Richard Verrone: This is Richard Verrone, I’m continuing my interview with
Ambassador Nguyen Phong, today is February 18, 2003 about 9:25 AM. Sir, we were
talking last time about your re-education experience and going through some of the, what
you did, some of the daily rituals, your relationships with some of the leaders and some
of the more humorous incidents that happened. You found yourself in a position of
leadership amongst the men at some point, you were able to talk with the camp leader a
number of times and suggest different, various projects to improve the camp, how did
you feel in that position of leadership, did that happen to you naturally or kind of evolve
naturally and once you were there how did you feel?

Nguyen Xuan Phong: Well I did not feel a sense of leadership but we were there
month after month, year after year and it seems that in the group meetings and the group
discussion the ideas I put out to resolve our every day problems in the camp and our
prison life seemed to be accepted by the other inmates each time that I was asked to give
my ideas about various things, so I didn’t feel like playing leadership at all and then it
turned out that I became some kind of a source of fun and comforts to them, especially
after shall we say closing time, by five pm, the iron doors of the cell were closed, then we
sat down, talk.

RV: In your barracks:

NXP: In our cell, yes the barracks. We were about a hundred in each building.
RV: You didn't have individual cells in the barracks?

NXP: No, we were all together, about a hundred, but our little bunks. And it turned out that in the evenings they liked very much that I tell them stories, mainly how people behave in the west and things like that, since I was in France and in England. So I told them all kinds of stories about the kind of life that the French, British, they had there.

RV: Do you remember any specifically, any of the stories that you told?

NXP: Oh, yes very much. I mean, first of all they were very interested in the eating habits so I try and point out the big difference between the British and the French in their eating habits, and their drinking habits too and the kind of food completely different, British food very dull and then the French they eat like mad. They were very interested in that, so for the food item, it also went into other countries, I talk about the friends I had in England from India, so we used to cook lots of curries, all kind of curries, goat curries, sheep curries, beef curry and frog curries and of course also pastries, the Austrian pastries, the Scandinavian pastries, and the French pastries of course.

RV: Did they want to hear about the food because food was so scarce?

NXP: Oh it was because we were all so obsessed with food. There was nothing to eat and of course I brought out everything, the Spanish kind of pie, bellaziana, and then on the pastas of the Italian and the cous cous of the North Africa. Yes, and so that occupy us for many months and then before then after that we went into courting, boys and girls in the west and also celebrations for prisoners in New Year, so they were very interested in those things. Most of them of course did not have any opportunity to travel abroad, and then of course I invented a few tales for them when I run out of true stories.

RV: What would you say, what kind of tales would you invent?

NXP: Well, I invented for example stories between boys and girls and things like that, love affairs and things like that.

RV: So you were an oral romance novelist?

NXP: Yes, that is rather the novels that I put out to them but there was a very interesting story that I happened to run into. There was a father and a son I knew in England and of course the wife died for several years and the father was dating a young lady who happened to have a sister too, but they were very interested in that story because the father and son eventually married the two sisters so that was unbelievable for
a Vietnamese mind and how would they call themselves because in Vietnamese traditions
you must call by your family rank and so that would be very confusing to them. And we
discussed for months that situation and then tried to imagine what would happen in
Vietnam if you have such a case and that kept them doing. But of course it was also a
very sad state of affairs because many of the older ones died quite quickly when we
moved to the north because they did not have any experience the cold, even many of
them were from deep from the Camou and Bagdu area, did not even go to Da Lat where
much cooler weather there. So when the hard, cold winter of North Vietnam came for the
first winter there in 1975 many of them just passed away, they didn’t hope and we didn’t
have much toughing too, and nothing to eat of course. I got skinnier and skinnier and
then we tried to help those old guys by using whatever we could to keep them warm and
the only thing that we managed to find was piece of cardboard, old newspapers, and we
wrap those things around them with strings to keep them warm, that was the only thing. I
was able to bring along four big towels, bath towels.

RV: Yes, we talked about that and you were able to keep warmer.

NXP: Yes, and it was vital for me because I cut them into gloves and socks and
the kind of jacket to keep myself warm there.

RV: Would you talk to the guards and tell them, hey these old men are very cold;
they’re not in good health?

NXP: They were also concerned, they were also concerned, they were not shall
we say, they did give the impression that they didn’t care but they had the same problems
too because they hardly have warm clothes, they have their uniforms and that was all.
And they didn’t have much clothing, those guards, they had the uniforms and that was
what they had. And it was very difficult to have warm clothes in North Vietnam in
general, even for the population outside, you see, that’s what happened to me when I was
on an expedition to the village market of Haitai with the kitchen van. I was given a cake
by an old woman once, several months later I met her again and that was winter and I had
the only wooller from England at that time and I took it off and gave to her, but that must
be a fortune in the north, they didn’t have any of those things.

RV: Do you want to take a break, get some water?

NXP: Yes.
RV: Okay, why don’t you continue?

NXP: So, but the cold, the most of the older inmates would not deal with that.

RV: How cold would it get?

NXP: And I remember, it was zero degrees C in the winter, the barrack did not have any ceilings, any windows at all.

RV: No ceiling?

NXP: No ceiling, you see you just had the roof, it was completely there open, you can see the ties up there and then there was a big iron door, but the windows with the bars did not have any glass window, wooden windows, so the cold just came in. You sleep there as if you were sleeping in the open sky and I remember the case of one of the older inmates there. He was the chief of police, I think of Sak Trang city, south in the Mekong Delta, very near my birthplace of Bac Lieu, he was chief of police and he must be nearly sixty by that time, very skinny guy. That was probably in the second year, I participate at that time to make what you call the tombstones, this is a rock that we polish and then we just engrave on a number because those tombstones used for the deceased inmates, we were not allowed just put their number on.

RV: Why not names?

NXP: I don’t know, that was a regulation so we had an area there, a kind of cemetery for the inmates to be buried when they die and you have those rows of tombstones with numbers.

RV: How many died while you were there, would you estimate?

NXP: Well, I, we were about twelve hundred or fifteen hundred at times and I work out the figures also to see whether it was very abnormal or not because we did not have any medical care and I think that the figure that I came up was about five percent a year.

RV: Five percent a year.

NXP: Five percent a year. So that was not too bad because there were other camps where that percentage was very, very high.

RV: Did you guys hear about those other camps while you were there?

NXP: Not at the beginning but later on because there were movements of those inmates so other inmates came from other camps and some of our inmates of our camps
went to the other camps, they moved them around for unknown reasons so we began in the second, third year, to have those movements, and to be able to get news from other people.

RV: What did you hear about the other camps?

NXP: much harder conditions, much harder. I think the A-15 that we were in that camp, was well the number one camp, the nearest of Hanoi and it was also a showcase for international organizations to visit so they made a special effort and we were put there probably because we were also the crème de la crème but the other, and especially the military camps were much harder, so that one was a little bit more political and also it was used for the U.S. POW before, that’s the Haitai, not very far from Hanoi. But that chap he went by where the tombstones were made and he asked what are they, we told him tombstones and he sat down and he cried. And then a few days later he went to me and said “Phong, I need two dongs.” At that time the salary of a mid-level civil servant would be fifty dongs.

RV: Fifteen?

NXP: Fifty.

RV: Fifty.

NXP: 5-0, and the guards received about seventeen dongs a month after deduction of their uniform and food and everything and that chap asked me for two dongs, he asked me to buy his toothpaste for two dong. I said, “Come on, why do you want to sell me your toothpaste?” Because we were given each quarter a tube of toothpaste and he said, “Because I need two dongs.” I said, “Why do you need two dongs?” He said, “Well, to buy cakes.”

RV: Keds?

NXP: Cakes.

RV: Kegs?

NXP: Yes, bake cakes, you know the North Vietnamese it is very hard but it looks like a moon cake, small one but it is very hard and a can of biscuits as you call it. And I said to him, “well if you need two dongs I give you two dongs. You don’t have to sell me your toothpaste.” So I gave him the two dongs and then he manages through the guards to buy some cakes from the villagers. Then he cut in small pieces and he went
around in our cell and he begged people to eat these piece of cake for no reason. He had
that feast you see and then a few days later he died. We buried him. He was too weak
because of the cold.

RV: Did he know he was going to die, do you think he really felt that?
NXP: I, at that time I had the impression that he knew that he was really, he
couldn’t hold it any more, couldn’t hold it, probably that he didn’t want to fight and
remain alive and let himself go to, because in the following days I noticed that during the
night he was so cold that instead of lying on his bunk he went into a corner of the cell and
sat there, crouching there several nights like that and then he died in a very striking way.
It was early in the morning because we were wake time, waking time is about five am in
the morning and that morning he got up from his bunk and he sat on the edge of the bunk
and just sat there and we were all very busy getting ready to go to work, we start the day
and he just sat there and died sitting there. And then the others around him came and
then touch him he just fell back and we discovered that he was dead, that’s how he died,
died sitting, waking up in the morning.

RV: How did everyone react to that?
NXP: Well, we became used to it, so we tried not to show too much emotion
because I think, I had the impression that with those older guys going one after another
we also wanted, if it happened to us we would not like to have the others to weep or to
cry or to manifest anything too much, but it was rather the impression I had the attitude
that we adopted that when things like that happened, those certain instances, just take
them, that’s it. Don’t show too much emotion.

RV: How did you feel about your own personal health, did you feel physically
like you could make it?
NXP: Oh, I did not. I didn’t worry at all about my personal health. That was a
funny thing because I brought myself to accept whatever may happen, the worst was
over. I was all right with myself, that aspect, I didn’t worry about it and luckily I didn’t
get ill and I seldom get ill. That was not the worry, I worried a lot about my parents and
the family at home but I didn’t worry much what would happen to us there because I
considered maybe the worst is to come, was to come so I didn’t worry much. But there
was lots of very moving scenes from others that I noticed. There was a guy who was
very religious and he practiced our traditions and customs to the best of his abilities even in jail, in prison, and when it came to the, what we call the death anniversaries that we celebrate, one of the major traditions and customs of the Vietnamese people, we must have a small ceremony to commemorate the ancestors of our parents and I noticed that year after year in prison with him, he always tired to practice that and celebrate those events for his ancestors and relatives. And he would go into a corner of the prison courtyard and try to set up a kind of an ancestors altar there with rocks and bricks and somehow he managed, through the guards probably, to get the incense sticks to burn and since we did not have much to ear except that dough, the steamed bread that they give us, about 150 grams a day, but he used that to make the offering, to celebrate the death anniversaries of his relatives, ancestors and parents and it was heartbreaking to see the guy trying to go through the motion. While I also remember the death anniversaries of my ancestors but I do it in my head considering the circumstances I used to say to myself well, today is the death anniversary of my grandfather on the mother’s side and then I would sit a few minutes and remember him, that would be in my head only, but that chap, he was, who was he. He was a kind of Lieutenant and he was assigned after the military training, he graduated from the Tu Duc Reserves Officer’s Training Academy and because of the draft and he was a kind of a brilliant mind and he was assigned to the, what do you call the Central Intelligence Office, that is the Saigon CIA and he worked there, in the planning section or something, very good guy. And then he would do those things, not for the show of it but he tried to do it whenever he felt like it.

