

Zoua C. Yang

Zoua C. Yang describes the long migration out of Laos during the Secret Wars.

What were the camps like?

How was it in the camps? When we fled from Laos I was born. Then when we came we lived next to a garden we call Nang. We stayed there. Then the teacher went on an airplane and went to America. At that time the younger kids didn't know this, but my father said that our country lost and the Vietnamese won. Then we had to leave too. When we lived there I was only nine years old, but I was the oldest child. Since I was the oldest I had to do things for my family like carry the younger kids on my back all the time when my parents went out gardening. Since I had my responsibilities, I also had to get the water, cut pig meat, and make the food. I had to do stuff like that and await my parents when they came back because that is what the daughters of the house are supposed to do. My mother and father taught me to do all that stuff. Then when the country was split apart, I remembered that in Laos I did that too, so I would do the same. Then everyday I would go and garden with them and sometimes stay home and watch the children when the parents are working. At this time I was still young and we still lived on high hills. We lived near Thailand, but we hadn't run from the Vietnamese yet. They went to the army and then they came right back. We still didn't run from the Vietnamese yet because we lived on the high hills. I didn't know anything until I hear the older ones saying that the Vietnamese people were coming. I was scared but I didn't really know what was happening then. When they told us about it, I was pretty scared because of the killing that were done before. They said that we should leave everything because we were going to run away that night and they killed some Thai people. Our family was kind of split, you had to take your family to this one spot and then you could go on the trail that some people had made already for us Hmong to go to Thailand. That was when we would bring what we thought was important and would leave everything else behind. I remember when we went, they bought this type of rice with them and it looked really nice, but it was a heavy thing to carry. We would leave in the morning really early and then we'd walk until afternoon. We reached the Mekong River and there were some Thai people waiting to take us across the Mekong River. They gave us a white cloth and the Thais rode over in little boats and took us across the river. We had to pay them just for the ride across. My dad paid and the other Hmong people that were with us also paid to get across the river. The Thais would take us across and they would take us to a village. We lived there for a long time and then they sent us to another place called Nong Khai. There were some Hmong that went to live in a different city. There were some that lived in that city and many of my people went to live in Nong Khai? We went to live in place that was really big. The houses were so tall that one of them was about thirty feet. We lived there but on the outside of it and then they would build long, small houses and I didn't know how long and which one we lived in. We got to Nong Khai in 1975 and then we lived there for a very long time. They told us to do something so we wouldn't be sick or injured. When they built those houses a lot of people came and lived in those places. My friends and I would go and gather things like spices, penvas (a type



