

THE UNFORGETTABLE PAST



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On the 30th of April 1975, Saigon capitulated to the Communists, and opened its door to the conquering troops of the North. That day marked the fall of one nation, and the end of a regime. South Vietnam ceased to be, blotted from the map of the world, and the Communists had won at last in twenty days of flames and torment a war that had been fought for more than twenty years.

During the Second World War, Vietnam played quite a minor role, and was not a victim of the wars that swept through the world. It even enjoyed a relative prosperity and peace. After the victory of the Allies, the Japanese forces retreated from all their possessions in the Pacific. Vietnam fell back under French domination. Then rebellions arose, and finally the country became free of foreign rule, the French dividing the country along the 17^o latitude, giving the North to be ruled by the Communists. And after-

wards, when the U.S. came to the Orient, the South formed its government under its supervision. So two powers were opposed to each other in one country, two different regimes. So began a war where compatriots killed each other-- a war which was fought for years, which ruined families, and which exacted a price of bloodshed and losses.

Although it was the center of action in a country at war, yet Saigon did not show any apparent sign of fighting. Soldiers' jeeps could be seen circulating often, and military cars and patrols roamed the streets at night to prevent any sudden attack and to check citizens, identities. Also, TV Sets announced at news-time the war situation of that day, reporting attacks on the villages by the enemy, and the number of casualties. Except for this, the city was peaceful and calm, and a foreigner would have wondered at

what he saw. He would have expected to see the airport daily raided, and the city in a mess, with wounded soldiers and where he should lack every comfort. But he saw only airport very quiet, except for the voice of microphones, and the voices of travellers. Most of these were foreigners, wives and friends of American officers, and some tourists also, curious to see the city which war had made famous.

And indeed Saigon was a beautiful city. And though it could not be compared in splendour to New York, Paris, or Hong Kong, it had its own special style. The streets were flooded by day time with all kinds of vehicles and, especially at the time when schools let out, students pushed out into the streets to go back home. Many of the roads were bordered on both sides by tall towering oak trees that shadowed the houses from the tropical sun. They were planted by the French immediately at the beginning of their reign. Many of the houses and buildings for government administrative use were constructed also at that time, and together gave Saigon a French atmosphere. Many of the elder Vietnamese of the educated class had received a French education, and had continued their studies in France, and could speak absolutely pure French. This was what marked the greatest difference between Saigon and Thi An, the center for the Chinese population. Both were parts of the capital, but their inhabitants, living style and education were different. Saigon was also a commercial port, and the center of business and imports for the country. It was built on the banks of the Saigon river, and the cargo ships could approach Cape St. Jacques from the sea, go up the river, and enter the city. Every day they brought imported goods from every corner of the world, and especially oil. In the

early years of the war, the U.S. supplied yearly millions of dollars in the Vietnam war and the country's economic situation was quite safe. Imports filled the market with foreign goods, and business was very prosperous. Most of it was under the control of the Chinese population, like the rice, sugar, and lumber businesses. The import firms, banks and factories were mostly also in Chinese possession. Many years before, during the French rule, Chinese people had fled there as the Japanese invasion began to sweep over the Chinese Mainland. Many came in small ships; others first passed through Hanoi, by land, in North Vietnam. Then, by hard work, diligence, and patience, which have always been the recognized qualities of our people, they strengthened their financial situation, and finally many became prosperous. The Vietnamese of course could not see with resignation our people enrich their fortunes, while many of their country men died every day in the war, but they could do nothing, and moreover we have always been renowned for modesty and courtesy as a people, and so had at least apparently got along very well with the Vietnamese.

