

NOTES FROM ABROAD BY CLAUDIA KRICH

Vietnam Journal: Witness to the War's End

On April 30, 1975, the Vietnam War ended. I was one American who stayed to see what happened. From April, 1973 to July, 1975, my husband Keith Brinton and I were codirectors of the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) Relief Project in South Vietnam. Staffed by 55 trained Vietnamese, our program was a Physical Rehabilitation Center for civilians in the town of Quang Ngai—supplying artificial arms and legs, braces, crutches, wheelchairs, physical therapy, and corrective surgery.

Keith, Sophie and Paul Quinn-Judge, and I left Quang Ngai on March 20, 1975, worried like everyone else about expected fighting and possible bombing—though eventually Quang Ngai changed hands quite peacefully. We joined Julie Forsythe and Tom Hoskins, the other members of the AFSC team, in Saigon. (We all speak fluent Vietnamese and read and write it to varying degrees.)

After several months we decided to leave Vietnam. The new government had taken responsibility for the center. We felt it was in good hands. These pages are from my daily diary recording what I saw and lived before we left.

Saigon, April 17, 1975 (Thursday)

The rumors fly again, that Saturday will bring liberation, or at least an attack on Saigon. One tidbit I learned today is the "secret code" the U.S. Embassy will broadcast over the radio when they decide to evacuate. Someone will say, "The temperature in Saigon is 105 degrees and rising." Then they'll play "I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas"!

We listen to the radio every night to count the provinces as they "fall." Quang Ngai was liberated on March 24, four days after we left

there for Saigon, with hardly a shot being fired. Danang was liberated on March 29. By now there's very little GVN* area left at all. Saigon will be soon. An American friend said today that the Hong Kong Shanghai Bank won't take dollar checks any more, only cables. Nothing that takes time to process.

April 18, 1975 (Friday)

I've been working on "adopting" two children—my little friends Van and Tu. These boys are four and six years old, and their mother, Chi Yen, is my good friend. She asked us to take them to Laos so they could be sent to their grandfather in Hanoi to go to school. At the Embassy two weeks ago, I told an official that I wanted to adopt them, but was told it was too late. Today, I went again, and this time I decided to tell the truth. I said, "I don't want to take these children to America. I want to take them to their grandfather in the north." "Well, that's nice to hear," the Embassy official said. "I'm so fed up with this wholesale export of children I could scream!"

April 19, 1975 (Saturday)

The PRG would like a negotiated settlement. That requires Thieu [President Nguyen Van Thieu] resigning. Thieu doesn't seem to be planning to resign. Therefore the prediction is an attack on Saigon—on the airports and on Thieu's palace. Keith pointed out to me that many Saigon soldiers have never had to fight—they've bought positions in safe Saigon—and hopefully these inexperienced soldiers will just give up without a fight.

April 21, 1975 (Monday)

Thieu resigns! Whoopee! Keith and Paul went downtown to watch Thieu on TV, and to translate for BBC reporters. Sophie and Julie and I went next door to watch TV. Thieu was angrily saying that if only the Americans were still in here with their B-52s, he would have won the war. Presumably, then, he admits he's lost it. I didn't really think Thieu would resign. The rumor is that 20 generals told him to. Good!

April 22, 1975 (Tuesday)

The bomber jets are in the air. The GVN still has plenty of firepower, contrary to what Kissinger says when he asks Congress for more military aid.

*The GVN (Government of Vietnam) is the old Saigon/Thieu government, and their armed forces were the ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam). The PRG (Provisional Revolutionary Government) took over from the GVN in South Vietnam; the recent elections (April 25, 1976) provided a new assembly which will work toward reunifying Vietnam.

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April 23, 1975 (Wednesday)

Things are really moving again. Now the big event is predicted for two days away. The panic here is now in full swing, kicked off, as predicted, by the stepped-up U.S. evacuation. Deputy Ho Ngoc Nhuan, General Duong Van ("Big") Minh, and other anti-Thieu GVN people are attempting to quickly form a new Saigon government to avoid a breakdown in order. ARVN soldiers in Nha Trang and Danang robbed and killed people and did a lot of damage after the GVN lost control and before the PRG took over. No one wants this to happen in Saigon. We feel pretty safe in our corner of Saigon—neither too rich nor too poor, and with a good strong gate at the end of the alley.

