

Chapter 9

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**Bad things happen
to good people**

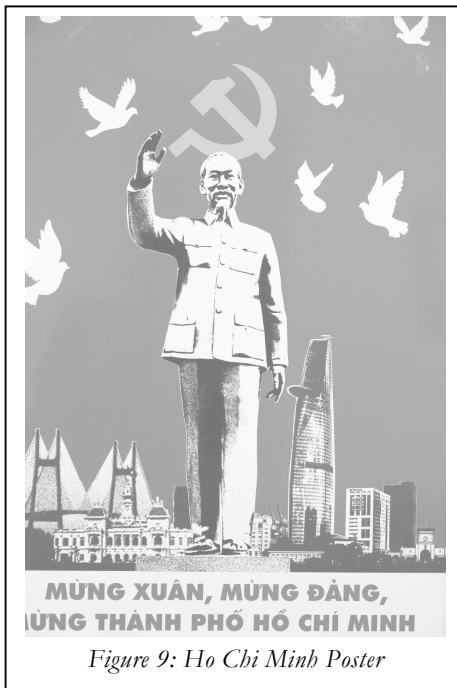


Figure 9: Ho Chi Minh Poster

I didn't realize...I guess I was just too young to understand what was happening. I had been taught in school that the Americans and the South Vietnamese Army had defeated the North. The danger was gone. All parties had signed a peace treaty in Paris just before TET in 1973 that officially ended the long war and guaranteed us peace at last. The Americans had promised to aid us in the event of a North Vietnamese attack. We felt safe and secure in that reassurance.

That peace turned to ashes only a year later, in December 1974, when the North Vietnamese forces attacked and defeated our men at Phước Long, around 150 kilometers north of Saigon. Following that 1974 attack, other skirmishes broke out. While we had been celebrating Chinese New Year with laughter and joy, the North's soldiers had prowled through our borders via Cambodia and reignited the flames of war. The promised help from America never materialized. We were in this alone.

Later, as is often the case, I realized that Father and Mother spoke in hushed voices a bit more than usual during that time. In my innocence, I had just dismissed the secrecy. I thought they were just coy about the upcoming New Year festivities. About that same time, Father began quietly selling some of the other properties that he owned. Now, Father was buying and selling things all the time, so I never gave the sales a second thought. The reality of what was happening around me did not dawn on me until a few months later, in April. Even so, I was only nine and had little idea of how much these events would affect my life in the future.

Then, on April 29th, 1975, the unthinkable happened. I am not likely ever to forget that day. Father and Mother had gathered all our family together on the roof of our house. Even for a family as close as ours, that was extremely unusual. We were rarely all together. Someone was always off wandering

somewhere in the evening, especially Hung, but this evening was different. We had not gathered by choice. This morning, the government had imposed martial law on its citizens that forbade any civilian travel out on the streets tonight. The police and military officers had orders to shoot any violators of the curfew on sight. There were to be no exceptions.

From here on top of our house, I had a clear view of the surrounding area. Hoc Loc, Hong Bang, and the other main roads were eerily empty. Now, in place of the hordes of private and commercial cars, bicycles, and mopeds, I could only see an occasional armored military vehicle flying down a vacant avenue honking its horn incessantly. Those trucks and cars usually had white flags flying from their radio antennas. I had no idea why. In the distance, I heard firecrackers going off, but Mother swiftly corrected me. The sound I heard was gunfire, not fireworks. We couldn't tell if the shooting was men battling in the city or people shooting into the sky. Where the sound came from didn't matter. I was old enough to realize that this was a scary time. The war had suddenly been reborn and had come home to us, and that realization filled my heart with a dread of what might come next.

We slept on the roof that night. We sometimes did so when the night was hot and there was little breeze. Often, the top floor was the only place one could catch a rogue draft. Tonight, our being together just felt right, here on the roof under the stars. Somehow, cradled in my mother's arms, I managed to fall asleep.

When I awoke the next morning, April 30th, the area around our house was eerily calm. With nothing else to do, I went about my chores. Why should this day be any different from others? About mid-morning, my mother interrupted my sweeping to report what she had heard on the radio. It seemed

that our country had given up...quit. After fifteen years of almost continuous civil war and countless lives lost, we had surrendered to the North. The broadcast had continued with the news that our president, Nguyễn Văn Thiệu, had fled the country like a coward two days before. His successor, Dương Văn Minh, officially turned over the government to the North Vietnamese forces that very morning.

The curfew from the previous day expired with the night. Slowly at first, the people, our people, warily came out from the shelter of their homes and began to roam about in the streets. There was still that eerie quiet surrounding us. No one spoke except in whispers. No one needed to talk. Everyone wondered the same thing, "What was going to happen next?" Out of fear, everyone kept close to their homes. Hoc Lac, usually brimming over with vehicles this time of day, was unnaturally silent. No traffic today.

