

Vo Thi Lien: "People are Same, All Country"

by Marilyn Garson

The Ho Chi Minh War Museum in Danang (like Ho Chi Minh War Museums throughout Viet Nam) lies behind a playground of captured American military hardware. A local interpreter reviewed our papers with a guard while I wandered past the tanks, helicopters and field guns with Brad, my American travelling partner.

We crossed Viet Nam last March, two backpackers sending a disruptive ripple through the lazy flow of bicycle traffic. The Vietnamese welcomed us exuberantly. We were inundated by passing attempts to break down the barriers of cultural otherness.

Our Ho Chi Minh City guide had urged us to meet Vo Thi Lien at this museum. We knew only that Lien had been a peace activist since the morning, nineteen years earlier, when her My Lai hamlet became a charnel house. "Find her," Hinh insisted. "She has a message for you."

Suddenly the museum's side door burst open. A tiny woman bounded toward us, waving both arms and shouting, "Canada, hello!"

She ran straight at me. I drew my head back, anticipating a collision, and held out one cautious hand. She gathered my whole arm in both of hers and said emphatically, "Welcome."

"Chao (Hello)," I managed. "Do you ... work here?" The woman

grinned and shrugged, not understanding. She was disconcerting: careless, yet focused. She looked young in bright orange pants and blunt bangs, but her solemn nods of encouragement (offered in lieu of words) were without naiveté. Her eyes were like lasers.

Still hugging my arm, the woman steered me down a drive that ran the length of the museum. I gaped back at Brad as she led me away: this wasn't our usual war-museum reception. Brad followed a little dejectedly.

Our Danang interpreter caught up with

us, strutting like a bantam cock. Mr. Ho disapproved of our presence in Viet Nam, and of this meeting in particular. "This is Mrs. Vo Thi Lien," he snarled.

Lien brought us to a reception room set with low tea tables, and ushered me to a wooden chair. With a final squeeze, she released my hand and sat across from me to make the tea. Between Lien's attention and the stares of Marx, Lenin, Ho Chi Minh (from above the doorway) and Brad, I was unnerved. But Lien picked up my eyes and held them while she spoke. Slowly I understood and our roles were

transposed; for as unconditionally as she gives reassurance, Lien is herself sustained by the women she meets.

Her family lived in My Hoi, a subhamlet of Co Luy, in eastern Son My village.¹ The region was prosperous, with brick houses and high literacy. Its beauty was such that the mandarin built vacation villas there. Villagers claimed expansively that peace and order would prevail until nearby Horse Mountain "crossed the river" that separated it from the settlements. The improbable occurred during the 1963-64 rainy season: the flooded river spilled around Horse Mountain, half submerging it. The Viet Cong arrived as the waters receded. By 1968, the US Army considered all of Son My a "free fire" zone.

Lien spoke in a lyrical,



Vo Thi Lien and Marilyn Garson

Photo: Brad Flom

cooing voice and Mr. Ho translated. "That day (March 16, 1968) is market day in Son My village. People in Xom Lang wake very early for market. While they make market, bombs come. People are killed, damage is much. But people go on with market — bombs have come before.

"Then there is much noise. Helicopters, many come. Lieutenant William Calley, many American forces. They make three orders in village. Burn all. Destroy all. Kill all." He sliced the air to demonstrate finality.

"In first house is family. Nine people, eat breakfast. American forces come in house. Kill all — shoot nine people.

"In village is large tree. A group of villagers is brought to tree. Maybe twelve. There is a girl, a child here. Her clothes are taken. She is nude, this child." I thought of the peasant women's long-sleeved modesty, their black hair held back by single pink plastic rollers. "She is, girl is violated. Many times she is violated. Then American forces kill all.

"There is a ditch, a trench. Americans put in more than one hundred villagers. Children. Women. Old. Shoot all in trench. Kill more than four hundred in village."

Lien bent forward to pour more tea. Outside, clouds were advancing before the only thunderstorm we would see in Viet Nam. When Lien looked up to continue, a caul had shaded her eyes.

"Then forces come to My Hoi hamlet, near.² Mrs. Vo Thi Lien hamlet. Already before they come, villagers know Americans come there. Hear shooting, hide in shelters. All family have shelters from bombs, they hide in. Mrs. Vo Thi Lien hide in shelter with grandparents."

"How old were you?" I blurted out.

"Thirteen." Mr. Ho stopped, counted in Vietnamese. "No, eleven. Mrs. Vo Thi Lien eleven."

