

HUYEN, from page 4

looked after by an absent-minded housekeeper, and the countryside, where she would play with the pigs on her grandfather's farm.

"My grandfather used to tell me stories about the communists," she said. "He said even to go out for a piece of bread, if you are out at the wrong time or place, they can shoot you through the head."

Many Vietnamese fled the country when North Vietnam's communist regime proved victorious, but in 1975, Huyen was just 1 year old, and her little brother, Vinh, was a

newborn; it would have been too difficult. Her parents decided to wait and, as a result, lost most their life's savings and treasures to communist raids.

Huyen remembers the fear that gripped her family after her grandmother's home was invaded. Soldiers threatened to kill everyone who was there, and they took everything that had been collected over the years.

Her father's extended family was killed off entirely by communist soldiers. Huyen doesn't remember ever

meeting any of them.

"I was against the communists," Chanh explained from his home in Aurora, Ill. "They followed me, and they wanted to imprison me. That was the reason why we had to escape."

The escape

It took one full year of planning and preparation before Huyen's family could flee Vietnam in 1979. If they were caught trying to leave, they could have faced execution.

While the communist regime was trying to keep the Vietnamese in, it was forcing the Chinese out. Like many other Vietnamese escaping the country at the time, they decided their best bet was to pretend to be Chinese.

False identification was purchased for Huyen, her sister and brother, her parents, and 12 aunts, uncles and cousins who would accompany them. They all had to learn their Chinese names and to speak some Mandarin phrases.

Huyen was only 5, but her mother taught her a few words, just in case she was asked any questions. She cut both her daughters' hair very short, like little Chinese girls.

They secured their place on a wooden fishing boat with a payment in gold for each passenger. Luckily her grandmother had enough to pay their passage – and to buy them life preservers.

Her father said the boat could hold about 80 people. Most everyone who boarded was Vietnamese pretending to be Chinese, to avoid detection.

Communist soldiers kept forcing more and more people on board until there were

300 people stacked on top of each other, said his wife, Lien. Most boats used for these escapes were built for fishing along the shoreline, and not built for the open sea. Those who made this voyage came to be known as the Vietnamese Boat People.

For four days and four nights, they traveled across the sea toward Indonesia. Huyen recalls that many passengers became seasick and vomited on the boat. Her younger brother suffered ongoing seizures, and just a toddler, he kept soiling himself with no change of clothes.

Chanh said the overloaded boat lost its equilibrium when it hit a storm. In the middle of the sea, it began to sink.

Huyen and her family were the only refugees wearing life preservers.

At her mother's insistence, everyone in the family jumped overboard. A nearby boat manned by Thais hoisted them up with a large fishing net.

Hundreds of Vietnamese who refused to jump drowned when the sinking boat slipped beneath the waves.

It's estimated that somewhere between 200,000 and a half-million refugees fleeing by sea after the fall of Saigon died making the trip.

Approximately 1 million Vietnamese Boat People made it to refugee camps, where disease and starvation took thousands more. Tens of thousands of Chinese also died at sea.

Huyen's family thought they were safe once onboard the Thai fishing boat. They were fed a rice porridge called Congee. Huyen remembers one fisherman cut up apples for them to eat.

Throughout the 1980s, Thai fishermen-turned-pirates robbed thousands and raped and murdered hundreds of Vietnamese who were fleeing the communist regime by sea. In 1982, the New York Times reported 200 women and girls taken from Vietnamese boats were recovered from Thai houses of prostitution.

The Thai fishing boat carrying Huyen and her family landed on a small, nondescript island somewhere in Indonesia.

That's where four of the fishermen pulled out guns, holding the barrels to the heads of her father, her uncles and her older male cousin, she said.

"My parents were very smart," Huyen said. "They knew we were going on a boat, so they hid a lot of jewelry in their bodies – which is a very common thing when you escape."

The men looked to Huyen's mother for direction, and she told them they would have to relinquish it all in exchange for their lives.

The family was transferred to a third boat, and after two more days and nights at sea, they landed at Kuku, a refugee camp in Indonesia where they would live for more than a year. It was sparsely populated when they arrived, but there were thousands by the time they were transferred to Galang refugee camp in 1980.

"Life in Galang is just like life in Kuku," Huyen said.

There was no clean water. Huyen and her older sister would fetch ocean water, contaminated with human waste from refugees who used the shoreline as their toilet. Their mother would boil it to kill the bacteria.

They had only the clothes on their backs, and there was very little food. Huyen and

her sister befriended a set of twins who taught them that with two bean sprouts, they could grow more, and that's how they survived until near the end when international aid organizations began to distribute food such as crackers.

It was in Kuku that Huyen's stomach had ballooned, and she'd find out later it was also filled with worms.

But Huyen maintained that she was a fortunate child, because so many children around her were dying from starvation and malaria.

"We would always see parents crying all the time, and they were carrying their kids up to the hill to bury them," Huyen said. "I have those memories in my head, and even to this day, when I look outside to the sea, or at the coast, I have tears every time because I think about my escape, and all the people that died."

Her little brother's seizures continued, and her sister's asthma was a constant concern to her parents, but miraculously, they all survived to see the day their names were called to board a plane to the U.S.

Huyen's aunt had a father-in-law who had moved to the U.S. in 1975, and he was sponsoring the entire family.

Starting over

Huyen's family started their new, American life in Port Arthur, Texas.

Chanh worked three jobs and eventually saved enough to move his family into a \$10,000 house.

They hadn't been there long when a burglar broke in and held a knife to Lien's neck. For the second time in as many years, she brokered a deal for her safety – he could have the family's savings, hidden below the television set in the living room. He made off with about \$400.

They soon moved to Chicago, where they continued to live in poverty, moving from place to place for the next few years, usually following a bump in rent.

And now there were more mouths to feed. Her parents had taken in several nieces and nephews and adopted a 9-year-old girl whose mother was still in Vietnam, and her mother had given birth to their fourth child, another boy.

Adjusting to the U.S. was not easy for Huyen. She was too nervous to speak English, and she carried around notes her father had written for her to communicate with her teachers and classmates. There weren't any other Vietnamese children in any of her classes.

Some of the kids mocked her, and told her to learn English or go back to China.

"They hurt your feelings a lot," she remembered, "but back then I was like, Oh whatever, I've been through so much, I can't even think about that."

But other kids took pity on her.

Huyen remembers the day her classmates presented her with a piggy bank they had filled with money. They wanted her to use it to buy a winter coat. Everything she wore was second hand, and her only jacket was too thin to keep out the penetrating chill of Chicago's unforgiving winters.

She got a lot of help from her teachers, too, who would buy her lunch and pay her way on field trips.

But her parents labored constantly to get their family back on its feet.

"We would always see parents crying all the time, and they were carrying their kids up to the hill to bury them. I have those memories in my head, and even to this day, when I look outside to the sea, or at the coast, I have tears every time because I think about my escape, and all the people that died."

THUY HUYEN

HELP MS. OREGON WIN THE PEOPLE'S CHOICE AWARD

You can vote for Thuy Huyen between now and August 31 at www.MsAmericaPageant.com

Each vote costs \$1, with a minimum purchase of five votes. The winner receives half the proceeds. Huyen is currently in fourth place.

WATCH MS. OREGON COMPETE

To live stream the Ms. America pageant, visit AlertTheGlobe.com at 7:30 p.m. on Sept. 3, 2016

See HUYEN, page 7