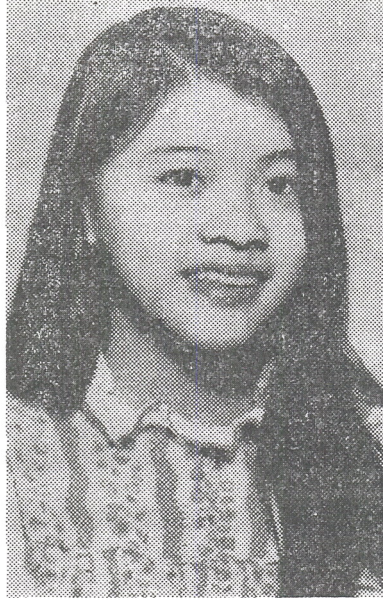




MAI YEN PHUONG  
The 5-year-old



MAI YEN THANH  
The 12-year-old

## Two Women's Custody Struggle

Phoenixville, Pa.

Two young Vietnamese girls and their U.S. sponsor have disappeared in what appears to be a custody battle with their mother. She had fled her homeland "so I can see my daughters."

Mai Yen Thanh, 12, and Mai Yen Phuong, 5, are loved by both women.

In fact, the women had cooperated to bring the girls to the United States before the Saigon government collapsed a year ago.

Duong Thi Yen Nga, 32, whose husband was killed in 1972, met Sara Coner, 28, the sponsor of the children, when both worked as nurses in a U.S. Army hospital at Long Binh.

The mother reached the United States three months ago. She declines to discuss details of the escape.

"So difficult," she says. "If I lose I go to jail, if I win I go see my daughters. Very dangerous for my life but I must think of any way so I

can see my daughters."

When Coner agreed to be a sponsor, Nga signed documents that apparently surrendered custody of her children and permitted their adoption. She says she didn't understand the words.

Last August, Coner obtained a guardianship decree for the girls. It was not full custody, and apparently it did not affect the mother's rights.

The sponsor and her mother, Katherine Coner, 57, are accused of interfering with the custody of minors and conspiracy.

At a hearing Monday, when Katherine Coner was freed on \$1 bail, a juvenile officer quoted her as saying the children were "safe and sound" with Sara but she wouldn't say where.

Nga, working as a nurse's aide at a geriatric rehabilitation center, says she refused suggestions from the Coners that she go to Africa to visit a friend and leave her daughters behind.

Associated Press



AP Wirephotos

DUONG THI YEN NGA  
A search for her girls