RV: How did that ceremony affect everybody else in the camp, when they would see this go on?

NXP: I think that they were also moved by that case, that chap and of course we all had that tradition, custom, deep down in our hearts but there was no way for us to do anything in those conditions, but we really we thought that the guy tried really hard, really hard.

RV: How much were you able to continue practicing individual customs and traditions inside the camp, was it limited or not?

NXP: There was no ban whatsoever, so we had Buddhist, we had Catholics, we had Protestants, we had all kinds of religions in there, but the inmates were also careful
not to display too much of those things. We had the feeling that you have those people
trying to stick to their faith and there was no limitations, no position by the guards at all.

RV: So there was no ban on any religious ceremony as long as it was kept quiet?
NXP: Yes, quiet and the inmates were very quiet about that too, that is to say you
would not gather together and do those things because we knew that that wouldn’t be
tolerated, preaching. But we were able to remain rather free in our faith.

RV: What about services to commemorate those deaths, funerals or rites of
passage, what did you besides make them a tombstone?
NXP: There was nothing at all in the prison itself. That would be taken care of by
the guards and we were only, a few of us were designated to carry the coffin, that’s it, but
there was no kind of ceremony whatsoever.

RV: So what would happen, you would take, the guards would come in and get
the body?
NXP: Yes, they would take the body outside to their offices, they would put it in a
coffin and then they would designate a few of us to carry it and bury it. There was no
ceremony whatsoever.

RV: Did they allow any contact with the family of that deceased person to let
them know that the persons?
NXP: Nothing at all. And there was a very exceptional case, in fact the first death
which occur in my camp, A-15, and in my cell too, was the case of Con Von Tguyen, and
To Boc Tguyen was a very famous lawyer of the same caliber of Nguyen Huu Tho who
was the president of the National Liberation Front, they were of the same generation and
he was a from the north, moved down south in ’54, ’55 after the Geneva Accords and he
became a very famous lawyer in Saigon and he was known to have tried to defend the
Vietcong when they were brought to court and during the time of Ngo Dinh Diem,
President Ngo Dinh Diem, there were just lost cases when you go to court and be accused
of being a communist. It turned out a very unbelievable story because Don Don Tguyen
had an adopted son in Saigon and we found out after his death that his own son who
remained in Hanoi, in North Vietnam was the adopted son of General Giap and that son
came down to our camp to bury his father. So Giap and Tu Vot Tguyen switched sons in
Hanoi.
RV: How did they do that?
NXP: Years ago when they were, when the sons were kids, we didn’t know that.
RV: They switched sons?
NXP: Yes.
RV: Why would they do that?
NXP: One went to the south, the other one remained in the north, that is that one of his sons who remained in the north and I was told that Giap wanted one of his sons to go down south.
RV: So he gave one son to Giap to remain in the north and he sent one south?
NXP: Yes. And so that son of his, Giap adopted the son, came to the camp to bury his father.
RV: Were you able to talk with this person?
NXP: No, not at all. We were told of this story.
RV: But everybody saw him come in?
NXP: Yes, because he was in our, in my cell and we were on a very, we had very good relations between him and me personally because he liked very much; he was willing to talk to me. He was a very respected person and one of the best intellectuals that we had in Saigon. He was very critical of Ngo Dinh Diem, the dictatorial regime, he did not think much of the second republic with Generals Cy and Thieu because there was complete void in terms of leadership and he was put in the position of the Nguyen and Thieu government, between those years, late ‘60s and the ‘70s. So that was that the guest of To Mac Tri, who was the first death in our camp, just four or five months after we moved up north.
RV: That leads me to another question, what kind of relationships did you from with the men in your barracks and with whom you worked every day?
NXP: Very nice, very nice. And I was very surprised that almost everybody of very different walks of like, they were able to get on with me quite easily and they came to me and talked much more openly than among themselves because I was not in Saigon from ’68 to ’75 and so I was a bit remote from what happened in Saigon and probably that allowed them to feel more at ease when they talk to me than with people that they had to deal with everyday in Saigon.
RV: They realized who you were, what your position was, how high up in the
government you had been?
NXP: Yes. As I said when I arrive at the Long Then orphanage, where we were
about three thousand there, I couldn’t find any about ten people that I met before but
everybody knew me and they were very nice to me and even then members of the
Cabinet, I knew only two or three of them, there was a minister of public works, he was
my kind of childhood friend because our parents were long time friends, I knew the
finance minister because he was in France at the same time with me for our schooling
there, just two or three that I knew well and then I met a few of them so altogether about
ten people of the three thousand of the Saigon government. So when we moved to the
north I knew even less because there were also people from the provinces coming there,
of those twelve hundred, fifteen hundred people, I knew just a few, not in my cell, there
was no one that I knew personally.
RV: At A15?
NXP: Yes, A15.
RV: Did you form any really close friendships with any particular individuals?
NXP: No.
RV: Was that on purpose, or that did just happen naturally?
NXP: I don’t know. My mental attitude was that it was not the place to have
friendship and I had very good relation almost with everybody including the guards.
They were very nice to me too.
RV: Were they nice to everyone else or just to you?
NXP: They were correct with most of the inmates there but they were unusually
good to me. They talked much more courteously to me.
RV: Why?
NXP: I don’t know and also they said to seek my advice when there was
something to decide in the camp.
RV: Really?
NXP: Yes, because I got well with the prison director. Major Yung, and that
probably influenced the other guards.
RV: So they would come to you and ask you for advice on how to run certain things in the camp?

NXP: Yes.

RV: Wow, what sort of things would they ask you, do you remember?

NXP: Oh, there were lots of things. For example, how to group people, team groups, would that one be better with that group, probably not to have frictions between the inmates and things like that.

RV: Anything else?

NXP: For example, they say, “would you advise the other inmates how to wash their clothes after a day of labor,” because many of them didn’t bother very much to wash their clothes very often and so they would like to tell them, but they said why don’t you suggest them to wash more often their clothes and things like that.

RV: Would you wash everyday or have the option to wash clothes every day?

NXP: Oh, yes after a days work I always washed my clothes, especially in the summer it was so hot, it’s about forty degrees C and you take a kind of a shower and you wash your working clothes there.

RV: In the lake?

NXP: By the pond.

RV: By the pond.

NXP: By the pond and you wear them and by the time you reach your cell its completely dry.

RV: So you would wash them on your body or you take them off?

NXP: Well, sometimes and sometime you take them off to when you need it, when you have too much mud on them then you take them off, but if not then you just try and get the sweat out of it a little bit.

RV: But this was the pond again that had.

NXP: That’s the pond, everything comes from there, everything comes from there. And then eventually I did built a water reservoir with the cement and the brick we had later on and then we put the filter system and then we try and get the water up there to go down and fill the pump, so we began to have cleaner water to use.

RV: And that was your suggestion?
NXP: Yes, that’s, and it’s not that because they did not have the idea but they did not have the means to do it, they couldn’t find the means to do it.

RV: They did, but you found the means for them.

NXP: Yes, and then you see when I was very well known and the masonry work because I was the one who was able to, how do you call it, to line and shine the cement in such a way that it can hold the water, if you apply, it’s very hard, thin layer of pure cement, it is almost a kind of coating that you put on the concrete.

RV: On the outside?

NXP: Yes, to form the water of the reservoir and you have to apply it very hard and make it so hard that it can almost be shiny. I developed that technique and the prison had there, said well only you can do this, so you should try and do the whole reservoir so that the water can be kept in there, because if not then the concrete could hold but it would suck the water, it was porous, so the Vietnamese term that they use is jalag, that is to say, make it shiny.

RV: So, Major Yung, he was, must have been very happy with you and the fact that you were willingly cooperating.

NXP: Oh, yes he liked very much to talk to me each time that there was an opportunity he would like, and he did ask me ideas about how to make gardens, good flowerbeds here and there because he received the instruction to make it beautiful. That’s why eventually probably he passed the word it that general responsible for all the prisons and then he came because he was an amateur for orchids and he told me that he hundred of flower pots that he collected here and there and he heard that I was making flower pots and he came to discuss with me how he could have the new kind of flower pots for his gardens. Then, very often on Sundays he would come from Hanoi and spend the Sunday with me there and that impressed very much Major Yung to have a general coming to the camp.

RV: To see you.

NXP: Yes.

RV: Was there any resentment from the other prisoners about that?
NXP: Not at all, not at all because they were happy that I managed to have contact somebody and we all thought that if ever we need some help, well we have someone to talk to, that was a plus, that was a plus.

RV: Were you able to talk to him about other things besides the pottery, could you ask about what was going on in Hanoi, what was going on in Vietnam, the world?

NXP: No, I was very careful not to ask anything of that sort. I just left to him to bring up the topics for conversation.

RV: Did he?

NXP: Yes, and what happened, and at the beginning of December 1979 he hinted that I might be released soon but he didn’t say that, he asked me that questions, “Phong, what would you do, when you are released, would you continue to remain in Vietnam or would you go to France?” So, he hinted several times like that. I didn’t understand at the beginning, I thought it was just casual conversation but then after two or three weeks I was informed that I would be released. I was among the early releases.

RV: You told him that I would stay in Vietnam, take care of my parents, right?

NXP: No, I didn’t say that. I said well you know, I was very careful when he said that because I thought that he wanted to test me or something and so I said, “well it depends on what the government and the party would decide to do with me,” that’s what I said.

