

BRIDGING THE SHORES  
SEGMENT A-1: REFLECTIONS OF ESCAPE  
Producer: Moberg  
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Lead :

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In 1977... Chang Yang had to flee his homeland by swimming with his friends and family across the Mekong River... past the boats and the guns of North Vietnamese soldiers.

**Yang01:** "Before you cross over the Mekong River, you have to have a very good swimmer, and then we tie each other together, and a good swimmer could pull five or six people, at one time."

"How deep is the river?" "The river is about 50 to 100 feet deep." "You had to tie people together to get across, you had to swim across, and you had a good swimmer in front." "That's true, yeah."

"You had people being shot as they were swimming across?" "We had a lots of people who got shot as they were swimming across. Pretty much, it was a moonlight trip, it was easy to see in the river, and the baby are crying, and people are drown, and they're yelling for help, and the North Vietnamese soldiers had a boat that they circled around, looking for these people, and whoever they see either they shot the group, or the individual and or they pulled them out and took them back to Laos."

"So you've got groups of people tied together, crossing the river, six at a time, you've got children who are screaming and crying, and the enemy soldiers in their boats, looking for them, listening for the sounds, and then shooting them before they could get to the other side." "That's right."

"How many people died on the way across? Did you have friends who died?" "I had lots of friends that died, I had a family member that died in the Mekong River. When we were crossing through, my mom was, got caught, and they took her back to Laos and I didn't see my mom for ten years after I got to the United States."

For refugees like Chang Yang, if they survived the swim across the Mekong River, their next stop was usually a refugee camp in Thailand, where they waited for the chance to move to America. Keith Uhlig, a reporter for the Wausau Daily Herald, visited one of the biggest of these camps, Wat Tham Krabok, in 2004... when the camp was holding as many as 15,000 people inside its razor wire walls.

**Uhlig:** "There's no grass on the ground. It's a completely bare ground everywhere, because people are walking everywhere, driving their little moped motorcycles everywhere, carts, that sort of thing, so it's all brown, dirt, dusty. The houses, from a western point of view, they're shacks. They're made out of concrete, bamboo, corrugated steel."

"What did the camp smell like?" (pause) "That's another hard to describe thing. I've described it in my writing as a mixture of campfires, of food cooking, of open, raw sewage if you've ever smelled that. There's a lot of that all around. The dust has a unique smell to it. It all mingles. It all mingles into your senses, and you know, at times you just become overwhelmed and you say, I don't know if I can stand this any more."

"Now, you mention the smell of raw sewage. You've got a lot of people stacked up, in a confined area, are there health concerns there?" "I talked to a doctor. The greatest health concern are respiratory ailments because of the dust. There's mining, limestone mining and marble mining in the mountains surrounding the camp... and so that picks up a lot of the dust. I actually saw sort of a dust storm blowing across the field, and it... you know, it chokes you."

"What kind of medical care do these people have access to?" "Very basic medical care. So there's one doctor there that provides primary medical care and he sees about 400 people a week."

Reporter Keith Uhlig visited Wat Tham Krabok just as many of its residents were getting ready to leave for America, during a late resettlement push. As for Chang Yang, he arrived in the Midwest on a cold January morning in 1981, still wearing his tropical clothes, and knowing nothing about the language or the customs of his adopted homeland.

**Yang:** " When I came to the United States, I didn't know how to read A-B-C's, I didn't know how to read and write, I couldn't speak English at all."

"How do you feel about America now?." "I feel very good. I think this country has opportunity for each. Even if you come from a different country, you had a hard life, the only thing you have to do, you have to work hard, to reach your goal, you will have a good life in this country because it's the country of opportunity."

Today, Chang Yang is married, with four children, and is the past President of the Wausau Area Hmong Mutual Association. He is also the Human Resources Communications Specialist for Great Lakes Cheese... one of the largest cheese processing plants in Wisconsin. For Bridging the Shores, I'm Glen Moberg in Wausau.