

# The Asian Reporter

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**MY TURN**

■ **Dmae Roberts**



## Refugee from war

April is a momentous time for Southeast Asians, with New Year celebrations taking place for the Lao and Cambodian communities, among others. For Cambodians especially, it is also a time to remember April 17, 1975 — the day the Khmer Rouge and its leader, Pol Pot, captured Phnom Penh and the government surrendered. That's when Cambodian citizens were rounded up and forced to work in the Killing Fields, which led to an estimated 1.7 million deaths between 1975 and 1979.

For the Lao, Mien, and Hmong peoples, April of 1975 also meant fleeing their country while much of Southeast Asia fell to communist forces. By December of that year, the monarchy of Laos was overthrown by the Pathet Lao movement, and the country became ruled by the Lao People's Revolutionary party. Many feared persecution and death because they had fought alongside the Central Intelligence Agency and the U.S. military against the communists.

For South Vietnamese people, April 30, 1975 became known as the Fall of Saigon. The day is also now remembered as Reunification Day by some. For others who had to flee, it's called "Black April." When the American war ended in Vietnam that year, thousands upon thousands of Vietnamese fled to the United States. Many who stayed in Vietnam ended up imprisoned in "re-education" camps.

Helping to recount this history for the Crossing East radio series a decade ago was Dr. Linda Trinh Vo, a professor of Asian-American studies at the University of California, Irvine.

"Communist forces overtook the southern part of Vietnam and wanted to replace the political power ... they imprisoned anyone who was a leader, whether they were a military leader or a political leader ... and replaced the form of government so that the socialist form of government was being instituted in [the] country," Vo said. "In the aftermath, in both Laos and Cambodia, communist forces also were taking, fighting for power, and this internal struggle [led] to a lot of death, a lot of instability, and a lot of imprisonment and torture of individuals. And also ethnic persecution of minority groups."

Most Americans are aware of the impact of the Vietnam War on America but know little about the horrors of war that took place in the cities and

countrysides of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. Those who know it firsthand are refugees who learned to live in a new country, building a vibrant community from coast to coast.

The Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act, which passed on May 23, 1975, permitted refugees from Cambodia and Vietnam to enter the U.S. It was amended in 1976 to include refugees



Pictured is Mien-American refugee Farm Yoon Lee, one of the elders recorded in Refugee Dreams Revisited for Crossing East. (Photo courtesy of MediaRites)

from Laos. Because U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia left vast numbers of people homeless, America responded with the Refugee Act of 1980, which formally defined a refugee as a person with a "well-founded fear of persecution." The Refugee Act created a formal resettlement plan for refugees and raised the ceiling on the number who could be admitted into the United States. Church and community groups across the country rallied to help refugees. In Portland, Lutheran Community Services Northwest and Catholic Charities worked to sponsor and place families.

Portland Public Schools was one of the first to figure out how to work with Southeast Asian youth attending their schools. The 1.5 generation — those who came to the U.S. at a young age — learned quickly, mastering language and writing skills before their first-generation parents.

For the radio series, we spoke with many former refugees in the Southeast Asian community who came to America as children or young adults during the 1980s and '90s. Now elders in their communities, many successfully seized the American Dream and have made it their mission to give back to their communities. A number had families who owned businesses or became language interpreters, like Khantaly Thammovang. Others, including Kim Nguyen and Quy Nguyen, entered professions such as education. Still others became community leaders, such as Kilong Ung, the founder of the Golden Leaf Education Foundation, Sokhom Tauch, the former executive director of the Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization (IRCO), and Lee Po Cha, IRCO's current executive director.

Now more than ever, we need to realize the contributions refugees have made and continue to make in our communities.

For the 10th anniversary of Crossing East, MediaRites has worked with area youth to create a production to tell

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