RV: That’s a good answer.

NXP: But I said I would do what would be permitted by the government and the party, that is the formula, the government and the party.

RV: Good answer, and he liked that answer I’m sure. Were they, do you think they were worried that you would leave the country, go to France and start an anti-Hanoi campaign or something of that sort?

NXP: Not at all, I don’t think so because I didn’t give that impression and eventually after the release when I returned to Saigon, I will tell you a very funny story then.

RV: Okay, let’s take a break.

RV: Okay, why don’t you go ahead, you said you had a story to tell you about?
NXP: Oh, yes I must tell you this story because it’s very illustrative of the mentality that we had about the war and about families and relatives and so on. One day, I think in the second year when they began to move the inmates from one camp to another and among the newly arrived there was a very well known lawyer by the name of Lawyer Sanh, S-A-N-H, and he was a very long time friend of my parents, almost a member of the family but he was also the associate of Lawyer Nguyen Huu Tho, who was the chairmen of the National Liberation Front, and they had a law firm in Saigon, the two of them and they were very prominent lawyers, very good lawyers and they had that same law firm that they put up themselves, very well known even during the French period, colonial period and they were among the first Vietnamese lawyers to succeed, become famous and so that law firm of Lawyer Nguyen Huu Tho and Lawyer Sanh became probably the most famous law firm in Saigon. And he also was in re-education, but I think the Then Wa, even up north nearer to the Chinese border, through the channeling of those really points just after the fall of Saigon. So he arrived there and we were very happy to meet, being an old friend of my parents. But that’s what happened was that probably when they heard that he was moved to our camp A-15 very near Hanoi, Lawyer Nguyen Huu Tho, the former chairmen of the National Liberation Front said an nate in a mecibus to our camp with food for Lawyer Sanh, all kinds of things and we had a big feast.

RV: He shared with everyone?

NXP: He shared with everybody right away, that show you that I think it is true in many Vietnamese families we had people on both sides and I mentioned to you eighteen of my relatives, uncles and so on, together vouch for my release to be under thee responsibility of their common custody, it was turned down by the government and the party but that was the attitude that those relatives are very dear friends who were with the Vietnam Communist Party. They did not have any, shall we say hard feelings against us, the former Saigon regime officials and in my personal case I did not have any antagonism against my relatives on the other side. I think the conflict was too big for us to understand or to do anything, and then we accepted the circumstances of that very prolonged armed conflict which was also not only the fight for freedom and democracy between the communists and the capitalists world or blocks, but also it was a dispute
between non-communist and communist Vietnamese and for all kinds of reasons people chose camps. I doubt very much that the Vietnamese people in general and even in my case, that we really understood at that time what communism was or what the free world was, but we were caught in a kind of a conflict.

RV: You understood though, didn’t you?

NXP: I grew up in the free world, you see.

RV: Right, you understood because of your education.

NXP: And so I continued to be in the free world but I did not sit down and try to measure what would be best for Vietnam or the Vietnamese people, whether we were communist or we went with the free world. It was a kind of second nature that you continued to exist in the world that you were born in or you found yourself in, so after ’54 there were half of the country in the south and the other half in the north but I doubt very much that the people in the countryside, particularly the peasants knew why and would continue like that.

RV: You’ve said, you’re saying that you did not sit down and try to figure out whether communism would work better for Vietnam, you just accepted your lot, you were in the south and so that’s the side you represented?

NXP: It’s not, it isn’t entirely to say that you accept your lot but you found yourself in a certain way of life that you were used to and that you believed in of course, you see. I thought in my mind at that time that communism was not good at all for all kinds of reason, through my education, through my upbringing in Europe, I was anti-communist but that was something very natural, it was not shall we say a difficult choice or it was an internal dilemma I accepted the kind of life that I was used to, that’s all. So I’m sure that for those uncles and other relatives who found themselves in the North or who decided to go North to join Ho Chi Minh and the Vietminh forces to fight French colonial rule, they did it for those reasons too and after ’54 they found themselves on the other side and they could not bring themselves to join the so-called free South against the Communist North. I think that we were on both sides much more motivated by a sense of nationalism rather than the sense of ideological conflict.
RV: Like this is best for Vietnam, so I think the South, this way, my way of life in the South is better for Vietnamese and in the North they’re saying, my way of life is better for the Vietnamese nation.

NXP: And that was a great moment I think in the history of the Vietnam War because by the end of the 1940s the traditional patriotic political parties, like the Dai Viet and the Working Man, Guomindang, they realized very soon, they were in a coalition government with Ho Chi Minh in 1945 when he proclaimed the independence of the country and the creation of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in Hanoi, so those people who were not communists, who were against the Vietnam Communist Party, they were very conscious of that but for the large majority of the people, mainly the rural population, they didn’t have any idea and it was for them just to regain some kind of national dignity, national independence and national sovereignty after a hundred years of French colonial rule and that was what mattered to them much more than communism or capitalism.

RV: So was this more of a war of elites, of elites, the people who really understood the differences in ideology, was it, they were driving the conflict, the majority of the population was like we just want a Vietnam?

NXP: Oh, yes and I think in the final analysis Ho Chi Minh was much cleverer, much more clever to play on those nationalistic feelings than Ngo Dinh Diem and then his followers and his successors. Of course the Free South had an enormous handicap in terms of context, timing, with the presence of the American troops and the American intervention which was somehow perpetuation of foreign rule to the ordinary and common people in Vietnam.

RV: Its almost like the Americans shot themselves in the foot.

NXP: Yes, so that show that in fact inside a family there was not much resentment, antagonism or animosity and we found ourselves in different camps and we accept and we continue with the ways of life that we were used to.

RV: But isn’t there antagonism, isn’t there some antagonism, I mean I sensed it when I was in Hanoi two years ago, three years ago, living there, there was antagonism against the people toward the officials, the policemen, the people who drove in their
Mercedes and BMWs versus the people who rode their bicycles, there was resentment, there was antagonism in the people.

NXP: You find that anywhere, any time.

RV: True, I agree totally.

NXP: See, its not because of the Vietnam War, but in the Vietnam War context itself I continued to have the impression that it was not much of an ideological conflict in the minds of the people.

RV: It was so ideological for the outside world though.

NXP: Yes, it was.

RV: Cold War, communism vs. capitalism.

NXP: Yes and I think that in the end Ho Chi Minh was able to mobilize those patriotic and nationalistic feelings much more effectively. He wore for example the sandals, its not that he didn’t have shoes, you never see him in a suit and things like that. In the South then we were western, completely and it was very difficult for the common people, especially in rural areas to see Ngo Dinh Diem in his white suits, everybody was in white suit, even the U.S. ambassador had a white suit.

RV: So, Ho wore those things on purpose.

NXP: Oh, yes.

RV: And do you think he, do you think there are any parallels between himself and Gandhi in that sense, that Gandhi dressed like the lower echelon people in India and wore the sandals.

NXP: In the sense that they projected a public image that’s nearer to the mass but I think in the case of Gandhi and Ho Chi Minh there’s an enormous difference because you see Gandhi was the non-violent line and Ho Chi Minh right at the beginning used terrorism because he didn’t have any other means if fighting. That is I think, in my personal view I think, the Vietnamese people, after the French, one hundred years of French colonial rule, they found themselves in an impossible crisis of leadership, there was no one, its amazing that the Vietnamese were not able to produce a leader. Was it because Ho Chi Minh monopolized I think very early and then also systematically eliminated physically anybody or anything against him that we continue to have that crisis of leadership. The only attempt to provide some kind of leadership was President
Diem, but he went astray completely and he did not get the feelings and the sentiments of
the population like Ho Chi Minh did. And even now, we continue to suffer from that
crisis of leadership, that is why it is such a chaotic situation but I don’t know when we
will be able to produce a leader.

RV: Do you think Diem was led astray or do you think he was prone to go astray
himself anyway?

NXP: Well, to begin with he was a Mandarin of the imperial court so very much
at that time and then second profoundly Catholic, coming from a Catholic family with the
French influence and presence in Vietnam and then he brought back especially from the
United States, western values and then in his eagerness to modernize South Vietnam he
went completely western and completely foreign to the population and he had an
impossible task also is to deal with subversion and then the escalation of the war by Ho
Chi Minh. Many people may think that the escalation was done by Johnson, from
Kennedy to Johnson but I think that in the final analysis, the American intervention in
Vietnam was basically a response to the action taken by Ho Chi Minh in order to overrun
the whole country. He did it in different ways than the American completely you see, so
the Americans responded in the traditional way of big superpower, why I think for the
first time, I dare say for the first time in human history that the notion of people’s warfare
was introduced in a systematic and organized way, not only subversion and kind of
terrorism some, but a very clever combination of the political, diplomatic, military and
then conventional warfare with guerilla warfare and then using the population in the war
as victims also pressure and also actors in that kind of conflict.

RV: Do you think that, okay, if we go with what you’re saying here, this
argument that Ho Chi Minh drove the conflict and America reacted, once after the Gulf
of Tonkin incident, once the United States had become involved, say by the summer of
1965 do you think that the United States drove the action after that or do you think they
continued to react?

NXP: Not at all, not at all because in responding to the subversive actions and
then gradually to conventional warfare by North Vietnam with their regular units against
Diem and Diem did not have a chance to meet all those forms of warfare and the United
States, probably, especially President Johnson had the impression that he’s in position of
all the military might necessary, of power to dissuade North Vietnam not to try and
overrun South Vietnam and the main or the decisive moments in the Vietnam War was
first of all when the Soviet Union had its bomb and then later in the beginning of the
‘60s, the Chinese had its bomb, so there were the two, shall we say forces of dissuasion
for the United States or not to overthrow North Vietnam, communist North Vietnam but
to limit itself to the kind of war which it had no chance whatsoever to deal with, with the
kind of subversion, the kind of warfare that Ho Chi Minh and Giap launched against
South Vietnam, so it didn’t matter how much military power you had, you were dealing
with something which was completely different, it was people’s warfare.

RV: Let me ask you about a parallel with today’s situation, with the United States
in Iraq, if the United States invades and goes to war against Iraq, defeats Iraq militarily
and then occupies the country, do you see parallels between?