Hung and his friends, unwilling to stay put any longer and eager to prove their courage, had taken off about nine o'clock. They wanted to see for themselves what was going on in the surrounding neighborhoods and on the main streets. The boys wandered about as far as the now deserted food market in their search for answers. Whereas our hamlet had been quiet, the farther the boys ventured, the more people they encountered. In fact, as they crept into Cho Lon's business district, they found a surprising number of people in the streets, and to Hung and his friends, all of them seemed possessed by demons.

When he returned, he related all the things that he had witnessed. The stories he told did not seem possible. People were looting businesses and homes, searching for valuables. When the boys asked the looters why they were doing this, they found the looters knew little. It seemed the former residents

had been either in the government or working with the Americans. Because of that association, the families had run in absolute terror from the Communists. They knew very well what would happen to them if the invaders captured them. In a mad dash to escape, they only took with them what they could carry – precious little of their belongings, leaving their homes and businesses behind.

The scavengers arrived shortly after and took everything they could lay their hands on from the newly abandoned structures. "If we don't take it, the Communists will get it" was their common cry, and so they took everything. Everything was up for grabs. Men who would have never thought of theft two days ago grabbed furniture, televisions, refrigerators, clothing, and even carpet off the floors. Looters then set their new-found fortune into motion down the streets and alleys of the city. on the backs of vehicles sometimes, but often on the heads of the looters themselves. Of course, the men didn't consider themselves thieves. The owners were gone. They were either already out of the country or looking frantically over their shoulders as they tried to stay one step ahead of the new government. Whether they escaped or the Communists captured them would make no difference. They would not be returning for their things now or ever.

One of the questions Father asked Hung was, "Where were the police during this?" I was confused when he said that there were no police anymore. The policemen and South Vietnamese soldiers feared for their lives. They had stripped themselves in the streets, leaving their uniforms behind so the invaders could not identify their association with the previous government. Then, they ran, practically naked, back to their homes, praying that they could remain anonymous. For them, the temporary embarrassment was nothing compared to the

peril of being found out. None of the looters dared to grab the discarded clothing either. They also dreaded the association the uniform held. Our new rulers, the Communists from the North, were already sweeping the city, looking for any military holdouts. Occasionally, we could still hear the static bursts of gunfire informing us when they found some. So far, our new masters had not had the opportunity to think about dealing with civilians. There would be time for that later.

My world had truly gone insane.

Later that day, my mother gave my siblings and me a written message containing our name, address, plus her and Father's names. She told us not to be afraid but to stay with family or close friends whenever we went outside the hamlet. I wondered, "Why do we need to do this?" I stopped myself short of asking her aloud. I could see the wildness in her eyes that I had never seen before. When combined with the weirdness happening around me, that told me not to question her or her judgment.

Every hour, outrageous new stories came to our ears. Our neighbors and we lived in fear of doing anything or going anywhere. Now and then, gunshots rang out, their loud retorts echoing through the streets. Gradually, the need to do something overrode the fear. We began the process of restarting our lives. Companies reopened for business. People went back to work. We could once again hear traffic on the streets, each day growing in intensity little by little. At home, we began manufacturing medicine again. The fresh food market reopened along with the shops and vendors on the streets. In the alleys, my friends and I once again played with reckless abandon.

When the government announced that school would restart, I had a shock coming. They had closed my Chinese

school. Closed was not the correct word. The government had moved in with their bulldozers and razed the building and gates to the ground only a few days after the South's surrender. The school was closed for good.

I could not understand why all of this had to happen. What threat was my school to the government? With its closure, I would go to the newly created public school instead. Since the government had outlawed the Catholic Church, Catholics no longer assembled. Its clergy were now in hiding or exiled, working to the government's advantage. They "appropriated" the Catholic school and rededicated it as a public school. That would be the school I would attend. Even though losing my old school saddened me, the new school allowed me to go to classes with Nhi and all my other friends. Some of my previous teachers were even there. Other than the change of venue, not much seemed different.

Even though the presence of armed soldiers patrolling the streets bothered many older people, I didn't see how our lives had changed that much. There wasn't much difference between the Northern Army and the old police force except for uniforms – or in the Viet Cong's case, the lack of uniform. Of course, we had all heard the rumors of mass arrests and executions around Saigon, or Ho Chi Minh City, as our new masters called it. Still, nothing like that was happening here. Slowly, hesitantly, almost reluctantly, the residents of Cho Lon took a deep breath and began to relax – just a little. They seemed to be taking the time to gather their energies to preparing for whatever this next chapter in their lives would bring.

