmother who was kind to him but he does not talk about anyone else in his family.

A fuzzy photograph on a government identification card shows the unsmiling face of his mother, a dark-haired woman who looks older than her 36 years. Le Thi Ba would have been about 19 when she gave birth to Minh – the first of her four children and the only Amerasian. She later married a Vietnamese man and had two sons and a daughter. Her husband died recently, according to documents. Le Thi Ba never told the son who was crippled by polio about her relationship with his father. All she said was that the man was an American, a sergeant in the Army. He was one of the thousands of GIs who left children behind as victims of the conflict that the United States never officially called a war.

When the soldier's son was 10 years old, Le Thi Ba ordered him to leave her home. She just said, 'Leave,' Minh recalled last month as he sat in the U.S. embassy plane that carried him out of Vietnam and to a new life in the United States. I just went outside – out on the street.

The street became home.

For the next five years, Minh's world was limited to a few dusty blocks in downtown Ho Chi Minh City. They were near the Saigon River, where he taught himself to swim and where each New Year, he watched the fireworks of a great celebration. The center of his world was once called Tu Do Street. During the '60s and '70s, it was a bustling downtown street crowded with the bars that catered to GIs.

Tu Do means freedom in Vietnamese. But that was not the name by which Minh knew it. The Communist government that drove out the Americans changed the name Tu Do to Dong Khoi – uprising – Street. It was there that Minh struggled to survive.

Photographs of Dong Khoi Street, when it was home to Minh, show old women who squat on the pavement selling vegetables and cigarettes from straw baskets, a gray-haired man with no teeth who offers cooked ducks displayed on metal hooks. A wizened grandmother who rocks an infant in a hammock that is the child's only bed, a naked boy who sleeps on the hard sidewalk while his mother comforts the baby cradled in her arms.

People in straw coolie hats rode rickety bicycles on the crowded streets of Minh's world; old French Citroens and Russian Volgas passed by. On one block, a row of red 1957 Chevrolets waited for use as wedding limousines. Every morning, an elderly man washed and waxed the cars with their chrome moldings and large fins. Horns honked on the byways and entrepreneurs sold everything from shoeshines to sex, and from ivory Buddhas to opium.

On Dong Khoi Street, Minh played with about a dozen other young beggars in a six-foot-high pile of construction rubble. He slept in doorways and, at daybreak, he would crouch on all fours on the tiled sidewalk in front of the Cuu Long Hotel, once called the Majestic. He never entered the crumbling hotel,

where eastern Europeans dine on prawns and sip Heineken beer in the rooftop restaurant. Where the white linen table cloths are stained and gecko lizards dart along the walls and the waiters dress in bow ties and frayed black tuxedo jackets. He hoped a foreigner would be moved by his American face and broken body. He would tug on the pants legs of western-looking visitors. “Joe,” he would say, “I’m hungry, give me money.”

Sometimes, he would offer an origami flower that he fashioned from the foil of discarded cigarette packages. To those who asked, Minh would say he was an orphan – perhaps because he thought of himself as one or perhaps because he knew how to play on the heartstrings of strangers.

It is on Dong Khoi and the nearby side streets that it is possible to see Le Van Minh most clearly, to find a context for a hazel-eyed child scurrying on his hands and feet with a paper rose in his hand. It is his time and place as much as Minh himself that offers a clue to his personal equation.

On a good day, Minh would panhandle as much as one hundred dong – the equivalent of about 10 cents. He would go off by himself and meticulously fold the paper currency into tiny pieces and hide it in the pockets of his tattered shirt and pink shorts. He was afraid that other beggars would steal his earnings. He had a friend, a Vietnamese boy named Ti, who carried Minh on his back and protected him. But sometimes, when Minh was alone, bigger and stronger children beat and robbed him.

Often, he would use the money to buy food at Bar Five on Dong Khoi Street, where the vinyl-covered stools were torn and an old American calendar decorated the wall. Minh was not without benefactors. Sometimes, when Minh was broke, the owner of Bar Five would give him food for free. Once an American cameraman gave the bar owner enough money to feed Minh for three months. And when he had money left over, Minh would take it to an elderly woman who sold mother-of-pearl laquerware at a neighborhood shop. The old woman acted as his bank - she would keep the money for him and dole it out whenever he needed it for food or, once in a great while, for clothing .

A few weeks ago, as he waited for medical clearance in a hospital room in Bangkok, Minh missed the street people who had become his family. He did not miss his half-siblings or the mother who had abandoned him. He said only that he did not want them to join him in the United States. He stared into space or turned the channels on a television set rather than talk about them.

On his last night in Bangkok, with the help of his interpreter, Minh wrote a letter to the people he missed. He listed Ti and the man from Bar Five and the woman in the laquerware shop. He said hello. He told them he was safe. And he said he was sorry that he had not been able to say goodbye.

Minh had no time for farewells when he left Ho Chi Minh City last month. He was picked up by three government security guards in front of the old Caravelle – a French-built hotel on a busy street corner that once provided a scenic backdrop of the city for American television journalists who did their war-time broadcasts from the rooftop terrace. The guards pulled at the sleeve of Minh's shirt. Come, he remembers one of them saying.

Minh thought he was being arrested. The men in khaki-green uniforms were a constant source of fear to the street beggars in the city many Vietnamese still call Saigon. Like cops walking a beat, the guards would patrol the area near the river, where hotels such as the Caravelle and the Cuu Long still cater to visiting foreigners. And where young urchins in torn and dirty clothing beg for food and money. The guards would shoo them away, swearing at the children with round eyes and freckled faces, spitting at them and calling them bui doi – the children of the dust. The guards would yell didi didi – go away, go away – and sometimes they would beat the children with billy-clubs or cart them off to jail in vans.