NXP: There are very clear parallels because you know in that kind of enterprise,
first of all you try and use whatever you have as force of dissuasion or persuasion and if
you fail that it is only then that you use your force of strike, and after force of strike
instead of war you have to occupy, so you have the force of occupation, but to do what.
So in the case of Iraq right now, what would be your real objective, is it really to put an
end to sources of terrorist activities? Well, its not only that but its main purpose would
be to overthrow Saddam Hussein, maybe at the joy of all the other Arab leaders, but that
would be your concrete objective is to put an end to a kind of a regime, a dictatorial and
cruel regime, that is to remove Saddam Hussein. Its only terrorism, because you think
that he is source of terrorism, so you remove him, but the other from of terrorism will
develop and so dare we say that for the moment, immediate objective would be to remove
the man, so if that is the objective, you just do it very fast and then leave it to the people
there to do what they want, its not your business to tell them what kind of a regime, the
only thing that you can claim is that the regime which is existing right now is evil and
you want it gone, disappear, but then you see if you say that are going to rebuild the
country like in Afghanistan I think that you go into the same problem like Vietnam, that
is to say you begin to tell the people there what kind of a political regime they should
have, whether, even if it would be the best, the very best political regime in the world that
you can invent, it’s not theirs, they would not accept it.
RV: They don’t have democratic traditions in Iraq, just like South Vietnam had no
democratic traditions.

NXP: Yes, because they’re concept of democracy is different, it’s not that they
are not democratic but their from of democracy is something different and in fact you see
most of those people have very little interest in political principles because they’re
traditions and customs for thousands of years has always been the search for the virtuous
leader and they put all their trust in there and in political theory you have that loophole,
my own done, George Betch Cole, asked me one day he said, “how can you explain and
answer the situation when the whole people surrender their freedom to a virtuous
leader?” And in modern times you would ask yourself about Le Bon Too in Singapore,
the people there would accept restrictions or limitations in their personal liberties in order
to, for the welfare of the whole country.

RV: You’ve talked a lot in length about the people of South Vietnam weren’t
concerned with the ballot box, they were concerned with having a bowl of rice and
providing for their family and keeping their land and making sure things are okay, do you
think there’s a similarity with the Iraqi people, they really aren’t that concerned about the
ballot box, they want.

NXP: We have right now, at this very moment in the year 2003 a very vital
dispute and debate among the overseas non-communist Vietnamese, there are about three
million of them now living, scattered all over the world. One school of thought claim
that you must have democratic liberties in order to bring the country up which is true in
many ways, for example now you consider the economic and social organization of
Vietnam right now, what the United Nations and other foreign embassies try to do is to
promote free enterprise, to have the free sector move up, that is very clear that when you
have free enterprise the economy will go up. That is true, but then on the other side there
are people who said that when you don’t even have enough to eat every day or your kids
do not have their needs met, it is an abuse to talk politics with them. Anybody can talk
politics with a starving man and that is why it reminds me of that saying by Aristotle, that
is to say man is political animal only when his essential needs are satisfied, which also
implied that when his essential needs are not satisfied, he’s just an animal, and so
whether you are promoting democracy or liberties, but if you talk to a starving people,
anybody can talk to a starving guy and make him do anything, so I am also against that.

That is to say you must have a certain minimum level of subsistence before you can talk
politics to him and talk about going to elections and the ballots. The communist regimes
with the Soviet Union, seventy years of history, it is not prosperity at all, hasn’t been
prosperity, communism has not brought prosperity to its people and the four communist
countries now left in the world you see, China, Vietnam, North Korea, and Cuba, and in
the case of China, it’s a very special case because those guys are clever enough to accept
the bankruptcy of communism, of the dictatorship of the proletariat and so I’m always
trying to joke about it, whether the communist leaders or the Chinese leaders now who
claim to be socialists and communists still but the country is very capitalist, so whether
you call it a kind of a capitalistic socialism or you call it a socialistic capitalism, I am
inclined to call it a socialistic capitalism and the Vietnamese are now moving in that
direction although they admit that they were wrong, but they are moving in that direction.
So, the same thing with those who claim that you have to have democratic liberties, right
away, that is religious freedom and human rights, even if the Vietnamese people are still
very poor and starving, almost on the other side there are people who have said that you
have to bring up the economic level a little bit more before you can talk about politics. I
have the impression that they are the two sides of the same coin in fact, but if I have to
make a choice I would try and push up the economic level faster, more and then play
politics with them. So that was the dilemma of the Vietnamese in the ‘60s and the ‘70s,
whether you go all the way like Ho Chi Minh trying to mobilize and use the nationalistic
feelings against the foreign presence or as the nationalists would claim, the non-
communist Vietnamese would claim that you had to respect human rights and democratic
liberties, things which the majority of the Vietnamese people do not understand really.

RV: So where do you come down, which side do you agree with?

NXP: I think that its easier for practical reasons now and that is also the position
of the U.S. government now and the United Nations agencies, that is to push up as fast as
possible the economy, the development of Vietnam and give the people more than the
four hundred dollars per head per year GDP per capita income so that things can be more
meaningful to them. Then eventually you try to infuse through them notions of what I
call western democracy, the ballots and so on. They wouldn’t be much interested in that
and since the 1940s with Ho Chi Minh, then for the last thirty years of socialist regime there I doubt very much that people understand anything about the ballot that they use, the communist party always win 99% of the vote.

RV: A couple other questions about Camp A15, you said there were some international organizations; did they visit there to your camp?

NXP: Yes, and that was very funny thing to because once we have rebuild the camp, it became one of the most beautiful as number one camp in the North Vietnam. Then Amnesty International came and the International Red Cross and also lots of governmental delegations from other countries, mainly from the communist bloc countries, Cuba and things like that, and all those days of those visits, all the inmates were taken to the fields, except for a few chosen ones to stay there, to give the impression that there were inmates still in the prison and then we were given straw mats to lie on and sleep, so all those days of visits by those international organizations knew straw mats were laid down there beautiful and then the blankets also, new blankets, folded there, very nice and those who were chosen to remain would do that kind of window dressing and then there were also cans of condensed milk, put here, there, nearby to show that the inmates had all the things they need, toothpaste and things like that.

RV: It was a big show.

NXP: And that was a big show, all the time and on those days we had to bring our lunch with us early in the morning, so instead of waiting for noon time to be delivered the food we were given at the time of departure for the day of labor we brought those pieces of dough with us during the whole day, we were returned very late in the afternoon before five pm to be locked up again.

RV: Did you find your blankets and condensed milk and straw mats there?

NXP: Oh, no when we returned these things have disappeared, put back the storeroom for the next visit.

RV: That’s incredible. How did you guys feel about that?

NXP: Oh that was something that was accepted, we were not surprised, nothing to say about it.

RV: Right. Did you ever keep up with anybody after your release that you were imprisoned with?
NXP: Oh, yes because there were a few who were my neighbors in Saigon, that finance minister who had his testes swollen and he was just across the street from our home in Saigon. Eventually he returned to France because he had a French wife although divorced already, but the French wife was able to vouch for him and take him to France. Also there was a case of a folk song singer, that kind of Vietnamese opera, its very Chinese, that kind of opera and that case was really funny because it was in the My Tho area just south of Saigon about fifty miles, and he was in that classical theater group, giving performances in the My Tho city and he got drunk on Saturday night and the police pick him up, completely drunk out and the nearest thing where he pick up was that camp where they kept the former Saigon people there, that was right after the fall of Saigon, they didn’t know where the put the poor guy, completely drunk, they threw him into the camp and that night there were orders to pick up the whole camp to take them to prison in North Vietnam and the funny thing was that those people who came from North Vietnam to take delivery of the whole camp counted the inmates and there was always missing according to the list given to them from Hanoi and so they didn’t know what to do, they took the poor guy and put him in there with the other military and officers of the former ARVN, so when he woke up the next morning with those former Saigon soldiers. So he yell and he objected and he was brought to Camp A15 eventually got out, he kept on insulting the regime and then he got misleaders and the more he did that the longer they kept him. But he was eventually released with me among the early releases. He went back to Saigon the same day with me and he had relatives just also in the same area where I was and so he stayed there and waiting for the chance to go back to his native city of My Tho but it was difficult because we were not allowed to move around. We were sent back to place, I was sent back to my parents’ home and I had to remain there. We were not allowed even to cross the street and sleep in another home there. We would be arrested.

RV: We’ll get to that in our next session, but this guy he picked a bad night to get drunk apparently.

NXP: Yes, and so he took go for five years. That was, I don’t know whether I mentioned to you the case of a school teacher also in Go Cong who found himself in Camp A15 with us and his job as a school teacher, elementary school in a village near Go
Cong was to hoist the Saigon flag every Monday morning for the kids to salute at the beginning of the week so after the fall of Saigon he was in possession of that enormous Saigon flag and he knew that it would be very bad if he were caught with that flag so he planned, he had the intention to use that, cut it and make shorts for his boys to wear but before he could do that there was a search in the whole area and he was found with that flag in his home, and so he was sent to Camp A15 with us up there.

RV: And all he did was raise the flag each Monday morning?

NXP: Yes, and he said that he was going to cut it into pieces and make shorts for his kids but he didn’t have time yet to do that.

RV: How long did he stay in prison?

NXP: When I left he was still there, I don’t know.

RV: So more than five years.

NXP: And I mentioned to you the case of that old guy who was 72 when he was Fifteen camp with us, Dam Poo, and he was completely illiterate, he was a horse cart driver all his life and his son, the eldest son went to the Vietminh, the communist side, so after the fall of Saigon his son returned, so he was very happy he said I will kill a pig to celebrate but during the meal his son began to insult the American imperialists and the Saigon puppets, he said I could not stand that so I had to fight with him and he was reported to use a big knife chasing his son, trying to kill him and he was arrested and sent there, completely illiterate, couldn’t even read and write, seventy-two years old.

RV: Did he survive?

NXP: I don’t know. He was still there when I left.

RV: You said a few times, we talked about telling stories and talking about western culture, was there any talk of the United States, American culture?

NXP: I didn’t know much United States because I hadn’t been there. I only went there five days in 1973 so I talked more of the Europeans than the Americans.

RV: Was there a lot of discussion about the war and what went wrong?

