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The Viet 'Mother Of a Thousand'

Columbus, Ga.

Mrs. Vu Thi Ngai, who cared for war orphans for 30 years, brought poison with which to kill herself should she fall into Communists hands.

"I did not anticipate the Viet Cong would kill me outright," said Mrs. Ngai. She said thought her name was on a death list for allowing hundreds of Vietnamese children to be flown to America.

"There are many different ways of torture," said the 71-year-old woman known as "the Mother of One Thousand Children."

Mrs. Ngai fled Saigon in early May along with other refugees coming to the United States. She said in an interview at her new found home in Georgia:

"They (Communists) give you paper and pencil. You must write what they tell you — biography, 'confessions.' I'm very tired. I do not have the temperament for this.

"I bought poison, to be ready, if the Americans did not get me out. I would rather die than be in their hands."

She says of the traumatic change which brought here to America: "I begin now my second life."

It is also the second time she has fled communism. The first was in 1954, when her doctor husband and other members of her family were killed by the North Vietnamese.



MRS. VU THI NGAI
'I begin now my second life'

AP Wirephoto

But long before that, Mrs. Ngai, as a wealthy North Vietnamese, was taking, starving children into her mansion in the Tonkin Bay area.

"As a young woman, my interest was sports, all the time," said Mrs. Ngai. She was the women's tennis champion of her country, an expert fencer and swimmer.

But the French-Indochina war which broke out in 1945 was to change all that, she said.

"Two million died from hunger. There was nothing to eat. It is hard to understand the poverty and hunger," she said.

As the suffering increased, she and her neighbors began taking in abandoned children. In 1954, the Commu-

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nist Viet Minh ravaged her town, destroyed her home, arrested her husband, mother, brother and two sisters.

"All died in prison," she said. "My mother from starvation, because she was too old to work and earn her food. My 15-year-old son disappeared one day I looked and looked for him."

Then, gathering up the orphans, her jewelry and a few blocks of gold leaf, she fled south with hordes of refugees, picking up more abandoned children along the way.

By the time she reached Haiphong, she had used most of her jewelry and gold to keep her growing group of children alive. In Haiphong, she named her orphanage An Lac — Happy Place.

Mrs. Ngai was forced to flee Haiphong by the Communists. She appealed to Dr. Tom Dooley, who helped her move several hundred children by boat to Saigon.

There, she and Dooley founded the An Lac orphanage in an abandoned French army barracks.

"I have cared for 50,000 children in 30 years," she says. "Many stayed only for short intervals while separated families found each other."

Mrs. Ngai was later to learn that her own young son had escaped from prison and made his way to Paris, where he is an engineer.

"But I have many, many children," she says of the two generations of An Lac orphans. "I stressed independence in them. I was determined none of them would ever have to beg."

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