

'What Do You Say When You've Lost Your Country?'

By Ron Shaffer

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"What do you say when you have lost your country?" Nguyen Thi Ngan sobbed. "What can I say?"

For the Vietnamese clustered in the ornate drawing room of the South Vietnamese Embassy yesterday, there was nothing left but the tears.

Miss Ngan, a state Department interpreter, had worked frantically in recent weeks to organize relief for refugees and to get family members out before her country fell to the Communists. Like others sitting in the drawing room yesterday, the crush of defeat, of homelessness, overwhelmed her, and she wept.

Around her, a group of reporters were gathering to hear what Ambassador Tran Kim Phuong had to say. Some of them tried to make conversation with the somber Vietnamese.

The Americans talked about the lovely drawing room, with its friezes, painted screens and lacquer tables. Other Americans, talking animatedly, exchanged Vietnam war stories as they set up TV equipment for the ambassador.

"I don't see why the ambassador doesn't say 'we have lost the country—there is nothing more to say,'" Miss Ngan said, rising to leave "but he is a diplomat. He will say more."

The ambassador entered and shook the hand of each reporter.

"We have been defeated not by the Vietcong but by the North Vietnamese. We have to accept this defeat," Phuong said in deliberate, measured tones.



TRAN KIM PHUONG
... 'we have to accept'

"However I am happy that during the last seven days the administration succeeded in bringing out many of my countrymen. We have come a long way together, the Americans and the Vietnamese, and now that we have lost South Vietnam to the Communists, I hope that the refugees (here) will receive assistance to settle them down."

"Were you surprised at the Communist takeover," a reporter asked. Phuong said he was not surprised at the overall result in Vietnam—only that it had happened so soon.

"Who is to blame for the loss of your country?"

"I don't think anyone is to be blamed," Phuong said. "It is a very complicated situation, and all that needs to be said about it already has been said."

"Where did U.S. policy in South Vietnam go wrong?"

"I leave that to history. For the time being every-

thing is so emotional."

"What should U.S. policy be in Indochina now?"

"That is not for me to say any more."

Phuong, grimly composed throughout the interview, said he expected the Communists eventually to kill a great many of his countrymen. "But they will not do it

in sight of the TV cameras or the reporters," he said. "A lot of people will be taken away at night or while walking on the street and after that no one will know what happened to them."

Like most of his employees here, Phuong fears for his relatives in Vietnam.

Phuong said he and the other 70 Vietnamese embassy staff members in this country had decided not to return to Vietnam and not to serve the Communists here. "I suppose the embassy will have to be closed," he said. But until it is, the staff will continue to work at the 2251 R St. NW office, representing the interests of Vietnamese here.

Yesterday morning, Phuong said, American officials informed him the embassy no longer can draw money from its accounts here, nor can there be any sale of the embassy, which the South Vietnamese government had owned.

It is not known whether the embassy employees will be paid again, Phuong said.

Phuong Dung, an embassy political officer, sat dazed in a drawing room sofa after the interview. Like others at the embassy, she said she did not know where she would go.

"We are thinking of our family, our country right now," she said. "I ever imagined the feeling when you have no home, it's like you're walking on a street. You don't know where you're going, and you hope maybe someone will open a door to you—but no one does."

The embassy switchboard was swamped yesterday with calls from Vietnamese wanting to know whether their relatives had escaped.

Chi Ray, a Vietnamese expatriate living in Arlington, said she had submitted papers for relatives to the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service Tuesday, even as the country was collapsing.

"Then I called the State Department Indochina Task Force, she said, "and they said 'We no longer take care of that matter; it's all over.'"