NXP: Oh, no. Everybody tried to avoid those things because we were not very convinced of the clothes of the communist side but we did not in those circumstances, we did not insist to say that we were right or wrong, but there was a very funny incident and again with that finance minister. We had occasionally indoctrination lectures by big
shots coming from Hanoi and it was done in fact by that vice minister of the security who
came later on to talk with me several times and he was an old, he was from the old guard
of Ho Chi Minh, he was imprisoned during the French colonial period so he was rather
advanced in his age already and he had much more experience with the French than with
the Americans, but he came to give a talk one day at the camp, we were all there, a
thousand of us in the courtyard. After the talk, he wanted to have comments and
reactions from the inmates, he asked for volunteers, nobody volunteered to say anything
after his indoctrination talk and the man had the brilliant idea to call me up to give
comments on his indoctrination talk, I was named and asked to go up to the rostrum and
talk to the inmates.

RV: How many people were there?
NXP: About a thousand, the whole camp.
RV: About a thousand, okay.
NXP: Yes, so that was, I think it was the very first indoctrination talk that we had
at the camp.
RV: What did you, how did you feel when you heard your name called to go up
there?
NXP: Well, I didn't know what to say, really because I was not impressed at all by
his talk so most of us were there and it was almost like listening to the Hanoi Radio or to
reading the Yung Yung newspaper, the same lies and continue to say that it was the
Vietnamese people rose up in the defense of democracy and freedom, nationalism,
sovereignty against the American aggression, imperialist aggression, that was it and so I
was called and I had to go up there, the rostrum, on the stage and the only thing I found,
came to my mind to say, I said that the love for one’s country is not a monopoly of
anybody, that’s what I said, very short and sweet.
RV: That’s it?
NXP: No, I also said that I found myself here with all the people in this camp, I
didn't see that any of them as far as I could figure out, that they were assassins or bad
guys or cruel people, we were trying to have the life, a normal, ordinary life and I said
that, implying that we weren’t all traitors to the fatherland by saying that we are all, we
all care for the well-being of the people and of our country and I said that as far as I can
understand that patriotism is not a monopoly of anybody or of any group. My god, there
was a big silence and then it was very tense and the few of the cadres, the political guys
were running in all directions so I went back and sat down on the soil, on the ground
there.

RV: Is this outside or inside?
NXP: In the courtyard.
RV: In the courtyard?
NXP: Yes. But the old man was very calm, he tried to laugh it off and then he
called on another one to give comment and that was the finance minister that old
schoolmate of mine in France, he was also very disturbed but the guy with his French
education tried to pull a joke to calm down everybody. He then started to say I don’t
know how to comment on the thing but listening to the talk there he said he remembered
a story, an Arab story he said. He said that he learned this story, you have to beat your
wife at least once a week, you don’t know why you beat her, but she knows. [Laughs]
RV: He says this.
NXP: Yes, he said that.
RV: What did everyone do?
NXP: Nobody laughed, and he went back to his, sat down again.
RV: That’s all he said.
NXP: That’s all he said.
RV: So, what happened next?
NXP: Well, they called off the meeting ended, but it was a profound joke. Its like
the communists trying to beat us, things like that.
RV: Yes, I know a lot of insinuation.
NXP: And then it was really but incident because of what I said and then it was
only late in the afternoon, that was during the morning session that I was called to the
office of Major Yung who was there and the vice minister of the interior was there, so
what I understood was that they called Hanoi and reported the incident and someone in
Hanoi gave them instructions, so that vice minister, as soon as I arrived said, “Phong,
don’t worry about what happened this morning, nothing at all, don’t worry. There’s no
problem at all.” I said, “thank you very much, I didn’t mean anything bad.” They said,
“Okay, good.” So, we would like you to know that you don’t have to worry about it. I didn’t believe it but nothing happened.

RV: And that’s all they said.
NXP: That’s all.
RV: Everything’s okay. Did anything ever happen to you?
NXP: Nothing at all.
RV: Never mentioned again.
NXP: No.
RV: Very interesting.
NXP: Yes, so that was incident, it was well known and the word was propagated in other camps too because I got feedbacks from other people coming from other camps that they heard about this story.
RV: So you became famous.
NXP: Yes, I became famous for that incident.
RV: For standing up and saying.
NXP: Yes, and many of them also said to me that because I used the word love in Vietnamese and they also, a few of them try and counsel me not to talk too much about love any more. [Laughs]
RV: Really.
NXP: Yes.
RV: The inmates said this, or?
NXP: Yes.
RV: Why?
NXP: I don’t know, they were afraid, they were afraid, many of them were very afraid and in fact in the following weeks I had the impression that a few of them tried to avoid me. They were not as friendly as they used to be any more.
RV: Did you every get called to make comments again?
NXP: No, never.
RV: That was your only shot.
NXP: But there were other sessions but I was not called to make comments.
RV: They learned their lesson.
NXP: And they didn’t ask anybody for comments any, in the following sessions, the other sessions.

RV: They realized it backfired.

NXP: Yes, it was not a good idea even with the Arab story in there. So that was a bit of what happened in prison life.

RV: Before we stop for today, you’re able to laugh a lot about your prison life today, how can you do that, why are you able to do that?

NXP: Well, I think that probably because that was the way for me to overcome all kinds of problems and as soon as I found myself in something new and too hard to bear then I tried to laugh it off, find the funny stories and I got the habit I think until now.

RV: Not a bad habit.

NXP: I don’t know.

RV: Okay, well why don’t we stop for today.

NXP: Okay, sure.

RV: Okay, thank you very much sir.
Richard Verrone: This is Richard Verrone; I’m continuing my oral history interview with Ambassador Nguyen Xuan Phong and today March 14, 2003. Sir, it’s been a little while since we talked. We’ve been talking about your time in prison and we had worked our way up until close to your release, I wanted to ask you a couple of basic questions about your prison experience. In 19, when you went in, in 1975, what did you take with you physically, what were your possessions, what did they allow you to have?

Nguyen Xuan Phong: Well, we didn’t take much with us because we didn’t know where we were going. We were supposed to have only thirty days of re-education and we were gathered at the Long Ton orphanage and then after the thirty days we were moved, I was moved with about a hundred other high ranking people of the former Saigon regime to the Tu Duc prison. We stayed there for a few weeks and we were flown to North Vietnam and put in the number one re-education camp in the camp called A-15 in the Hai Tai District, just outside of Hanoi and in that camp there were about a dozen buildings, but there was only one in concrete, brick one, and I was put in the brick one but the others were just kind of a mud and straw type of building, which went down by one night by very strong winds and all the prisoners then rebuild the whole camp in bricks. So we did not know you see that we were going to North Vietnam and we didn’t bring much and we had just a few personal things, very few clothes and then no medicine, nothing at all.
RV: You had towels, you said.
NXP: I had, no I had about six towels, I was very keen on towels and that helped me.

RV: And toothbrush?
NXP: Yes.

RV: Toothbrush, any soap, shampoo, any personal hygiene?
NXP: All that went out, run out months ago, when we moved to Hanoi.

RV: Were you allowed to have any pens and paper, any writing, something to write with?
NXP: Oh yes there was no rules really, and we just brought along what we had.

RV: Okay, when you left in 1980, what were you able to take with you. When you walked, when you left, what did you have in your physical possession?
NXP: Out of prison?
RV: Out of prison.
NXP: Oh, yes of course we received a few packages in the meantime and had more clothes and so we had proper clothes to go home, shirts and trousers and so on and of course before we left we gave a lot to those who remained because we knew that we would be gone very soon, so we didn’t take much with us, but we were able to retrieve our watches, our rings, our wallets and personal belongings which were kept while we were there, but returned to us when we were allowed to go home.

RV: Did, was your money still in your wallet or did you have any?
NXP: Well, not really money because as you know they changed the currency many times and the kind of money that we had in ’75 was continued to be used with the Saigon money, but by the time we were released they were old and withdrawn from circulation and we had the communist currency.

RV: So you did have some currency, the new currency?
NXP: Yes, the family did send us a little bit. We had enough to return home but many of us then at the railway station in Hanoi sold lots of our things, watches all, to have more cash and buy food and everything, the first time after many years and we were able to buy all kinds of things for the trip back home to Saigon.
RV: Do you remember, I'm visualizing right now the Hanoi train station downtown; do you remember where you were on that street and where you were selling things?

NXP: Oh, yes.

RV: If you went back today could you identify where this was?

NXP: Oh, yes because the guard who took us there, we arrived about an hour before the train departure and he swindle us also because we asked whether there was a possibility to buy sleeping berths, you see, he said, sure there were sleeping berth and so we gave him I think about forty dongs or something. The average monthly salary of the civil servant in Hanoi at that time was about fifty dongs, so the sleeping berth was about forty dongs and he said he would go and get the tickets for it and he disappeared completely.

RV: Really, with everyone’s money?

NXP: [Laughing] Yes, with everyone’s money, so we continued to be on our wooden benches there until five nights and four days, the old Angstrom train, you know its about a thousand miles from Saigon to Hanoi, Hanoi to Saigon and at that time it took us five nights and four days on the train. I think it run about twenty miles an hour.

RV: What did you do on the train ride home?

NXP: Oh, we just sat, ate and looked at the landscape and so on and waited until we get home and it was also kind of a poignant moment when we crossed the seventeenth parallel again and we found ourselves in Da Nang and there was a very long stop there, so we were able to go and have a shower and wait for the train and but a few things on the road. We were also swindled by the merchants there, the little kids of course selling us rice cakes and they offered us to taste and it was very good, little square things like this as you may have seen in Vietnam and so we bought lots of those rice cakes, tend to miss rice you see, but then on the way we discovered that as we opened then it was in banana leafs, you know rotten banana leaves with just clay inside. But then we bought them so, some chicken, small chicken in the Wang Nang Went An provinces, very famous for their small chickens there, just boil or steam, but that, we saw were the chickens, that’s not clay.