"Forces come. Say come out shelters. Come out now! Some villagers want come out, want show Americans they not fear. Americans shoot, and shoot in shelters. Put grenades in shelters. *In* shelters! Mrs. Vo Thi Lien grandparents want come out, but they hear shots, stay in shelter. She is hiding behind grandmother." Mr. Ho raised an arm to one side and looked beneath it, as if a skinny eleven-year-old were tucked behind his back. "You understand?"

"From under the grandmother arm,

Mrs. Vo Thi Lien see three Americans come to shelter. Three rounds of shot. Grandmother and grandfather shot. Mrs. Vo Thi Lien not shot, but she fall under grandmother. Then grenade, and grandparents killed. Mrs. Vo Thi Lien not killed, but she loses ... loses conscious.

"After, villagers come from other hamlets. Mrs. Vo Thi Lien walk around other family's homes. To home of aunt. She is—" he passed his hands over his stomach "—baby. Soon baby? They have—" he made jabbing motions.

"Bayonets," Brad mumbled.

"Yes. Maybe. Cut aunt stomach. Violate aunt. Kill both. And ...burn homes! Mothers, children. Burn together!" His narrative grew jumbled, atrocities juxtaposed and lost to me. "In Mrs. Vo Thi Lien part of hamlet, Americans kill 98."

She was finished. I wanted to apologize, but Lien waited for our questions with an eagerness that denied any intrusion. Brad cocked one eyebrow at me.

I took a shuddering breath and stammered, "Lien, when you met me outside ... You knew my friend was American before we came here, but you agreed to see us. All over Viet Nam, our welcome has been very warm. It's not what we had expected...we thought that people would still be so angry, but they're not—"

Mr. Ho translated with a sour face. "Viet Nam not hate people of America. Viet Nam always know, many Americans not like the war. Understand that such a war is not to win."

"But you, Lien, how can you not hate?"

"Mrs. Vo Thi Lien not hate. Understand that all American not like those soldiers. The young — youth? — not like. Government make to fight, but young never want war. Young are open. Now, after, that is her message. Her work. Young in all countries must work, all together, for peace in all places. End all fighting. Or what happen in Son My, happen again."

"Her work" Hinh had said only that she worked in the war museum.

"Mrs. Vo Thi Lien work now, all her life, to speak this message. Even she speak to Europe youth, Germany. Say she want much to speak to Canada, but government say no visa."

"Which government? When?"

"In 1970, people's group in Canada ask her come there. To talk the war. Mrs. Vo Thi Lien still very young, but Canada government know she is truth-talker, and

say no visa." Mr. Ho looked smug.

I sighed. "Yeah, well, Canada was having some problems around 1970, I think that we and the government might be more open now, more willing to learn from difficult stories. I have worked in Canada with politicians and women's organizations. Maybe one day we can arrange for you to speak there, to women who share your beliefs. And students in the universities."

Lien leaned toward me, her stare intensifying. "She ask you help her. In Canada, you talk *for* her. Say that West and Viet Nam must come together now. Must talk together to understand people are same, all country. Fight is when no understand."

"I promise to try. I think that people would be surprised and happy to know about you, because we have heard a great deal about Viet Nam's wars, and nothing about Vietnamese work for peace. Is there an actual Vietnamese peace movement — many people, working together for peace?"

"Other people want peace, yes," she said uncertainly.

From my discussions with Hinh about women's rights I knew that our framework of a movement was alien. "Do groups of these people meet regularly, talk, talk to People's Committees?"

"Yes, talk for peace. But many?" Mr. Ho struck a professorial stance to soliloquize, "You see, Viet Nam have still many enemies. With Kampuchea, with China, much need for fight—"

I cut him off. "Lien, do you know that there are groups of women all over the world speaking this message?"

"You are first Canada woman she know. Say she want very much to meet other women with same work."

"I wish you could meet more of them. I wish our governments didn't keep you from the women who should be your friends. If you feel discouraged—" Mr. Ho shook his head, "—tired, I hope you understand that you're not working alone."

Lien nodded without self-pity. "Say women and young understand best this truth for peace. Viet Nam woman fight much in war, still want for peace.³ Mrs. Vo Thi Lien not alone."

"What about the Vietnamese government? I know that there have been many changes here in the last few months.⁴

Does the new government speak as you do about peace?"

"Yes, new government want good ties with West. Diplomatic, and trade. With America. With talk, understanding come, too."

"When I go back," Brad said slowly, "I am going to speak to students and professors at the universities in California. I'm going to bring them my pictures of Viet Nam. What can I say to them on your behalf?"

"Say that time now is for talk. American and Viet Nam. Talk to no more fight."

"Do you think you ever will visit America?"

