Immigrant Voices
New Lives in America 1773-1986
Edited by Thomas Dublin

With the fall of Saigon in 1975, the evacuation of the U.S. military, and the reunification of Vietnam under Communist rule, a new wave of Southeast Asian migration began. By 1990, 2 million Asian refugees had uprooted themselves. Almost a million of them came to the United States; another half million remained in refugee camps in Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, and Hong Kong, awaiting resettlement or repatriation. Coupled with renewed Chinese, Korean, and Filipino migration, these newcomers have made Asian Americans the fastest growing ethnic group in the United States today.

Among the first emigrants who left South Vietnam with departing U.S. troops in 1975 was the family of Trong and Thanh Nguyen, who eventually settled in the “Uptown” neighborhood of Chicago and were interviewed by Al Santoli in 1986. Their experience as refugees was more unsettling than that of others who emigrated with more advance planning. Still, their path was far smoother than that of Vietnamese who escaped by boat five or ten years later and spent lengthy periods in refugee holding camps before gaining admission to the United States.

At the time of the following interview, the Nguyen family had resided in Chicago for ten years. The parents had made considerable accommodation to the demands of the broader American society. Trong Nguyen worked as a social worker for Travelers and Immigrants Aid, helping more recent immigrants adjust to their new lives. The family had recently opened up a restaurant, which drew on the labor
of parents and children alike. The interview focuses principally on Trong Nguyen but includes comments by his wife, Thanh; their nineteen-year-old son, Tran; and their fourteen-year-old daughter, Thahn Tram. In the differing perspectives of parents and children, we gain a sense of the diversity of the Vietnamese immigrant experience in contemporary America. We sense as well strong links between the history of one immigrant family in the United States today and the experiences of earlier immigrants, such as the Hollingworths, the Gollups, and Itois, whose stories we have already read in this collection.
TRONG: I have always believed that, if you just stay home and do nothing you are not a person whom others will respect. Since I came to Chicago in 1976, I've been involved in building the Vietnamese community. Of the twelve thousand Vietnamese who live in this city, more than half live in a fourteen-block area around the Argyle Street business strip, between Broadway and Sheridan roads.

Uptown is called the Ellis Island of Chicago. Some thirty languages are spoken in the area. Besides the Vietnamese, there are a thousand Cambodians, two hundred Laotians, and some Hmong. But most of the people are American blacks, Appalachian whites who came from the coal mines of Kentucky and West Virginia, Mexicans, and some American Indians.

In 1975, when the refugees first began arriving, the area was a dumping ground for derelicts, mental patients, and everyone else the city didn't want. Drug addicts, gangs, and prostitutes hung out in abandoned buildings owned by absentee landlords. Some refugee families with children live in transient hotels alongside winos. Large multistory housing projects like on the corner of Argyle and Sheridan were very dangerous. Refugees were constantly robbed and beaten.

The Argyle Street business strip had only a few struggling businesses, like small Chinese restaurants, a mom-and-pop bakery, and a tavern with naked dancers. Most storefronts were empty, with a lot of threatening people on the street.

When my wife and I came to Chicago, our major concern was to feed our five small children. We had Vietnamese pride and did not want to take public aid. We wanted the American community and authorities to respect us.

In Uptown, we felt like we were thrust from one war zone to another. Local community organizations strongly opposed the refugees. People talked about a "Yellow Horde invasion." They started a lawsuit
campaign against the city for bringing Indochinese into their area. They said, "Because the refugees are moving in, rents are going higher."

The absentee landlords in the neighborhood were horrible. The [community] organizations had started a boycott against them before the refugees arrived. This created a lot of vacancies in some of the run-down buildings. The voluntary agencies who sponsored the refugees saw the cheap rents and placed refugee families in those apartments. That allowed slumlords to stay in business.

At the height of the tension, the city brought the community associations, some refugee leaders, and voluntary agency representatives into a room to talk. Commander Howard Patinkin of the police department moderated the session, because it was getting to the point of violence. At the meeting, the community groups realized that the refugees were good people, and an agreement was made for the voluntary agencies to coordinate with local residents.

Just trying to begin a new life here, we had so many difficulties. When I worked as a janitor at Water Tower Place, a co-worker told me, "Trong, do you know that America is overpopulated? We have more than two hundred million people. We don't need you. Go back where you belong." I was shocked to hear people trying to chase us out. I thought, "Who is going to feed the children?" In America, a single income can never feed the family. Even though our youngest was just a baby, my wife had to find work.
THANH: When we first came to Chicago, I cried a lot. In the factory where I worked, there weren't many Americans. Most were Mexicans, some legal, but also many illegal aliens. They acted like, as Vietnamese say, "Old ghosts bully new ghosts." They cursed our people.

Some Mexicans said, "You come here and take our jobs. Go back wherever you came from." I was very upset and cried. They said so many things. Then one day some of them said, "You come here to make money, then go back home and live like kings." That was too much. I couldn't hold it in any more.

I told them in a very soft voice, "We are Vietnamese people. You don't have enough education to know where our country is. Vietnam is a small country, but we did not come to America to look for jobs. We're political refugees. We can't go back home." I didn't call them bad names or anything, but I said, "You are the ones who come here to make money to bring back to your country. We spend our money here." After that, they didn't bother us very much.