of Hmong spice), and bamboo. We'd buy fish sauce. We would also go and cut wood even though we were girls. They had a gate where they would not let anyone enter because there were too many people in Thailand already. They would not let anyone leave because the Thais were so picky and mean that they would not let us out of the place. I was not real scared and we were doing Thai work. There were a bunch of my girl friends that went to work with me. We would walk a long way to the garden and then sometimes we would eat the penvas. We didn't like to eat those so we ate bamboo. We got to a Laotian house and there was a bridge and we crossed it and asked if the Thais had any work for us to do because we really needed money. We were just young women. They said they had a bamboo field and they needed help so we went and got to work there. They had food so we ate it all day while we worked. The Laotian was so mean, he would hit us and then he would steal our food. That guy was so mean that I never want to work for him again. When he took it we could not protest because we were just girls. We could not really do anything when he stole our food. We wanted to tell on him, but we could not do anything. We would work for a long time and they would just pay us 12 bahs, which is the same as a little over a penny over here. It wasn't really fair for us girls to work all day and get a little over a penny for a really big bag of bamboo. We would go and pick pickles also. Sometimes when we pick enough they would let us carry some pickles home for our family. I remember that my job was to go find food and dig soil and also pick green leaves. I had to go find water; finding water is so far away because at that time there wasn't any water and some people had these big tanks that had water in them. You had to go very far. We lived in this place for about eleven to twelve years. I have a bucket outside that was about a twelve a gallon bucket. You can carry about twenty-four gallons of water on your own shoulders. You had to carry that amount a long way. Then you carried it home and your mother and father would have some water to take a bath. Every day you had to do that. The sun was really hot so you would go to swim in this water that Laotians dug up. Some people called it the water of fish. The water was all yellow and when we went to swim in there it hurt our eyes. We got a red eye. Then we figured out to only swim in the water that looked clearer. We live there and after a while Thai people came and taught us so and I went to the school. I went for about two years. I wasn't very good at the beginning because it was the first time that I had ever gone to a school. Now a days thinking of it was like a dream. I think that if I did have to learn again, I would know better than before because if you did it once then it stays in your mind. If someone teaches me again I might think that it's easier for me. Sometimes I might forget how you would spell a word or even letters. I forgot what month that was. After that my grandpa and my brother came to pick me up to go to Vietnam. We came with them first. At that time it was the year 1979. My parents followed us to Vietnam. When I came to Vietnam, I came with my Grandpa. All I remember is going to the garden and grow corn to sell. I just remember that every morning I would wake-up and go to the garden with my older sister. We would cut down the corn and the tall grass. Sometimes when there wouldn't be any work to do at the garden I would go pick the Thai's flowers for money. They were really pretty. I would keep on picking those flowers until the pile was real high. If I were to compare it to the rice that we buy from the Hmong stores the flowers would weigh more than 100 pounds. It was really big. I stayed over there for awhile. My mom then followed and came to live with us. Then, my grandpa got them papers and we got to come to America. My dad didn't want to come to America because my dad said that if we come to America the people over there would kill and eat us. Then they were scared to die so they didn't want to come over to America. So we stayed. Then were heard from the people that went to America that there's nothing wrong with America, and there was no reason to be scared. It was good there they said. Then my dad

still didn't want to go, and at that time my father had a second wife and didn't really love us. I really wanted to go to America. I really wanted to go because I wanted an education. I wanted to go to school, then I saw my friends and they left for America, and that made me very sad. It was really, really sad because I wanted my parents to take me there. I thought that if I came to America soon, I would be able to go to learn how to read, write and speak better. I was still really young, and my parents were scared so they wouldn't let me go. They were scared that the Vietnamese would kill us, so they didn't want to go. So, they ran to live in Thailand. They were scared to come to America too because they were scared to die. So, we lived there. There was nothing to eat and drink. We just lived like that. They didn't know what it was like living in America, but they were scared to die. So that is why they went to Thailand. My parents didn't want to go anywhere else so we just stayed there. We stayed in Thailand for a long time. Then I got older and I got letters saying that we should come to America. If we didn't go, there wasn't anything there for us. The Thais would let you go live in Laos and live like the Laotians. Then, my father didn't like that so he wanted to leave. He left his 2nd wife and came to America. They used cement in Laos for the floors. It is like the cement on the sidewalk where people walk on...the white kind...they would wash it with water and then they would just chop the vegetables on top of it. They would just take it afterwards and boil it in these really big pans. I was one of the people that were scared of maggots the most. There were ton of those maggots and flies over there. There was always some everywhere. They would crawl everywhere while we were outside there was no way we could sit still in one spot because of the maggots crawling all over. There was no way to hide. They smelled rotten and it was really disgusting. It always seemed like we were going to puke because it was too sick. That was why people got sick easily the places are so unsanitary and people were so poor. The toilets were so disgusting and smelly. You had to live with it because without it we couldn't live. That was how we would do things and there was no better way to go to the bathroom than living in a place that really stinks. You can't do anything. I wanted to come to America, but it was the old folks that didn't want to and they didn't know about it and they were scared that if they came they might be killed or die somewhere. They really don't know anything. That is why we lived under all those disgusting conditions. We lived there for three months and we didn't get names to go to America so I went and asked the Americans that worked there and said "We've been here for a long time and why isn't our names on the list that is going to America?" So they looked and they said that we didn't have any sponsors in America. Then they asked if we had any relatives that is living in America. If we did, and they filled out the papers to get us over here then we could come over here. Then I wrote a letter to my uncle and asked him to sponsor our family to America. I was sixteen years old. A month later our names came out and we got to come to America. When our names came out we went to live in a place where they lifted the people off in an airplane and we lived there for probably a week. Over there we had to sleep on the cement and it really hurt. They had water to use and the bathtub over there had water coming in. They had a huge bucket and we would have to carry it in something and then we had to bring it somewhere to bathe. I think life was easier. The amount of water was never limited. They always filled this really huge bucket every hour. They would divide the food and water equally and the food was more sanitary. When we were coming they gave us a bowl of egg with rice and they gave it to us so we could eat it. My parents wouldn't eat it because they said that when we ate it we would be going to "the underworld." I was hungry so I ate my egg and rice and then I became dizzy and threw up. When we got on the plane I was so sick I threw up until we got to America. Then I couldn't stand. My parents and brothers didn't get sick because they didn't eat theirs. I was the only one