RV: You saw what you were going to get, right.
NXP: With some foods. But if we, we tried, if I tried to understand and have an assessment of the re-education, the so-called re-education process, there are of course all kinds of stories about those concentration camps, so first of all you have a difference between the military concentration camps and the civilian. The civilian would be under the Ministry of the Interior, but the military, the Department of Defense also had that concentration camp for the former Saigon military. The very high ranking, the Generals and the Colonels, they were put in my camp, A-15, but secluded by a very high wall in the corner but I suppose that from accounts even by the former Saigon military who were put in those military re-education camps, it was very hard, very hard indeed, among the military as opposed that they must have their own ways. But in the civilian camp shall we say there were also a difference between the major camps, like mine or the one not very far from that in Nam Ha camp, just also outside in the south of Hanoi, where all the high ranking former Saigon officials were kept there and military too, Colonels and so on, then the treatment was much better than compared to far away provinces or far away places where those concentration camps were really hard and it is easily understood that the people running those camps in the far away and remote areas, they were much harder on the prisoners.

RV: Why is that, because they had less supervision and they could do what they wanted or?

NXP: Well, it was a matter of culture too. I mean the people there, they didn’t have much education and there was still a resentment against all the bad things and bombing from the U.S. in Hanoi and so probably the treatment was much harder there and there were also attempts of escapes in those smaller camps than in the big camps, it was very difficult to envisage the possibility to escape from the camps like for example the one I was in, was a very solid prison with high walls and so on.

RV: Did you ever consider that, trying to escape?

NXP: Well, all of us hoped for possibilities but we never well that we would not have any chance to do that at all, even if we managed to get out of prison we would not last very long because you see the people all around there, the villages and the hamlets would identify us right away. That under communist regime that much is very much the population who would do those things, and I, I come to the understanding, the conclusion
that there is a difference, discrepancy between the principle and the practice, the theory and the practice of re-education of those camps, so we were not tried by any court, we were there, legally you would call in other countries and that was also used by Saigon, a kind of an administrative detention, preventive detention and things like that, but that usually should not last too long before you put the person to trial at the court, but I think that with the enormous mass of those people from the former Saigon regime, the Hanoi authorities must have a way to deal with it, neutralize those people at the beginning of those years after the so-called liberation, so they had to put those people, possibly dangerous to them in those concentration camps. So the treatment made be different, one camp to another but I think that the major concentration camps were much better, than the small ones in the remote areas.

RV: How would you define re-education?

NXP: Well, its rehabilitation, re-education, imprisonment is the same thing, you see. But it has always been the contention of the people in that kind of field, re-education, rehabilitation that you can make the man better by putting him in jail there and hope that you will change him, so that was the principle. But I’m sure that the Hanoi authorities could not believe in such a thing, that they thought some two hundred thousand officials of the Saigon regime could be brainwashed even to change their feelings and their thinking, so it was mainly a kind of preventive safety measures so that they can run the country, particularly in the south, but I don’t think that they hope very much that they can change the mind of those former Saigon people. So, that is the theory and the practice of it. And, they try of course to, in the major camps to do whatever they could to show that they are a good government, that they treat the prisoners well, and it was true. Although by Saigon standards, it was terrible, very primitive living conditions, even hygiene, we were not used to that kind of standard but that was common in North Vietnam and in many ways we were much better treated than the ordinary people in the Hai Tai village. They didn’t have toothpaste, they didn’t have soap and all these things, sugar, we, every quarter, we had our share, our ration from the Ministry of the Interior, I think we had two pounds of sugar for three months, for every three months we had the toothpaste and we had soap and all of these things and so you couldn’t say that it was
lousy treatment compared to Saigon standards, they were very primitive but compared to
the ordinary people outside we were privileged, so that’s one thing and I think that they
did not in our case, Camp A-15, think that they could use violence or torture or anything
of that kind, that would go counter to their policy propaganda.

RV: Because of who was there?
NXP: Because we were more than a thousand people there and they always tried
to be polite, they talked courteously, they don’t yell at us or they don’t beat us, you see
they didn’t do that.

RV: But they did this at other camps.
NXP: The other camps, for sure, and there were cases that some of the people are
our camp were taken to the Hoa Lo prison in Hanoi, the main prison, you know what they
called the Hilton in Hanoi, where the U.S. prisoners were kept there and there was a case
a guy in my cell, he was the Director of Planning of our CIO, which is the equivalent of
the CIA of Saigon, the Central Intelligence Office, he was the Director of Planning, so
right at the beginning, that guy very candidly proclaimed publicly that would, that he
knew lots of things you see because he was in the intelligence business and he would do
his utmost to help the communist government with whatever knowledge that he had. So,
he was right away taken to the Hoa Lo prison in Hanoi, stayed there for months, came
back about a couple of times and then was sent to the Hoa Lo prison again and
disappeared completely.

RV: What do you think happened to him?
NXP: And we learned later from the other prisoners in Hoa Lo they beat him up
like mad to get information out, they couldn’t believe he had completely, although I don’t
know the guy, maybe he was sincere when he said that but that was a lesson for us, that is
to say you should not believe what the guards told you, that is to say the more you
confess your crime than the sooner you will go home and the more plans that you
confess, the more information they try to get out of you. And it was also very funny and
there was a very low ranking guy of the CIO in Saigon, he was responsible for the, what
we called the dead mailboxes.

RV: The dead mailboxes?
NXP: Yes, that’s the Vietnamese expression, that is designated area where you put the messages, receive your messages from the dead mail in mailboxes.
RV: The drops?
NXP: Yes, the drops. And that guy I think that he was kept until the very end and we didn’t know that after even ten years there was no news that he was released at all and it was also told, we were also told that he had contacts with both sides apparently through those dead mailboxes you see, and so the Hanoi authorities wanted to know who their traitors were, to furnish information for the Saigon intelligence office. I was even told that he was kept there to serve other purposes too, every now and then that they wanted to put someone in jail they just asked the guy to admit that he had contacts with that chap.
RV: And they could go arrest him and?
NXP: Yes. And so its not only the high ranking people who were kept there longest. There was also very funny incidents, I told you I think that incident at one of the indoctrination meeting and when asked me to comment on it, but there was also a young chap, he was just the guard at the, also the CIO, Central Intelligence Office in Saigon, he was the security guard, very young, who was drafted Vietnamese and he was nineteen or twenty. He was proud he was given the job to act as the security guard at the gate of the cell to open the gate for the cars to go in and go out and he had a very funny question to the instructor there, he said at one of the indoctrination meetings, he said, “Why in 1954 with the Geneva Accords, did you not get the south instead of the north? You see I was born in the south, if you had the chosen the south, I wouldn’t be in jail today.”
[Laughing].
RV: [Also laughing] How did you answer?
NXP: We all laughed but there was no answer of course to that question.
RV: Right, oh that’s funny.
NXP: But re-education was very well conceived and handled by the Hanoi authorities.
RV: Very efficient?
NXP: And you must admit, very objective. It was exceptional how you know the war ended, and how all those Hanoi people dealt with the problem of those hundreds of thousands of former Saigon regime officials. Not I think that they did that on purpose
because of their good heart, they would have eliminated us all if they could, that was their policy since the 1940s, but I think the population would not understand it and international community would not understand it and in the end I think they came slowly to realize those Saigon people were not much of a threat any where. They had a million troops and half a billion U.S. troops there, who were not able to deal with it, so now two or three hundred thousand people of that former Saigon regime wouldn’t be in position to do anything very drastic, so they took the chance and they claim in that case that they had a very humanitarian policy and they did not restrict too much, although they jail about two hundred thousand people and many of them died in jail of course, but I tired to find out at one time whether the percentage of death over the prison population was too abnormal or excessive, it was not too abnormal or excessive, we are to objectively accept and recognize that. And it was not thanks to them because they did not have much capability to deal with the health care in those prisons and in fact the health care was carried out by the Saigon doctors who were in jail then, amending you see, so with the very little medicine, but at least we had a number of doctors and in our camp we were very lucky to have several of them and one of them was Dr. Ei, who was at that time of the fall of Saigon the Director of the Pasteur Institute, so he was a crack doctor and he took care of us. And I, I have already mentioned to you there was also another convict there and he was jailed there for having killed his wife and her lover right in the bed, he shot both of them and he got eighteen years and when I was there he was only in his tenth year or so, so he was a good doctor, because he was the Director of a government hospital in Haiphong, so he was a good doctor too. So, they tried to, to do whatever they could to make it acceptable for us to be in prison there but the means were very limited and so I think we had the best treatment that they could have given, but compared to the Saigon standards, that treatment was really, to many people, inhumane and very primitive.

RV: What about the torture and the things that went on at the other prisons?
NXP: We didn’t see it any at our camp.
RV: But now, looking back at it when you’ve heard story after story of?
NXP: Yes, probably in the smaller camps in the remote areas and also, it would be very likely as in the case of that Director of Planning for the CIO, then you would be
the hand of the prof, in the hands of the professionals and they had to go through all these
things to abstract adverse information as they could from you, so that’s a fair practice,
with that kind of business.

RV: Okay, so are you saying that the torture had a purpose behind it, wherever it
grew on?

NXP: Yes, interrogation, that is a process of interrogation if you really believe
that you know the enemy had vital information you would use any means to obtain that
information.

RV: There have been some South Vietnamese civilians who said they were
basically tortured, their experience in these so-called re-education camps were horrible
and they were jailed simply because they were a member of a leading family or they were
in the wrong place at the wrong time and they were tortured and they go through this and
then they’re released, what do you have to say about this?

NXP: Well, to begin with there was not much of a coherent administrative
structure, after the fall of Saigon to govern South Vietnam and so at the beginning the so-
called Vietcong tried to take over, you know because they were the people on the spot,
but very rapidly the Hanoi authorities move in, within I think three months, not more and
then they began to take over, you see the administration of South Vietnam from the so-
called Viet cong people, who had no experience whatsoever to do those things, but the
Hanoi people, they probably did their best under a communist regime to administer
anything. So, you had I’m sure in the far away remotes provinces, instances like that and
there were summary executions too, probably because of the local sentiments, after so
many years of repression or something, war, so you have personal revenge. There were
lots of those cases, but that would not be shall we say like the Nazi as a national policy to
of those things and take people to the Wall and exterminate them, so there was not. And
in fact, the central government, people tried to go to far away provinces to put an end to
those things because it would be very, very awkward for them to let that situation prevail.
There were cases like that, but I would not say that it was a nationwide thing. You had
also actual torture, also the exaction, but then it would be on a local basis rather than a
national policy, but there cases like that, horrible cases I’m sure. So, I would say that on
the military it would, it was much harder, more violent, than on the civilian, I’m sure.
Military, they may be more prone to use violent methods than let’s say civilians. And to the Saigon people in general, I think the treatment was harsh because they’re not used to that but probably to the people in North Vietnam it was normal. But then, that kind of re-education, it was, the most horrible thing was that the uncertainty, you were not told how long you would be there, how you would be treated and in my case, the mental pangs would come from the inability to know what happened to my old parents, to my family, so that was terrible. When you are alone, when you are in jail you think about yourself, you realize that it’s just you, one person, but the rest of the family at home might be in even worse situations you see. Then we heard that the material living conditions outside were extremely difficult, they did not have much to eat and things like that. We did not have much to eat in the camp, but we were sure that we would not be left to starve to death, you see, so even if we lost weight very rapidly, but we didn’t think that we will starve to death in those camps.