Most of Minh's friends – particularly the Amerasians – knew the sting of the guards' curses and their clubs. The group scattered when the three men grabbed Minh – they hid in doorways or ducked into the shops that line Dong Khoi Street, they ran off to play on the old French guns mounted in cement near the harbor or to swim in the murky waters of the Saigon River

The Amerasian did not see his friends again. The guards put him in a van and took him to jail. The next day he was transferred to an orphanage, where he cried as his sun-bleached hair was shaved off.

No one told Le Van Minh he was on his way to America.





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WELCOME HOME

By Irene Virag

In London, Le Van Minh wondered if he had landed in America. "No," Rep. Robert Mrazek said. "This is England. "

America came next. The first sight was a picture of the Statue of Liberty in a magazine on the plane carrying him to the United States. Minh looked at the photo. "America," he said.

When the 747 finally landed in the United States yesterday afternoon, Minh said nothing. Mrazek picked up the Amerasian teenager as he had Saturday at an airport in Hanoi and carried him into the glare of television cameras in Kennedy Airport. "This is the Big Apple, son," the Centerport Democrat said. "You're home. This is New York. "

The crippled boy from the streets of Ho Chi Minh City put his arms around the congressman's

neck and Mrazek wiggled the purple visor on Minh's white cap and they walked through the bodies pressing against them in the crowd. Surrounded by police, they walked through the terminal as people in gift shops and ticket lines turned to stare.

Moments later, they faced the press and 100 of the Huntington High School students who had succeeded in a months-long campaign to bring Minh to the United States. As he would throughout the media circus of his welcome home, Le Van Minh – whose first name means "bright" in Vietnamese – smiled and remained silent.

It was impossible to know what he was thinking as students surrounded him, touching him and congratulating one another on his arrival. It was difficult to know what made him wave during the welcome, drawing applause from the American children.

It was almost as difficult later to know what was going on in the mind of the tiny teenage refugee as the van carrying him and Mrazek weaved through traffic on the parkways to Long Island. According to his interpreter, Xuan Bell, even Minh's Vietnamese vocabulary is limited. He was a street beggar in Ho Chi Minh City, and has virtually no formal education. He seems quick to learn but even in Vietnamese, he lacks the verbal skills to truly express what he is feeling.

"We're going home," Mrazek said. "We're not there yet but we're going home. "

Minh repeated the last word. "Home," he said in English.

He looked out the window a great deal, fascinated by the lanes of traffic. He asked Bell about the radio antennae on the passing cars, he commented on the large size of the station wagons and Cadillacs, and he pointed at a black Corvette and told Bell he liked it.

Mrazek laughed. "I'll buy you one," he said.

At another point, a train passed alongside and Minh did a double take. He stared at the trash on the parkway divider – at the cigarettes and beer cans and dented hubcaps. Why don't they pick up the trash, he asked Bell. In Vietnam, he said, the trash would be treasure to his friends on the street, who would collect it and sell it. "They would be very happy," he said in Vietnamese.

The dark blue van left the parkway and headed along Jericho Turnpike. Le Van Minh looked at the drugstores and pizza parlors and delicatessens and gas stations and some apartments under construction and asked where the tall buildings of New York City were. Finally, he leaned against Mrazek's chest and fell asleep clutching his new flag.

When he woke up, the van was pulling into the driveway of the 200 year-old, black-shuttered yellow house on Centerport Harbor where he will stay with the Mrazeks until he moves into the home of his foster parents, Eugene and Nancy Kinney, on the same street. The door opened and 5-year-old James Mrazek ran barefoot out of the house yelling "Minh, Minh. " Then he yelled to his father, "Bob, could we show Minh his new bed? " Then, "Minh, you're on TV. "

Inside, 8-year-old Susannah showed him the family's 16-year-old cat while James bounded around the room. "Minh, Minh, I want to show you our swing," he said. "Let's give him a ride," the little boy told his father. "Is he still crippled? "

Instead, the two boys laughed together as Minh watched James swing back and forth.

Then the boy who slept in doorways in Ho Chi Minh City was carried upstairs to his room. The new twin bed was covered with sheets bearing the emblem of professional football teams and decorated with stuffed rabbits and bears. He sat on the bed and Susannah climbed on it while James ran into his own room and brought out a game.

"Minh, you wanna play Monopoly," James asked.

Not now, said his mother, Cathie Mrazek.

Soon afterward, Minh's foster family arrived from down the street. The Kinneys, their daughters, Caroline, 22, and Christie, 19, and their adopted Korean-born sons, Robert, 15, and Joe, 13, gathered around the bed and started asking questions.

Le Van Minh's new life was beginning. He would swim in the harbor that Mrazek had told him about and perhaps learn to use the rope swing in the backyard. He would try to cope with an environment as far from the opportunistic world of the streets of his native city as a distant nebulae. There would be doctors and school and adults to obey.

And no one could know how Le Van Minh's journey home to the land of his unknown father would turn out. It would be nice to think that the movie on the plane from London had been symbolic. "Star Trek IV," the movie was entitled, "The Voyage Home. " Near the end of the film about the crew dedicated to the exploration of strange new worlds, Mr. Spock uttered a favorite salutation. "Live Long and Prosper," said the man with the pointed ears.

For the moment, all Le Van Minh could say was a simple "I'm tired" in Vietnamese.