Of course, it would be an error to say that all the Chinese in Saigon were leading prosperous lives. Of the two million Chinese in Vietnam, a small part together held the country's economy in their power, but the great majority were workers and small businessmen who lived in small shops. However, regardless of the differences of being rich or poor, Chinese people got along very well, and lived in a very united community. The rich did their best to help the less fortunate ones by giving donations to schools and hospitals. Those hospitals were also built with Chinese funds, collected from the richest Chinese, in order to help

the poor who could find there cheaper fees, and better care. Moreover, the personnel were all Chinese, the doctors, nurses, and the servants, so that it was easier for our people to ask for anything, some of whom could only speak their own dialect. This hospital system was a great help to people in Cholon who, otherwise would have had to be moved, in case of necessity, to the hospitals in Saigon.

The schools were built equally with the aim of encouraging and helping Chinese people's instruction, and giving them a Chinese education. Many of the poorer families which had difficulty making their ends meet often preferred that their sons work to sustain the family and rarely encouraged them to get a higher education. Therefore, many of the schools required very cheap fees, and they taught Chinese; most included both primary and high school education. In the following years, the government restricted Chinese teaching, and the Education Department introduced a national Vietnamese education program. Despite that, many of the better schools went on teaching Chinese, and some private schools taught English exclusively, or French. Vietnamese people never sent their sons to Chinese schools, and people in Cholon rarely frequented the schools in Saigon, which included Government public schools and the French Lycees or colleges. It was not a matter of distance, but a mark of difference between the two peoples, and it was in fact an easy job to make out a student of Saigon, and one of Cholon, even if both were Chinese. Vietnamese families, however, had quite a high educational system. And many of those who had finished high school and had passed the "Baccalaureat Examen," or graduation exam., went to continue their university education in France. Those who had no

financial means for study abroad or who had entered the government graduation exam. entered government universities. Fewer Chinese had a chance to continue their studies after high school. The majority of them had too little knowledge of Vietnamese to pass the government graduation exam.. Yet many of those who had received some English or French education escaped to Europe, and even more to the U. S.. As the years went on, the government restricted more and more the flood of students out of the country, only allowing the best students the privilege of foreign study and restricted their financial supply. So, most could only be sent abroad in clandestine ways, and Chinese people who had the means could, before, send their sons abroad. The number of our people who left the country increase afterward, despite the daily increasing severity of the laws of the immigration department. This was because the war gradually took more disastrous turns, and military conscription became obligatory for all those of age. The majority of Chinese dreaded to see their sons or relatives sent to the army, as they had not received any military education before, and to be sent to the front after a few months' of training represented a terrible risk of death. Therefore, those who had no means to immigrate lawfully found every means to leave in a clandestine way, by the goods ships that took them mostly to Hong Kong. These kinds of trips were very dangerous for the clandestine passengers, but they preferred those dangers to the horrible prospect of conscription. And it was a pity to hear of poor people who had taken out loans everywhere to collect enough money for their sons to leave, but who had learned afterward that their sons had been killed or had been caught on the way. But a great many

people escaped conscription by using identification cards which supposedly showed younger ages. Some just rarely ventured out into the streets, in order to have a lesser chance to be caught. However, this gave the police a good opportunity to bribery, and they checked papers even more strictly, especially Chinese peoples. But this at least saved many of our people from military service, if they had money.

Except for this fear of conscription, people lived peaceful and comfortable lives. War was forgotten in the daily routine of everyone's occupation. Business was as usual, and was rarely affected directly by the war, though the economic situation became more serious every day, and money less valuable. Yet prices kept increasing and though it was of little influence to rich people, poor people, war refugees, and workers were greatly affected by the increase of market prices. Crippled soldiers especially and the jobless, many of whom were neglected by the government, became either beggars or robbers. It was hard to imagine the pitiful state of those men who had fought and had been injured in the war. They were mostly uneducated Vietnamese and, when they returned home from the war, they often found themselves jobless, and unable to sustain their families. The donations of money given by the Chinese to the army were too often lost in the pockets of higher officers, and the poor common soldiers were left to their fate. On the other hand, the businessmen and tourists led an easy life, untormented by the war.