RV: What was your physical condition when you left?

NXP: Well, when I was, when I went into the Long Ton Orphanage I was about seventy-two kilos, that would nearly 160 pounds or something, fifty something pounds and about not ever two years later I was, I dropped to forty-three kilos?

RV: Forty-three?

NXP: Yes, so it would be something like ninety-five pounds. I was able to weigh then because I happened to be in the kitchen one day and they had the thing we had to weigh the.

RV: The scale.

NXP: Yes, the scale to weigh the flour and the cereals and I jump on it to find out how much, and I found out I was forty-three, it was really skinny.

RV: Did it shock you?

NXP: Not really, because I accepted the events that I would be diminished.

RV: What about your oral hygiene, your teeth?

NXP: Oh, yes I lost my teeth one by one so when I was released I was left with about six, which I managed to keep until the death of my parents in Saigon, living there about ten years, I lost another three and for the last five months that I arrived in Lubbock, I managed to lose the last three.
RV: Did you really? Let’s take a break, I need to change disks. Okay, we’re continuing the interview; so let me ask you a couple of questions about the concentration camps, as you say the re-education camps. Do you think there was an alternative to having these re-education camps, that the Hanoi government could have implemented?

NXP: I don’t really think so because it was a threat to their regime and particularly at the very beginning when they were completely lost, what to do you see for the administration of Vietnam. So you have there a big dilemma, so they decided that from the levels of service chief that is, just right below the directorate level, that is a director that under the director you have the heads of the services. So the head of services up and on the military the lieutenants up would have to go into those re-education camps. That was the only way for them to shall we say neutralize any adverse effect and it was also true that right after the fall of Saigon there were lots of people who were really worried, scared even you see, and wouldn’t have done anything to try and fight back if they could. So, I think that the Hanoi authorities had no other choice but to imprison those people. To my estimate there was at least about two hundred thousand who would be you, required to be in prison for a rather long time.

RV: Do you think that was a good, accurate number or do you think it should have been much less than that, or more?

NXP: Well, it may be more but at least I would say two hundred thousand according to the kind of structures we had with the Saigon government before. But then for the ordinary troops, for the NCOs and for those civil servants below head of service, they were supposed to have only seven days of re-education but on the spot, that is they remained in their homes and they would report every day to the police or to the military unit there to listen to talks about indoctrination. For the other nations lines it was no not too difficult for the Hanoi authorities to put out the arguments that they were for nationalism and the defense of independence and sovereignty and freedom and so on the Vietnamese people against American aggression, so there was not much of an ordeal. And, what happened was that they tried to keep the Saigon structures going, first of all the utilities worked without any destruction whatsoever, water, electricity and so on continued and they were manned by the Saigon people who knew how to do that, telephone and so on. But for the other fields of activities, even the Hanoi people were
completely in the dark, they didn’t know how to handle those things so there was a complete stop and the very first thing was to have a survey or census of the people who were, who was who and where. And even the few weeks after the fall of Saigon the people continued to flee abroad by all means. They went to Cambodia by road, they took the boat, but it must be recognized that the large majority of the population little by little came to realize that not very harsh action would be exercised on them, so they continued to go on with the new regime and at the beginning the stores were still there, and so a lie was not too visible. But I was told that probably about three months later problems began to pop up for the new administration. But it was at the very beginning very much in the hands of the military, so even the Saigon general area was put under military rule of General Than Yuan Tan, who was supposed to be from the NLF and a southerner, so he was much nearer to the so-called South Vietnamese. But then when the Hanoi people move in, then the friction began. It began first with the NLF and then the friction came slowly to the population, so you have then really hard measures imposed on the population in South Vietnam, the population in North Vietnam, they were used to that ever since 1940s and the ‘50s, but in the South it began to be really difficult for them. And the difficulties were mainly economic to begin with, not enough to eat, then no work to do, you see, and they had to reorganize the whole thing and they failed completely of course.

RV: Why not allow, they tried to stop, the Hanoi government tried to stop people from leaving the country as much as possible over the years after, since, after ’75, why not allow them just to leave, to escape free will, to do what they wanted to do?

NXP: Well, first of course it was political. They wouldn’t accept that failure; second, it’s not that they really tried to prevent those people to go, because deep down inside if those people did not accept the new regime they would be happy to let them go. They didn’t try very hard, really very hard to stop them and so the boat people began, you see the boat people began and very soon they began in collusion with the local authorities. So the boat people exodus was to a large extent possible with the collusion of the local authorities, see and especially there was some kind of understanding passed through those people at the local level, local level, I would say at the district, hamlet level that for example the Chinese, it would let them go quite freely, so the Chinese had the
means to leave and they weren’t really worried, but they were not recognized by the
United Nations because Taiwan was no longer a United Nations enter, it was done by the
Red Cross, the National Red Cross that they would go to Taiwan see instead of the other
countries like most of the Vietnamese. And it cost a lot to arrange escape by boat so
people put all their money in there in order to go.

RV: If they weren’t trying to, if they weren’t trying, as you said, to stop them so
much, why was it so hard to get out of the country?

NXP: Well, because it was not enough officially permitted and you have there lots
of false play there, you know. The local police would take their dime in passing and then
it was also a problem to gather enough people to get in a boat and people very afraid to
ty and get someone to agree to join you to escape, so it was not something to do freely.
But then very soon afterwards, I would say by 1977, ’78, it was almost official you see
that if you pay so much, so many tiles of gold per person than the local authority would
even organize those trips for you and it was almost official by that time, two or three
years later and that was also by that time that the Hanoi authorities came to the
conclusion that they better let those people go. It was also by that time that allowed the
strangled foreigners who got caught by the fall of Saigon and retained there, considered
dangerous or something, that was only by 1977, ’78, that the Hanoi authorities began to
allow the repatriation of those foreigners and including Elizabeth who was suspected to
be a CIA agent and for weeks she was called by the security people and spend a whole
day with them under interrogation and they began to take position that she’s not, she was
not my real wife because she doesn’t look very Vietnamese, she’s a Hanoi girl, you know
one hundred percent Vietnamese but she is very tall and she doesn’t look very Oriental.
And they claim that she was planted there by the CIA to take the place of my real wife
who was still in Paris because my real, I wouldn’t be crazy enough to come back you
know five days before the fall of Saigon. She was kept there for three years under the
intervention of the French embassy and consulate she was eventually repatriated back to
France.

RV: How much contact did you have with her while in prison?

NXP: Nothing at all.

RV: Nothing at all?
NXP: Nothing at all. But it was also a good thing because when I married her in Paris, I was alone in Paris at that time, my father did not check very much but I had a violent objection on the part of my mother.

RV: Why?

NXP: Because she was a Northerner and she wouldn’t let, my mother, accept, she has a daughter-in-law who would be Hanoi girl. She would accept a foreign girl, French or American easier than a Hanoi girl.

RV: Really?

NXP: And when in fact Elizabeth’s father was from south, he emigrated to north to begin career there and became one of the largest landowner in North Vietnam, was very wealthy and in the 1954-55 events he was jailed by the communists and he died in jail.

RV: Did your mother ever come around to accept her?

NXP: And then you see during those three years that Elizabeth had to stay in Saigon, my mother and her got on very well.

RV: She stayed with your parents?

NXP: Yes, the whole time and they got on very well. That was a good thing.

RV: Let me ask you a couple other questions about re-education before we move on. What if somebody listened to this tape, this interview and thought that you were defending re-education, that it was not as bad as it has been made out to be?

NXP: I’m not defending re-education, but if you look through history books, with a long war, bloody war, for three decades between the communist Vietnamese and the non-communist Vietnamese, I also wondered many times when I was in jail, what we would do, the Saigon people do if we won the war, how you to treat those communist troops. I’m not very sure that the Saigon people would have reacted less violently because there were also lots of resentment on the part of those South Vietnamese against the communist troops too, you see. And in fact they were victims of more, shall we say, terrorist acts by those North Vietnamese against the South Vietnamese than we had in South Vietnam done against the population in North Vietnam, you see, and so the reception that we had from the North Vietnamese population was not as bad as I thought, you see. So, its not a matter of defending re-education it’s a matter of what would have
happened the other way around to begin with and then, its not defending re-education but
I think that the North Vietnamese authorities had no other option to do that, whether it is
good or bad is another thing, but realistically, concretely, there was no other way for
them if they were to preserve any kind of decency and dignity for their government.
RV: Let me throw out something. During the American Civil War, after that,
there was a military occupation of the former Confederate States of America by the
United States Army and there were military districts set up and military governors, and
this was about a twelve-year process of Reconstruction as it had been called, was called
and is called today. But there was not a lot of, some of the government officials were
arrested and went through trials or were imprisoned, some of the military leaders were as
well but overall there wasn’t a large majority of people or in the military who were
imprisoned like this, in these re-education camps. They were allowed to pretty much go
home. Why the difference between to two, besides the obvious?
NXP: I think that first of all you see that the American Civil War, the defeated
troops you see generally was no longer a threat to the, what they call the.
RV: The Union Armies.
NXP: The Union Armies, you see, but with what they believed to be one million
Saigon troops it was a real threat.
RV: Even though they were defeated militarily?
NXP: Defeated militarily but you must also remember that the weapons and
armies, they could not really know what happened to those things and those Saigon
troops who could have set out areas of resistance, pockets of resistance, so it was a real
threat, it was a real threat. And if you think in another aspect and here my uncles told me
afterwards that by 1968, beginning in 1967 the relatively high ranking members of the
Vietnam Communist Party in the North Vietnamese hierarchy who were the southerners,
who went up north in the 1940s to join the Vietminh ranks with Ho Chi Minh at that
time, that was the case of my relatives on my father’s side. They had many meetings
with Ho Chi Minh who advised them to respect the set up in South Vietnam,
economically and socially, everything because Ho Chi Minh claimed that there were lots
of assets and the South Vietnamese, so-called South Vietnamese were always considered
as very dynamic entrepreneurs and very active, efficient in doing business and in the
economic activities. And so that was the idea put out even by Ho Chi Minh, but unfortunately Le Yung, who replaces Ho Chi Minh as Secretary General of the Vietnam Communist Party, maybe under the pressure of others and also in the revelry of the victory, historical, enormous victory against the almighty U.S. you see they did not respect that wish by Ho Chi Minh, that is to say he had the idea of one Vietnam, two systems, you know like Hong Kong and the mainland China and I think he had always been very realistic, that man. Of course he was a communist and he was dedicated to have communist rule by all means and he did all the dirty tricks possible to grant power and to maintain the Vietnamese communist party there, but there again he showed that you know, they had the idea that the South Vietnamese could be an asset to them. So you don’t take those guys out and shoot them, in fact they should have try and use those assets but they failed completely, they failed completely. So then what I discovered after my release in 1980, it was chaotic.

