

# Nightmare at Sea Haunts Refugee Who Survived

ARNOLD ABRAMS

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## ESCAPE FROM VIETNAM

# Nightmare at Sea Haunts Refugee Who Survived

BY ARNOLD ABRAMS

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NEW YORK—The vision usually haunts Nguyen Tuan in the dead of night when all is dark and silent, but it also appears in midday while the sun shines and he is surrounded by people.

Whatever the circumstances, it turns Tuan cold when it comes: a vision of dozens of bodies, arms and legs in many instances intertwined, floating by within touching distance as he and his family cling, stunned and helpless, to the hulk of an over-

turned boat.

That scene is not the product of a fertile imagination. It took place several months ago, when the 21-year-old Tuan and his family—mother, brother and two sisters—were sailing through the Gulf of Siam after paying handsomely for the privilege of fleeing their native Vietnam.

The boat was a fishing vessel built to accommodate about 100 persons, but there were 300 aboard—all, like the Tuans, ethnic Chinese forced from their homeland by policies pursued by authorities in Hanoi.

"We had been getting lower and lower in the water as the wind and the waves rose," recalled Tuan, who uses that pseudonym to protect relatives remaining in Vietnam, "and on the second day out, without any warning, we suddenly sank."

More than 100 of Tuan's compatriots, including three of his relatives, drowned. Such has been the fate of untold thousands of "boat people," whose flow from Vietnam has turned into a flood of more than 300,000 refugees.

Most of the refugees live under

abysmal conditions in crude camps created for them by neighboring nations in Southeast Asia. But the Tuans survived the rigors of that sea journey and a several-month stay in a refugee camp, and finally made it to the United States.

The family was among some 5,000 Indochina refugees admitted in April. On June 1, they moved into a comfortable, four-room apartment in Brooklyn, N.Y. Nevertheless, the tale of their ordeal is, in microcosm, the story of what more than a million ethnic Chinese now face in Vietnam.

In the first months following the fall of Saigon in 1975, life continued largely unchanged for the Tuans, who, like many ethnic Chinese in the South Vietnam capital, lived in the middle-class community of Cholon.

But the combination of a Communist system and age-old ethnic animosity gradually came to cast a large shadow over their relatively comfortable existence.

The children felt it first in school, where late in 1975 the curriculum was altered to emphasize ideology and students were obliged to attend political meetings and work on government projects.

In 1976, the system snared Tuan's 60-year-old father, who had been making an ample living as a supplier of meat to Saigon restaurants. Faced with the choice of closing shop or having his business nationalized, he chose retirement.

But like many of their well-to-do compatriots, the Tuans subsequently saw their savings substantially reduced by a nationwide currency revaluation. Adding to their burden were threats by government authorities to confiscate such valuables as the family car and television set.

Finally, with minimal earnings and a cloudy financial future, the family began to be pressured by local officials to resettle in a "new economic zone," a government euphemism for what amounts to forced agricultural labor in barren rural circumstances.

"We heard many horror stories about what happened to city people like us who went to a 'new economic zone,'" said Mrs. Tuan, 56, whose small stature and gray hair belie considerable strength and spirit. "How can we suddenly become farmers?" she asked through an interpreter.

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# NIGHTMARE AT SEA

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**"It's like asking a fish to live on land."**

The Tuans had only one recourse—to flee their country.

The price, paid in taels of gold, varies according to the region and people's economic circumstances. In Cholon, the cost was 10 taels (about \$3,000) a head, but the Tuans were given a special deal: half-price for children.

Painfully aware of the journey's dangers, the Tuans decided to split up. When departure time came in mid-November, the father remained in Saigon with his two eldest sons, hoping to follow his wife and other children in the near future.

Such precautions were well war-

ranted by the fate of that badly overloaded boat. Survivors of its sinking were picked up by Thai fishermen who, as part of a prearranged escape plan, had been guiding the Vietnamese vessel to their shores.

As payment for their life-saving services, the Thais took whatever money and valuables the survivors still held. There were no complaints.

On the fourth day, the Tuans landed in southern Thailand. They spent the next four months in miserable conditions at a refugee camp. But because they had relatives who went to the United States in 1975, settling in the Bronx, N.Y., they were granted admission by American authorities.