that ate it. There were eight of us and they divided it and I was the only one that ate it. They were scared that it was going to turn them into something bad or die. So they didn't eat so they didn't do anything. When we got to America I was dizzy, Everything was upside down and then I got dizzy. When we got to San Francisco we lived there for a week and they gave this medicine to me so I wouldn't be sick. Then we flew from San Francisco to Colorado. Then on to Milwaukee. My uncle and grandparents live in Sheboygan. Then they came and picked us up in Milwaukee, so we lived in Sheboygan for about one week. I wrote a letter to my husband because when I lived in Thailand his cousin begged for one of my pictures so I sent it to him. He wrote to me and I wrote back to him, like keeping in touch. When I got here I got his address so I wrote to him. At that time he didn't live in Colorado anymore because he moved to Wausau. So I wrote to him and the people that lived in that house sent me his new address and he got my letter. I came here for a week after he got my letter. He asked me to marry him. I didn't now how to speak English and he taught me. When I was taught they repeated a word over a couple times. I decided to marry him because when we got here I begged my parents to buy me clothes but they won't. Later on I begged for some shoes, but they wouldn't buy those either. Also they never helped me and the words were so hard to study, and I thought that maybe I wouldn't be able to learn it. After I was married for about four years I really started to understand the American words and somehow I got on. Then I believe that if I study I would be able to know it. So I went and asked the principal because at that time we lived in Wausau. I came and married my husband in Wausau. Then about two years later they let me go and learn. At that time I was eighteen and a half years old. They still let me learn because that's when there wasn't a lot of Hmong yet. They let me learn and the grades weren't enough. When we were back in our old country we were always running and this guy was really sick because they lived near bad people. When I had three kids they wouldn't let me go to school because there wasn't anybody to baby-sit my children. My husband was the only survivor in his family because they all died in Laos. We didn't have anybody to baby-sit the children, so I had to. I went to a school called Start Fresh for those kids who are really naughty. The dropouts of school were forced to go back to school. Life in America is really poor. It's good, but there is no one to watch the children. When we live in Laos, although, we had to work really hard; it wasn't that difficult because you live a full life and you have your farm work to do. When we came we have to go and sign up. After that we were picked and my dad said that he didn't want to come. Then, we said that if he didn't want to come, we are going to come anyway. He said that if we were going to go without him then he would divorce his second wife. He did that and he came with us. He missed his wife so he said that he wanted to go back. We said that we were already here so lets just stay. We stayed. I went to ask the people and they said that I'm the one who is responsible for everybody and all the paper work. If nothing worked out I would have to go talk to them because I'm the oldest. I didn't know how to buy the rice either. It was very difficult. My dad really wanted to go back but the people watched everybody very carefully and wouldn't let anyone go back. Then, I went to ask if my dad could go back. When we registered to come to the United States we rode the bus to Bangkok. I don't know exactly because at that time it was just close to Bangkok. We didn't have a sponsor and that's why we didn't get to come to the United States. I just go to ask the people that work there. They said that we could come. So I wrote a letter to my uncle and he sponsored us to come. A month later we have our name on a list and they call our name so we get to come to the United States. We came in November of 1981. My grandfather and his group came first. They registered and they came first. They decided to go to the United States instead of France. They had a choice to go to the United States, China or France. He