RV: If Ho Chi Minh would have lived, do you think it would have been different? NXP: I think so because after him there was no one who was able to say anything to anybody.

RV: Tell me about how you dealt mentally with the uncertainty and the imprisonment. You wrote in your book about hope, about dissecting this word and understanding what this was, tell me about that.

NXP: Of course you had to accept the sad reality that the Vietnam Communist Party since the 1940s did everything to grab power. They could not do that, couldn’t have done that without the help of the communist bloc, mainly the Soviet Union. So the history of Vietnam there, particularly from the beginning of the 1960s really closely related to the Soviet Union. So, that is the sad aspect of that, but that was the reality you see. And deep down inside I could not come to accept a conflicting ideology. For me it was not bloody conflict between communism and capitalism because I never had the impression that capitalism was an ideology and it was a label put on the Vietnamese in the South of Vietnam that we belonged to the capitalist world. I did not have the impression of that time that the majority of the so-called South Vietnamese were conscious that they were in the capitalist world or not, you see. It was rather a southern traditional way of life, Vietnamese way of life and to me communism would be contrary
to that form and ways of life. But then Ho Chi Minh was clever enough to say that communism would enhance the nationalist feelings, nationalistic feelings and the customs and traditions of the Vietnamese people. I didn’t believe that and for me it was international communism although at that time I did not dwell much in the differences of communism from the Maoists are a kind of communisms even with Tito, Yugoslavia, so, but it was a kind of solidarity in the international communism movement. And the thing was for me that if you know, if we had to accept any form of political regime, communism was probably the worst thing that could happen to the Vietnamese people, but then we had to accept that you see. When I was in jail I said, well we have to accept it and live like the rest of the people who happen to be under communist rule too. I mean, the Czechs and the Germans, the Poles and Anlo, all those and they continue to live on and we have to accept that lot.

RV: Okay, so this is what you processed in prison?

NXP: Yes, and then I had that, you know, I’m coming back to that kind of ideological conflict, the mental exercise. I said that whatever you try to impose you see on the people, they always have ways to remain what they are; I mean they come back to their traditional ways of life and their traditional values. You cannot destroy those things. I thought of Mao’s communes, even if you tried to do that, you cannot reduce you see the notion of, concept of family life and all the basic values of, and it was also in my mind very clear that private possession, private property is inherent in human nature, you cannot eliminate that whatever you do, you see it will come back. So that’s why I managed to have hope in that sense, that is to say you cannot destroy the characteristics, inherent characteristics of human nature. That was it. We will be able to come back to those values one day.

RV: Do you think that’s come true for you and for Vietnam?

NXP: In a way, you see. To a large extent because they are the realities that you cannot destroy, that you cannot reduce and you have to combat with and so very concretely now, what is called the market economy, that is the very return to your basics, you say whatever you may try to introduce, you have just come back to that.

RV: What about the title *Hope and Vanquished Reality*, can you explain that?
NXP: Well, hope is that is the ability to continue when you see that there is no way out, but somehow you must try and continue you see, so how can you have the energy and the motivation and the mentality to continue. You have to find things in order to convince yourself that it still worth trying to continued. Vanquished Reality came to my mind because we tried to set up so many realities, invent even realities, particularly I was thinking of the outpost of the free world, for South Vietnam. So if you consider those things as realities, they can be vanquished.

RV: That’s true, that’s true. Tell me about the last of the train ride from Da Nang down to Saigon.

NXP: Yes, we arrived in the morning, early morning, after the fifth night on the train and there was one of the, we were about eight I think to be released and returned to Saigon and there was one who had his home near mine in Saigon, the same district and so the both of us, we agreed to share the cost of hiring a motorcycle pedi-cab and so we were both.

RV: Seon, seon.

NXP: No, seon was just a motorcycle with a guy behind you but this was is a three-cycle thing, but it has a motor. So it had a pedi-cab. They go to the suburbs more than inside Saigon and so at the, at the Binh Tu, railways station because they moved the station outside of Saigon, moved it to the suburb of Binh Tu.

RV: Your parents weren’t there; no one was there to greet you?

NXP: Nobody knew.

RV: They didn’t know you were coming?

NXP: Nobody knew, and so they did not inform anybody. And also we were told only usually about just a few days before the release but in my case it lasted more than two weeks because they could not find a convenient date to send us home, there was a shortage of guards. It was up to that time there were about three or four releases before mine and they were all accompanied, convoyed, by a guard to Saigon and then the guard would handed us to the authorities there, but that time of my release we just went on our own. So, we took that kind of motorized pedi-cab.

RV: Real quick, how did it feel to be back in Saigon, you stepped off the train?
NXP: Oh it was exciting really, it was exciting for the sheer idea that, you know, that I was back in my hometown. First of all I was struck by the change in the appearances you see, most of the houses there were very dirty and broken down and no maintenance or repair whatsoever for five years and the people were much, I’d say drab, the clothes, and there was no, almost no cars in the streets, just cycles, lots of bicycles, but there were a few motorized cycles there. So, we took that motorized pedi-cab and it stopped just in front of my parents’ home and the chap who was with me, who was he, the chap who was with me. He was one of the low ranking civil servants, he was the other side of the street, small streets there, so we said good-bye and he went to his home. So it was about ten o’clock when I was in front of the gate of the old house, it was really dirty too, the house and also broken down. So I rang the bell, no one answered, no one appeared, kept on ringing, ringing, looking back and forth and around. I didn’t see anybody I knew, again all the neighbors and so on, so I just stood there with my little sack back there, kept on ringing. I didn’t even know that the bell was ringing or not because I couldn’t hear anything from the gate of the bell ringing inside. So I waited and waited, then there was nowhere else for me to go. I dare not go anywhere, so I just stood there hoping that someone would come in and out, but I keep on pushing, pushing. But then at one time I tried to look inside, the gate, the iron gate was rather high, above my head, couldn’t see anything, but there were cracks at the joint so I was able to look in there, just a small band and then about half an hour I saw then a head popping back and forth at the corner of the house, this garden before reaching the house. And at the rear end, the corner of the house, I saw a head popping up and back and forth there and I recognized it was my mother. So I yell a lot, say “its your son, Phong, here,” in Vietnamese, “Its Phong your son, Phong your son.” And then she ran out, she was, she was what, nearly eighty years old at the time, seventy-eight or seventy-nine, and very skinny, she was about thirty-five or thirty-seven kilos, she was very, very skinny, that is about seventy pounds. And tears was running and she tried to open the small door because there was a big, iron gate but there was also a small door by the side there, she tried to open the small door and I went into that. We hugged for a long time and she told me that my father had gone to the hairdresser, to the barber and we went into the house, so that’s how I arrived home.
RV: How did it feel to be back in your, your home?

NXP: Wonderful, really wonderful and even without knowing how life would be or how it was already, but to be back in your own home, to see my mother, also skinnier than before.

RV: Well, so were you.

NXP: Yes, and the house was also in a very sorry state, with most everywhere. There was a very nice garden that my father tended for years, were very famous too, that garden and it was completely wiped out. My father was already in his late 80s at that time. He arrived about ten minutes later and he was really surprised to see me because nobody knew. And my sister and brother-in-law took the kids out to the pagoda that day so they left very early in the morning and wouldn’t come back to the evening, so there was just the three of us there at the house that morning.

RV: What did you talk about, what questions did they ask you?

NXP: Oh, they tired to tell me what happened to them, and I tried to tell them what happened to me during five years. It was very confusing but I think the main and general impression was that we were so happy that we were together again and they were really horrified by my physical look because I was really skinny and so on but I was happy to see them in relatively good help in spite of their age and we keep on telling stories, story after story, tried to tell everything just to let one another what happened during those five years.

RV: Did your mother cook for you?

NXP: Oh, yes.

RV: What was the first thing you ate?

NXP: It was time, and since my sister and the kids and her husband was not there, so my parents did not have, did not prepare much for themselves for lunch, but with my return then my mother insisted to cook lots of things. There was not much to cook but she always tried to get the rice out, some vegetables fried. There was no meat, it was very difficult to get any meat at all, but then I noticed that they raised chicken and ducks and so on, in the back yard and so what happened was that later in the afternoon she killed a chicken and tired to prepare kind of a feast for dinner with the others coming back. But for lunch then she cooked some of nishkàn rice and we all sat down and tried to have
lunch together, but it was really good when I took my bag upstairs to my old room. All
the clothes were there, the things were there, still intact.

RV: Everything?
NXP: Everything and I just jump on the bed right away, I didn’t see a bed for five
years, so that was it and took a shower with soap and everything.

RV: Not the pond any more.
NXP: Yes, didn’t see a shower for five years so that was a return and then had
more discussion in the evening and far in the night with my sister and all the others then.

My brother was still in the North. He work him in there eight or nine years.

RV: In prison?
NXP: In prison, yes, re-education camp.

RV: Okay, eight or nine years after you got home, or total?
NXP: No, total.

RV: So he came three years, four years later.
NXP: Yes, that’s it, three, four years later. Okay.

RV: Would you like to, let’s take a break.
NXP: All right.