Lien laughed out loud, and held up one hand in a 'slow down' gesture. "Say she very much like, but she think no. More maybe to Canada, if you help her."

"Lien, do you have nay family left?" I asked suddenly.

"Mrs. Vo Thi Lien have husband now, and child." Mr. Ho listened again. "She ask where your family in Canada."

I told her about growing up in Nova Scotia with my sisters. She followed the translation with a genuine interest that I found painful: how could she care about anyone's family?

"All girl?" I said yes, and she smiled her approval. "Mrs. Vo Thi Lien ask you bring her best wish to your mother and sisters."

"I will, and I send my best wishes to her family as well."

Mr. Ho rose then, and insisted that we start for the Marble Mountains before the storm struck. We left by the back door, Lien and I strolling hand in hand down the drive. The silence between us was warm and comfortable. At the car I tried once more to convey the feelings I feared would be lost in Mr. Ho's translation.

"Lien, despite the past, I hope you and your family will always be happy. And you must remember that you are not alone with your message! I'll help you in Canada, and I'll look for you when I come back to Viet Nam."

"Say she find you when she come Canada." She waved from the guardhouse as we drove off through the dreary junkyards and gutted military bases that surround Danang.

¹The US Army assigned new names to Vietnamese settlements: the greater village of Son My became My Lai; Lien's

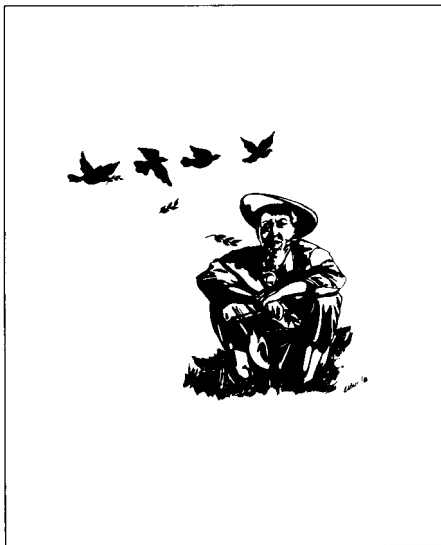
hamlet of My Hoi became My Khe (2). The hamlet known to us as My Lai (4) is properly called Xom Lang or Thuan Yen (the latter name means The Place To Which Trouble Does Not Come).

²The killings in My Hoi took place about two hours after the initial massacre, and involved a different company. No one has ever been disciplined for this adjunct to My Lai.

³Women's active role in the Vietnamese military dates to 39 AD, when the Trung sisters led a rebellion against Chinese occupiers. All-female guerilla units fought throughout the country in the American war. The most powerful woman was a peasant, Nguyen Thi Dinh, a commanding general in the National Liberation Army.

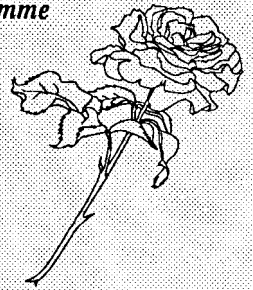
⁴A reform-oriented Politburo (including Nguyen Thi Binh, the woman leader of the NLA delegation to the 1968 Paris Peace Talks) has made radical economic and foreign policy changes since the Sixth Communist Party Congress in December, 1986. We benefited when Brad received the first unsponsored tourist visa ever issued to an American.

Marilyn Garson, a freelance writer based in Toronto, is writing a book on post-war Indochina. She crossed Viet Nam last spring during a year-long backpacking trip, shelving the misconceptions of years of secondary-source study.



CLAIRE ROTHMAN

Portrait d'une femme



In this city of wide and faceless streets, limousines, long and sleek conduits for men who confer on phones or mix martinis in the back seat while Jacques or Justin drives, you shine. Not like some jewel or bauble no, don't misunderstand me, not like that.

The town has its share of costumed beauty) More like a peony, some soft flower, petalled velvet intent on pushing through cracks in the asphalt, straining on its stem while lines of long and heedless cars roll by.

Femme parmi les hommes. And what a woman, they whisper, wink like schoolboys as you pass, brush shoulders in the corridors of power, who can say you covet it? I think rather, for you, it is a game to while away the hours, like chess, or late night movies.

Pink is a colour that you evoke A rich dust rose set off against the greys of suits, lacklustre stone, ice on the canal that divides this ordered English city. Your rooms are rose, the office where you work, a skirt, a slip, a blouse of Spanish silk. You never quite grasped the English way nor mastered the English tongue. To your ear

it sounds tinny, nasal, devoid of grace and so you stick to French, composing notes to your confreres with flourishing pen on hand-made paper from Japan, scented with gardenias.

Woman in a world of men.