

# Amerasians of Vietnam War face discrimination



HO CHI MINH CITY, Vietnam (AP) — They were the lonely outcasts, children considered no better than dirt, the spoils of battle. Born of American fathers and Vietnamese mothers, these Amerasians have now grown into young men and women, survivors older than the war that bred them.

Many were exploited, sold from one Vietnamese family to another, trapped by bureaucratic red tape, victims of the political and economic wars between Vietnam and the United States that followed the end of the fighting in 1975. And they were victims of indifference.

The majority were in their teens or older when they finally realized their dream of going to the United States to get an education or perhaps meet their biological fathers.

Most have not done well in America, never able to quite escape the discrimination that dogs them wherever they go.

"I do think they have trouble fitting into either Vietnamese society or American society," says Tim McCully of InterAction, a Washington-based umbrella group for almost all refugee resettlement agencies in the United States. "They see

themselves as straddling that line, and I'm sure that elements of racism come in from both sides."

"When I lived in my country, people said I'm not Vietnamese," said Ann Marie Pham, 19, who arrived in America three years ago. "So when I came to America, the American people don't think I'm Amerasian. So I have a question: 'Who am I?' I'm really upset about that."

No one is sure how many Amerasians the war spawned. According to the latest figures from the U.S. State Department, about 20,000 Amerasians have gone to the United States since the war ended. Of that number, about three-fourths of them made it out of Vietnam in the past five years, after passage of the Amerasian Homecoming Act, and during Vietnam's emergence from isolation and its improved relations with the United States.

No one is sure either how many remain in Vietnam. Estimates range from 1,000 to 5,000.

"It's a pity they were left there in the first place to languish," says Dewey Pendergass, an official in the U.S. State Department's Bureau for Refugee Programs. "We can't do anything about that now, but we're trying to make things as right as we can."

The State Department has begun a new program to have the Amerasians apply directly to U.S. officials either in Ho Chi Minh City or in Bangkok, Thailand, for passage to the United States instead of going through the Vietnamese authorities.

About 300 of the remaining Amerasians and their families live at the Amerasian Transit Center in Ho Chi Minh City, which plans to close in about a year. Others are thought to be scattered across Vietnam.

Some of the American fathers accepted their children, even years after the war ended and they finally caught up to each other. Some knew they had children in Vietnam, but abandoned them for the American families they returned to back home. When some of the Amerasian children finally did make it to America on their own, they were rejected again.

Some of the fathers were married and wanted to keep the secret from their wives. Others never knew for sure they had a child because they left before the child was born or the mother never told them.

One of those unable to find her father was Nga Tuyet Pham, whose American name is Ann Marie Pham.

"I have his picture, but I never saw him," she says. "I couldn't find him because a lot of people have the same last

name. I don't know what to do. I think some of the fathers don't know they have children. I'd love to see him. I don't want anything from him. I just want to see him."

"I never saw my mother. I remember people telling me my mom threw me in the garbage can. Another lady brought me home. I had a terrible life when I was little. I lived with a family on a farm. I watched the cows. I had to work the whole day."

"The Vietnamese people didn't like me. They said, 'Your father's bad. Your father's American. Go back to America.'"

So she did, at age 16, accompanied by a Vietnamese woman who used her to get to America herself by claiming she was her mother. Instead of living with the woman, Ann Marie chose to live with another Vietnamese family and later with a Vietnam veteran and his family in Springfield, Mass.

The stories told at the Amerasian Transit Center are much the same: Their mothers abandoned them or are dead. Father unknown. Raised by a grandmother or other relatives or friends.

Some are impostors seeking a better life in America. It is often hard to sort out the truth. The Amerasians have learned to live to survive.

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