

# A Tale of Two Indo Refugees

By Jerry Carroll

Ngon Som had a good life in Cambodia as director of refugee resettlement for the U.S. embassy, while Phan Tran lived comfortably in Saigon as a university professor.

Som, 44, managed to escape Pinom Penh with his family before its fall April 17 and Tran, 42, got out with his family before Saigon collapsed 13 days later.

Both are intellectuals and were important people in their countries. Among the first of the refugees to find American sponsors, they are in the Bay Area now to build new lives in a strange land.

Brainy, adaptable and forthright, the two men would appear to have a better chance than most of the 130,000 refugees to assimilate into a culture whose values in many instances are the opposites of their own.

Tran, in fact, already has landed a \$14,000-a-year job at Presbyterian Hospital. French-educated biochemist with a Ph.D. he works with radioactive isotopes in the department of nuclear medicine.

Few of the new arrivals can match that lightning start. Som, who speaks six languages, has applied for



The Patrick Pritchards and their children with Ngon Som (right), his wife (left) and the couple's youngsters



welfare while he gets his feet on this new turf. With a wife and two children, he is entitled to \$311 monthly.

"I think it will be very easy to adapt myself to any way of living," Som said. "The main problem is that for the time being, unemployment in the U.S. is so high. We have come at the wrong time."

"We're looking for a job for him now. He'll do anything, from washing dishes to whatever," said Patrick Pritchard, 27, a computer programmer, who lives in San Pablo.

Pritchard and his wife, Cheryl, 25, who have two children, agreed to sponsor the Som family because, as he put it, "we just sort of decided that was the thing to do."

Things are cramped in the Pritchard home, a flat-top bungalow in a lower middle-class neighborhood, and until Som begins getting welfare, the new arrivals are a drain on the slender family finances.



DAVID SHUMAN  
'Rather a small effort'

"Most people say I'm crazy," Pritchard said. He was against the war in Vietnam, but wasn't militant about it. "What we're doing is partly cultural exchange and partly guilt about the war."

Tran and his two young sons (his wife was stranded in Paris when Saigon fell and no one knows when they'll be reunited) are being sponsored by David Shuman, 36, a vegetable oil importer, and his wife, Elizabeth, 30. They live in San Francisco's Sea Cliff area.

"We thought in view of how the whole country went down and our part in it, it would be rather a small ef-



ELIZABETH SHUMAN  
Refugee co-sponsor

fort to put someone up for a month or two," Shuman said.

Lily Bien, a social worker for the non-profit International Institute, which lined up sponsors for the Soms and Trans said most of those Americans offering to sponsor refugees are doing so on humanitarian grounds.

"Those who offer sponsorships with no strings attached are usually low-income families. Many are blacks. These are just very warm people," Mrs. Bien said.

But many others who offer to take in refugees want them as live-in servants, an arrangement to which the institute does not object so long as there are written safeguards against exploitation.

In May, there were 11,000 offers a day nationwide to help sponsor the war refugees, a number which has

fallen now to a daily average of only about 450, according to the State Department.

"We need more sponsors," Mrs. Bien said, "We're not giving up hope, but it is difficult. The average refugee family numbers six, which compounds the problem of placing them."

But, given the polite, retiring nature of the Vietnamese and Cambodians, both the Pritchards and Shumans agreed, the problems of two families living under the same roof are fewer than might be expected.

Mrs. Pritchard said Som's wife, Siatha, 23, sometimes leaves the gas burners on because she's used to a wood stove. But on the other hand, she's taken to backgammon with a relish and skill that helps make the suburban afternoons pass more quickly.

Som and Tran had different reasons for fleeing their countries. In Som's case, he says simply, "I felt if I stayed in Cambodia there would be an end to life."

Tran, however, feels that as a scientist his lot in life under the Communists wouldn't have been too bad. But he had been trying to get his family out of South Vietnam for years and the brief interlude between the old and new dictatorships in Saigon finally enabled that.

"When you come to this country and feel the freedom, that's good enough," he said. "It's like getting out of prison." Tran intends to become an American citizen. Som isn't sure.



"I will wait to see what happens in Cambodia," he said. In the meantime, he will see to it his children, Uddam, 2, and Manita, a year old, are brought up knowing the Cambodian language and culture so they can return if it becomes possible.

Do Tuan, a 21-year-old Vietnamese student who has been in the United States for more than three years, takes a gloomy view of the prospects of his countrymen in the United States. He thinks 90 per cent will want to return to their homeland in time.

"The cultural gap is too much," he said. More than 45 per cent of the refugees are 21 or older, their attitudes shaped by a slower-paced, ancestor-worshipping, uncompetitive society whose values and customs in many instances are the reverse of those in the Western world.

Take the matter of eye contact. In the West, the

person who doesn't meet your eye is regarded as sneaky. In Vietnam, the person who meets your eye is expressing disrespect, Tuan said.

Showing the soles of your shoes to a Vietnamese is to demonstrate contempt and it is a mortal insult to touch his head unless you are the closest of friends. Male friends bathe together and share beds in relationships that are non-homosexual, he said.

In the United States, people who amass wealth in business are admired. In Vietnam, they are condemned. "When we want to insult somebody — please don't be offended — we say he's just the son of a businessman," Tuan said.

This is because in the stable, agricultural economy of South Vietnam, to accumulate wealth meant to deprive others of what they needed to survive. "This is a cold-blooded society," Tuan said of the United States.

"I don't feel myself a stranger in this country," Som said. He was educated in India where, he said, he was made to feel an outsider. "Sometimes when I was walking down the street I would be stopped and asked some very rough questions."

Som appears unaware of



VIETNAMESE REFUGEE PHAN TRAN  
'Its like getting out of prison'

the public opinion polls which show that most Americans are opposed to giving refuge to the Vietnamese and Cambodians at a time of high unemployment. But he does not fear discrimination. "You people practice — what is called — equality," he said.