



The New York Times/Le Lieu Browne

A camouflaged bus carried U.S. prisoners of war across the Long Bien Bridge from Hanoi to Gia Lam Airport on Thursday. Hanoi residents watching the release of the prisoners expressed no hostility toward them or toward Americans in general.

## Hanoi's People Still Curious and Likable

NYTimes — MAR 31 1973

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Special to The New York Times

HANOI, North Vietnam, March 29 — Despite the heavy facade of official policy statements confronting any foreign visitor to North Vietnam, scores of Hanoi residents proved to be startlingly frank, curious and amiable to one visitor, believed to be the first Vietnamese-American to come here since the country became independent.

The visitor, the wife of this correspondent, was a member of the group of 23 American, British and French reporters admitted to Hanoi to cover the release of the last American prisoners of war.

A South Vietnamese by birth, naturalized as an American, Le Lieu made no secret of the fact that several members of her family are soldiers in the South Vietnamese Army.

### Bombing Damage Overstated

Apart from the amiability shown to the Vietnamese-American visitor, one of the most surprising aspects of life in Hanoi is the condition of the city itself.

The damage caused by American bombing was grossly overstated by North Vietnamese propaganda, and many western news reports have similarly overstated the dilapidation of buildings caused by an impoverished economy over the years. In fact, Hanoi remains a beautiful and bustling city.

Not so surprising is that state control of the North Vietnamese population is evident at every turn, in the form of ubiquitous olive-green uniforms and militia pith helmets, Government food shops and all the trappings of a state-centered bureaucracy.

At the same time, children and adults cheerfully ignore threats from traffic policemen and even soldiers, and when speaking Vietnamese — sometimes even in the presence of officials — tell without hesitation of at least some of the negative aspects of life in the North.

### Patriotism—With Complaints

Officials, soldiers and ordinary people express strong patriotism, but show little reticence in discussing food and clothing shortages, homesickness for families and friends in South Vietnam and even favorable impressions made on North Vietnamese troops by the South Vietnamese towns in which they had fought.

None of the people showed any interest in leaving, however.

Perhaps the most remarkable statement came from a soldier, who said that he had fought in the South Vietnamese city of Hue during the Tet offensive of 1968. The soldier, born in Hanoi and with sons already in the North Vietnamese Army, said:

"I liked Hue very much. I had last been there in 1945, but in 1968 it seemed even more beautiful, with many more buildings."

He did not speak of the heavy destruction and loss of life that residents of the city suffered during the North Vietnamese attack.

### Women Admire Clothing

Foreign clothing and jewelry drew admiring comments from women in Hanoi, who are permitted few luxuries and only a few yards of cloth each year for clothes.

"We are really short of everything—food, clothing, almost anything you can think of," one woman said.

Some correspondents were carrying cheap notebooks purchased in Saigon, with photographs on the cover of pretty girls wearing the traditional ao dai—a costume now worn in Hanoi only on special occasions because of the cloth shortage.

"Oh, isn't that beautiful," several women guides com-

mented, looking at the picture on the notebook.

Many Hanoi residents of South Vietnamese origin whose whose the North when the country was divided in 1954 were eager for descriptions of their home towns, and particularly for any information about their relatives.

#### Interest in Families

In some cases, they said that their relatives were fighting with the Vietcong, in others for the Saigon Government, but their interest seemed to be not in political and military divisions but rather in the fate and welfare of their families.

Le Lieu knew some of the families in question, and could give up-to-date information.

Many of the Hanoi residents asked the visitors to try to send greetings to families in South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia and outside Indochina.

Hostility and suspicion were evident only once during a long day of many conversations. Some sharp remarks came from a uniformed militiawoman stationed at the Nga Tu So prison camp, where Americans were being kept.

She spoke harshly when a conversation alluded to reports that a number of North Vietnamese prisoners held by South Vietnam had refused repatriation. She insisted angrily that this could have occurred only because of "brutal coercion."

#### Some Wanted to Stay

One official, speaking of the Hanoi Hilton prison, asserted that there had been some American prisoners who had asked not to be sent back, "but we had to send them home because of the Paris agreement."

In crowds on streets, out of earshot of escorts and officials, ordinary Vietnamese chatted with interest about the American prisoners being released and taken to the airport on buses. There was joking about the appearance of some of the prisoners, but none of the many conversations overheard expressed any hostility either toward the prisoners or toward Americans in general.

At the end of the day, an escort officer — not realizing that he was both overheard

and understood—turned to a colleague and muttered: "I think we better try to get these newsmen off the streets. It's been fine up to now, but they seem tired and I'm afraid we will meet some children throwing rocks."

#### Every Request but One

Escort officers, who seemed relaxed with the large group of Americans, asked at the outset for requests and suggestions as to how to spend the day. Every request was granted—except for one that correspondents be allowed to spend more than one day in Hanoi—including the cancellation of a North Vietnamese press conference and the substitution of one by an American general.

The impressions of a day's visit confirmed descriptions of North Vietnam as a threadbare, militarized, regimented society. But Hanoi conveys another impression, perhaps superficial—that most people have accommodated themselves fairly happily to the system, work hard, and are clearly not afraid to joke and talk among themselves, even criticizing aspects of their system.

To the outsider, Hanoi seems scarcely more repressive than Saigon. Barbed wire and curfew, inconveniently obvious in Saigon, are absent here.