But there were days when the whole city rejoiced together, no matter whether people were rich or poor. Paques, or the Resurrection Day and Christmas were great days for the Vietnam-

ese, many of whom were faithful Catholics. At Paques, it was a charming sight to see all the great "Patisseries" expose in their windowshops a multitude of chocolate eggs, in their flowered papers and ribbons. At Christmas, Saigon made great preparation. Two weeks earlier, Nguyen Hue street exposed Christmas trees, to passers-by, which still smelt of their high-altitude perfume. The shops also sold toys and gifts by the lot. Everywhere in all the churches were seen Christmas stars and Christmas trees shining majestically in the darkness of the churches. And on the night of Christmas Eve, the streets leading to the Cathedral of Notre Dame were filled with an ocean of people on their way to Midnight Mass. Church bells rang all through the city, celebrating the birthday of Christ. Few Chinese people celebrated Christmas, since most of them were Buddhists. On the other hand, the Lunar New Year was a great day for them. Rich and poor all prepared for its coming. Houses were washed and, weeks before, people hurried to the market for provisions. There were also gifts to relatives. And every family bought in flowers to decorate their houses. Then came the New Year's days, days of rest, days for visiting relatives and friends, and those whom we rarely met at ordinary times. Children, of course, received "lucky money", and new dresses and toys. The streets were very calm and quiet, all the shops were closed, and only the cinemas were filled with people. Vietnamese people mostly spent their New Year's days at home where they played cards. Years before, those days were always filled with the petard sound. It was a custom when we went to visit a relative's or friend's house to buy a box of petards and explode them before going in. But

after the attack on Saigon in 1968, it was forbidden for anyone to use petards. I think the 1968 event gave many Saigonese the first clear impression of what a war really is. I was then too young to understand the horror of the situation. I could remember that on the second New Year's day as we prepared to go out for a visit, there were explosions, which we took for petards. Then the police cars announced in all the streets that Saigon had been attacked last night, and ordered people to keep in their homes, and not to use petards any longer. Then the following nights were interrupted by explosions near our sector, destroying houses, cars, and leaving masses of ruins to be the graves of the inhabitants. Those explosions of course were not aimed at people's houses, but at the administrative buildings, but errors of calculations caused many innocent losses. In the morning, we would sometimes walk to see the ambulances remove the dead and the wounded from the masses of ruined buildings. Then the government forces evacuated a whole sector of Cholon and bombarded it. And after days of panic, the attack was pushed back, and all the communists killed or caught. Most of them were only young boys of seventeen or eighteen who died faithful to their cause. I don't quite remember that time except that we stopped going to school for three months, and spent a very unexpected vacation at home. It was equally amusing then to move from the third floor of the house to sleep in the living room on the second floor. Afterward, we drove out to Cholon and, where formerly there had been houses and families, we could only observe a whole area of blackened ruins. Many streets were still cluttered by the corpses of the communists which had not yet been removed.

The odor of death and destruction pervaded everywhere. And the city had an atmosphere of terror and funereal quietness, which continued on for days, since the inhabitants still lived confined in dread of being killed. After that event, when life had returned to its usual routine and when streets and houses were built back and horror become vague memories, the city became more strictly policed than ever. At daytime, and especially at night, police stopped vehicles to verify the papers of their drivers. Young people with suspected identify cards were temporarily imprisoned, and either released through bribery, or else transported to the front. There was trafficking, the black market, and bribery everywhere from the lowest officer up to the highest. Cripples and old men begged in the streets, which was a most pitifull sight. And though immigration became daily more difficult, and the reafter forbidden, still many people sent their sons to foreign countries, once they had graduated, no matter what price it cost them.

And so that was Saigon when I left it. It must be greatly changed now, and it has even had its name changed to Ho Chi-Minh City. The war which has lasted more than twenty years, and which had devastated and ruined both sides now already belongs to the past. But it will take years and generations to forget this past and to build back a new future. However, let's hope that the peace brought now, at the cost of such blood shed, and cruelties, should be a long lasting one, and bring a quiet life to the people after those years of torment.