

Em Nam

A woman of South Vietnam

anon.

1971

The history of the Vietnamese people is clearly a history of struggle, of choosing what to tolerate and what and how to change. No Vietnamese man, woman, or child has been spared the struggle because it is one of survival and the protection of the freedom to define how to live, once in the face of Chinese occupation, then, French colonialism and Catholicism, and now American imperialism.

I came to know some South Vietnamese women who are struggling for their lives against a repressive South Vietnamese government and the ugly imperialism of the U.S. which only promises exploitation. Their struggle is ours and to understand their personal history and their changes as I witnessed them, is to understand our own history as well.

I lived in the mountains of South Vietnam from 1966 to 1968 as a social service volunteer maintained by the American Friends Service Committee. I learned Vietnamese and was allowed to join a group of Vietnamese students, men and women, living as a commune, working in a refugee camp of 40,000 in the shadow of a huge helicopter base of the First Calvert Division of the U.S.

The students attempted to maintain a non-political position, as I was also, in order to be accepted by the refugees and not be harassed by Saigon officials. In fact, there were inherent contradictions to this position. Their organization, though totally Vietnamese students, was partially funded indirectly by CIA AID (Aid to International Development)...like many student "voluntary service" groups after 1963. These same students had successfully fought to bring down Ngo Dinh Diem's repressive regime. Their aspirations for non-violent revolution and their energy for serving the peasants were successfully diverted (with U.S. dollars) from political activity and channeled into "humanitarian service."

It was in this environment that I learned to understand the ugliness of imperialism and the pain of idealistic students learning who to fight. I was walking to the market one day for the day's fresh food when a young girl called shyly "Hello, Marriasan." She was delighted when I greeted her "Chao, om" (hello little sister). From then on we spoke Vietnamese as she refused to speak the GI English she had learned working as a day laborer filling sandbags, cutting brush for 50 cents a day under the guard of an armed and suspicious GI on the base. She was 18 and the main support for her family, including aged and sick parents, 5 living brothers and sisters, one of whom was mentally retarded. Her mother had borne 10 children. Her family, among tens of thousands, had been forced to come to this camp from their villages, or be suspected N L F supporters and therefore shot or tortured in prison. Their home and all their belongings had been destroyed and the only way to get rice to eat (imported from USA as a "gift" of the American people) was to work on the U.S. base, wash GI laundry at the wells or river (ironed by charcoal-heated irons), sell peanuts and beer to GIs, or embroider slogans (i.e. "I've been to hell and back, Ankhe, VN) on jackets for the GI market. The wage on the base was deliberately low so as to encourage the refugees to become "independent" and settle in the area where it was only possible to grow peanuts, hot peppers, and sweet corn. Those who attempted vegetable gardens withered with the breath of defoliation "drift" from the mountains nearby. Em Nam's family were coastal rice farmers but despite official promises, there was no land being distributed. Regardless, her only

wish was to return to their ancestral village when it could be safe again from Americans). She had never been to school but she dearly wanted to go, despite teasing from her father that she only needed to write love poems! After working from dawn at the base and fixing the meal over a fire of carefully-gathered sticks, she came to our night classes to learn to read and write Vietnamese. Her hands were hard and callused and grasped the pen awkwardly but she was determined to learn. Why? She confided that she wanted to read the labels on medicine bottles for her family; the nearest Vietnamese doctor was 50 miles or 3 hours by bus).

After several months of literacy classes, she became more confident and outspoken and even brought other girls to study. But the war prevailed. Saigon changed the draft to include the students, and all males 17 to 45 years old. They imposed curfews at sundown so the police could search homes for draftees. Anyone out in the dirt streets after dark (even for a piss) could be shot or arrested. This cut the night classes. Em Nam heard that the students were leaving. She was so upset that she organized most of the other girls. Armed with stones, the girls threatened to destroy the tin building, which housed the commune and classes, if they dared to leave. She felt betrayed by the students, but her militancy was misplaced. She should have turned it against the Saigon government whose power is based only on repression and defending American interests in exploiting the peasants.

Em Nam could only learn more clearly from this experience that she could not rely on the Saigon government or anyone even indirectly associated with it, including the well-meaning students, to reliably serve her interests. She can only rely on her own revolutionary brothers and sisters to struggle for a peoples' government that will protect her freedom to live and grow in her own very beautiful way, Only then will she learn to read and write and share in her peoples' destiny.



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