came here. Some of the relatives decided to go to France, so now some of them live there. Actually my father and my grandfather came to the United States. My dad was good so he got to go to school. I didn't go to school. I went for a time and then I couldn't go anymore. We didn't know about the American organization, so we had lots of kids; we Hmong, it was our way of living, thought that you had to be like your father and mother and have as many kids as you could. It didn't matter as long as there were enough. Then we just had many kids. I gave birth to nine children. I told my younger brothers and sisters not to have as many kids as I did because in this country the husband will have to go and work. The mother will also have to. The kids are not like the kids when we lived in Laos. When we were in Laos we didn't have as much. They like to go to the forests and go swimming. In this country there is much to learn. They touch the electricity and they don't know that it will shock them. The kids put in hot water and then burn themselves. When they watch TV they learn fighting and bad/swear words. That's why the children that live here are so much harder to deal with and handle. It just makes us older ones wish that we were back in Laos and living the way that we used to live back in Laos. The ones with a lot of children have to deal with it. I remembered that time. I learned to speak English, but some don't know yet. That's why we don't really understand the American way of family organization. We had a lot of kids, like we always did. Then they thought that we came to live here the way we wanted to. We thought that they didn't like us, hated us, because we had so many kids. So, when you see the way they are, talk to them, and get to know them and their ways of family organization then you think that they don't like you because you have so many kids (and because the Hmong live so different). They thought that the Hmong just used so much money to buy cars. Then, when you find that out, that really hurts you. You know what they think. You (a Hmong) are really hurt, so the mother and the father go out and work their heart out. The mother and father go to work and leave the children home alone. It was really hard for some persons, so they would just eat pills and kill themselves. They had so many kids that no one could take care of them after they died. I want you all to go to school and get good grades. You should all go to school to know this country more and that you all know more English. I also want you to learn how the Americans have such a nice life. I want you to learn the laws of the Americans, but don't leave the Hmong culture and that you should always remember you are a Hmong. You are still Hmong. In Laos, I believe that there would be a giant storm and eliminate all the bad people and leave all the good people. That's what the Bible says and I don't know when it will happen and that if it will be true. Just to tell you young people to remember that you are still Hmong and even if you know the American language and you're smart, you should always remember the Hmong language and culture. Come back to help the old people. I know these days we are losing a lot of Hmong kids because they are not going to school and helping us. I believe that you people that go to school will succeed and help and love us old people like we did when we were younger. Don't say that I am good in the American language or that I will become an American. Our lives are very bad for the people that don't know what to do next. It seems that they don't know the American language but it's very stressful for the older Hmong people. You also don't know what their lives are like and how they play games. You don't understand us. I want them to come back for us and they also come back for the little ones. This is how the Hmong live and this is how the Americans live. I remember when I was the oldest and my responsibility was to the children. Some people don't have any education back in Laos. I'm still learning. I learned how to communicate and I hope that five to ten years from now I will improve my life. I hope it will be better than right now. I would like to go to school but only my husband works so it's hard for me. One of my son, he's 12 and he has a

problem. All three of my kids were disabled. I am scared when they get older; their vision will get worst. It's very hard for me. Now my daughter also has the same problem like the other two and she was having lots of problems. That's why I can't go to school. I would like to go but I can't go because family comes first and they have lots of problems.