

FIRST STEPS IN THE USA

Par Lâm Chi Hiên JJR 62



Leaving VN... All our beloved ones: Dad, Mom, siblings, relatives and friends, board the Vietnam Airlines plane with restrained emotions, merely because crying would be understood as red eyes disease and could cause delaying our departure, not to mention the costs. . A penniless, homeless family...

We have to stay for 4 days at Bangkok to wait for another flight to the US. Here, in Bangkok, we have to live in the building next to the jail for illegal people, and have to sleep on the floor. A nightmare.

At last we arrive at San Francisco then to Los Angeles, then to John Wayne airport. It's the rainy period. We are puzzled on seeing homeless people wandering around, outside the main entrance of the airport. "Oh! My God! There are homeless people here, like in our homeland, and we might join them because we don't know where we go after this flight ! "

It's raining and wet around, and dark, like when Saigon collapsed in 1975. One family of 5 and us, 7 people, are the last ones to wait for somebody to pick us up to the right place. We wonder whoever will show up with this wet weather...A car is coming and a man (that I later on recognized as the pastor) points at me: "Are you the person who refuses to join our church over there? I 'm the pastor who sponsors your family viaa person you don't know except through the paperwork. Get in the car. It's late!"

Une famille de réfugiés arrive dans l'Idaho →

We get to his church after a short trip. Everything is new to us: big houses, lots of cars, large streets, huge for us who were born and lived in Saigon a long time ago.



A man in white clothes welcomes us at the church. He says:"It's a mistake to get here, in this country. Do you know it? A big mistake! Really, I came here earlier than you. I have lived here for 15 years and have never smiled , had no time to relax, like in our homeland. You don't believe me. But I 'm saying the terrible truth...". And he keeps going on with his sad sayings while the pastor does his paperwork for us. And so through these words, we have in mind a hard life for us, for my poor wife and young kids who just left behind their harmful sufferings in the fatherland. My wife and I, we say to each other to go forward whatever the future will be without any fear as we overcome our sufferings to survive in our fatherland.

We get to an apartment rented in my name with the precious help of this so kind-hearted protestant church (yet we are roman catholic people). It's amazing because we have asked for help from the catholic church and did not get any reply! Tired out after a long flight (9 hours aboard 2 consecutive planes and washed out by everything) we come into our new home and are welcomed by our new neighbours (parishioners of the protestant church) with some gifts. We eat our fast food bought at the supermarket next to the church with the money the pastor gave in advance on our welfare benefits (social services benefits given to every refugee..) without any furniture and my kids are very happy to discover their own rooms. Everything is new and comfortable. We sleep on the floor. The next day - a sunday - we have to go to that church and are welcomed. We recognize the white-clothed man. He's the pastor's brother. We are given a lot of gifts and get lots of new friends...

The next days, we have to go with the church car to do our legal procedures with the Immigration Services for our papers, as required for legal immigrant people (while we are not yet used to the different time : it's daytime here versus nighttime in VN) with the Social services....and our half-opened eyes, We try our best under the kind directions of the pastor, like robots...We are afraid to go out, to get lost...We have to go and get physical examinations with the church car (as the pastor says until the whole month..).The doctors in charge do their job, examine us with phrases like "open your mouth" while we are still tired out....

Réfugiés apprenant le français au Canada ->

We have to go and have my 2 youngest kids registered at their respective schools by foot. We go out carefully, watching, looking....It's amazing...new...huge....We use our utilities (gas, electricity opened for 1 month)and do not see anybody sending us bills for these expenses...Finally, our neighbours help us to go and register as required....



These are our first steps in US.

And little by little with what I get from the education received previously (primary, highschool at JJR, merchant marine college...) I am starting a new life with a good job to support my large family after a few months living on social benefits, instead of living on those benefits until my youngest kid get adult (18 years old, about 10 years later), and while a lot of refugee families like to do so.

"Are you really mad to ask for work while all people like you are still on benefits and do not like to leave them ?", said the lady in charge of the social benefits in the county...

Lâm Chi Hiêu JJR 62

Iconographie: Nations Unies