

## **Story of a refugee in Australia**

My name is Nguyễn Thành Nhân. I am a Vietnamese who escaped from Communism and settled in Australia. In front of me there is a plate of delicious spring rolls which have just finished frying. Living in Australia, sometimes I crave for this traditional dish, a dish which can't be absent in any family on special occasions such as memorial days for the death of the loved ones or the celebration of Lunar New Year. In particular, I miss the spring rolls that my Mother made for me and my siblings, with a distinct savour originated from the North. It is called "Nem rán".

My family migrated from the North to escape Communism in 1954, bringing with them the flavours of many traditional dishes which have been passed on through generations from our forefathers. Settling in the South eventually everyone modified the dishes to adapt them to the taste of both regions.



Nowadays, this spring roll dish is well known in the world as a traditional Vietnamese dish. When I was still in Vietnam, I never had to make spring rolls myself. Now, my Mother is no longer with me, so I miss what she did, so I have to try to learn how to make them by myself. This way I can treat my children and teach them how to make this dish.

Having to live under Communism, I knew so well what would happen to me and my family, so I tried to find a way to leave my homeland when the Communists invaded the South in 1975. I escaped from Vietnam in early 1980s on a small wooden boat with 90 others. The wooden boats were using as a mean of transportation on the rivers in Vietnam. It was not designed to take on the perilous high winds and big waves on the open sea. But we had to leave in this flimsy wooden boat as we could not afford any bigger and safer boat. We gambled our lives, despite the danger on the open sea to seek for a free life in another country. We would not accept living under the

punitive, totalitarian rules and without human rights of the Vietnamese Communist government.

Before escaping, my wife and I had discussed everything, and I planned to accept the settlement in any democratic and freedom country that the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees allowed our family to settle in. But if we had a choice, then our priority would be Australia, then America and Canada. We chose Australia as our top priority because we thought this was a country with a tradition to respect freedom and democracy. The living conditions in Australia were peaceful and stable. Its population was relatively small and affable, easier to integrate. The climate in the country was good and not much different from Vietnam.

I left Vietnam with my eight years old son, leaving behind my wife and two young children as it was unsafe and we could not afford other arrangements. My wife and I parted with little hope of seeing each other again as each escape by sea was full of hardship, life-threatening and it was easy to get caught by the communist public security, leading to being shot at or imprisoned. My son and I were enduring six days, five nights full of terrors on the vast ocean in a stormy season, with many strong winds and big waves crashing down on us. At one stage, the motor of our small boat seized up and we were just drifted aimlessly for hours. Luckily, we were able to start the motor again and slowly moved forward against big waves and strong winds. A miracle saved us on the sixth day that we were at sea. An oil tanker of a private American company arrived and rescued us from our tattered boat which was about to be smashed into pieces by the waves. We were also running out of drinking water and food. The tanker took us to Okinawa island in Japan. Initially, our boat was aiming to the direction of Malaysia, but when we were rescued by the tanker our boat had been drifting in the Philippines ocean because we had lost our direction after many attempts to chase other ships, asking for help. Another miracle was that on the day after our rescue, a big storm lashed out in the same area of the ocean. Had we still been on the small boat, we would have vanished from the face of the earth with the sunk boat in that storm.

My son and I stayed in Japan for eight months, then were selected by the Australian government for settlement under humanitarian category, being considered as political refugees. Setting foot on Australian soil, I was elated but worried because my new life was full of novel aspects and challenges. Elated for being able to live in a democratic and free country where human rights were assured by the laws. Worried because having to start my live from the beginning again with nothing but my empty hands; and with other obstacles such as my age and language difficulty. Furthermore, the living conditions were totally different from what I used to in Vietnam. My family had been split into two parts and by all means we had to try reuniting our family as soon as possible to give our children enough time for studying in Australia.

At the beginning of my new life in Australia, I was fortunate to have my wife's relatives who lived in Sydney since 1975, after Saigon was took over by the Communists. They helped us when we arrived. I was also helped by other organisations in Australia such as Department of Social Security, Indo-Chinese Refugee Association (ICRA), St Vincent De Paul and Smith Family to provide us the necessities of life. More than two years later, my wife and two other children escaped from Vietnam and arrived at Galant island in Indonesia. My family was united in Sydney after nearly three years living apart.

From then, my wife and I have been trying to learn English and at the same time working to support our children's study. Our children have been persevering with their studies, trying to catch up with their classmates and building for a secure future. All my family's efforts have brought the stability in our lives after fifteen years of settlement in Australia. We now have a house to live in, our children have all graduated from universities and have stable careers in Australian society. We have been integrated into the Australian society and regard Australia as our homeland. Vietnam is only a place of reminiscence but not where we intend to live in for the latter part of our lives. However, in terms of emotions, I would say it has been difficult to find stability when I have experienced so many emotions of happiness, sadness and sorrow in more than half of my life in Vietnam.

Looking at how my family is living at the moment, I can see how blessed we are, maybe from our fates, or as a result of good deeds performed by our ancestors or a blessing from the Divine. We were accepted by the Australian people and government with open arms to give us the opportunity to make a new life; opportunity to contribute a relatively small effort in building the future of Australia. We have always reminded ourselves to respect and perform our duties, responsibilities to become good citizens of Australia. I hope the Australian people and government sympathise with the plight of refugees who have to leave their homeland and accept and assist them. Please support their wishes to integrate with the society. Please value fairly their contributions in building our lives together, without any discriminative behaviours or actions based on the differences in race, culture, skin colour or language; because all of us living on this land are Australians. "We are all Australians".