Today we had a picnic on the roof. The landlord followed us up and asked us to help him get to America, and to get dollars—one of half a dozen such requests today. They say, "The Communists won't kill *you*, only *me*." Everyone thinks it's she or he, and no one else, who will be singled out by these beasts with horns and fangs, the V.C. Meanwhile we hear from Agence France Press that the GVN, in withdrawing from Xuan Loc, used American bombs (the illegal CBU 55) that take all the oxygen out of the air. They reported hundreds of people found dead near Xuan Loc, choked to death, but with no injuries. Talk about *wicked*, damn it!

April 27, 1975 (Sunday)

Tonight Keith and I went to dinner at Chez Albert's, and splurged on steak, clams, brains, and custard. To our astonishment, every table was occupied. Mostly families, all very happy and talkative. The waiters were working very hard and seemed as amazed as we were. The atmosphere dampened only for a moment when a fighter jet seemed to come unusually low overhead, sounding like the one that bombed the palace earlier. It felt like an

evening in Paris or New York, definitely not Saigon. Do they know peace is coming? They certainly don't seem to be leaving the country.

Rioting at the airport and at the Embassy. The constant noise of airplanes for this "secret" evacuation is enough to cause panic all by itself. They never used to be allowed to fly over the city. Now they do because there's so little GVN-held territory down here that's safe for them to fly low over.

April 28, 1975 (Monday)

Today Minh was installed as President, though not with the wholehearted support of all the GVN ranks. Minh freed all political prisoners and gave the U.S. government 24 hours to leave the country. At 6:10 in the evening Sophie, Julie, and I and our friend Thanh Binh were sitting on the front steps listening to a lightning rain storm. A loud boom came, and Julie said it was bombing. We laughed at her and said it was thunder. Then came another, and the scream of an airplane. Then cracks of rifle, machine-gun, and antiaircraft fire. Thanh Binh went home, and we locked up the house. We thought it was a coup by Ky [Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky], and were very depressed.

We barred our doors, checked the alley gate, closed the new shutters in the front window, pulled the kitchen table, already set, into the central room, and sat down to candlelit dinner. We had a silent moment holding hands amid machine-gun and antiaircraft fire. No one could really eat, but we drank water. Finally the noise let up, and the electricity came back on. We cleaned the dishes, showered, moved to the living room for fruits and beer. For a fleeting moment I thought of the evacuation, and was glad I wasn't on it. We were in our cozy little house.

April 29, 1975 (Tuesday)

Doing the dishes tonight was an ordeal. The electricity was off, it was 7:15, dark and stormy. Lightning and planes in the sky over the unroofed kitchen—first a string of evacuation helicopters and then the American fighter jets protecting them. With every bang or close plane I'd jump and go into the room with a roof. Tension that the American jets will bomb us, or crash. We're all tired from the worry, but controlled. Today few people are obeying the 24-hour curfew. Lots of ARVN soldiers are wearing uniform pants but have changed into civilian shirts. Soldiers are running away, and many civilians are running closer into the center city. This morning looters were selling their goods for high prices. By this afternoon prices were low—things like American cigarettes—as people realized how close the PRG troops are. Tanks could be in Saigon in a few hours. The ARVN soldiers, left behind, are firing at the U.S. evacuation planes. The PRG apparently quit its attack on the airport this morning in order to allow the U.S. evacuation to proceed. Tonight BBC radio had a report we applauded merrily. They said the Americans had all left, except for a few reporters and a few "hard-core expatriates." That's us! Wonder how many of us there are tonight in Saigon.

Thanh Binh was visiting as the radio announced the liberation of Bien Hoa, her home. If only her father could have lived to see this day, she said. He and so many others. American troops cut open his belly, she told us quietly. For the first time I heard my friend Yen's whole name—Yen Thu. Thanh Binh told me this. Now all the secrets can come out. *Dien Tin* and some other papers abolished by Thieu came out again yesterday for the first time. The new GVN radio is broadcasting the Paris Peace Agreements, announcing the release of all political prisoners, and calling the PRG by its rightful name, not Viet Cong.

Weeks ago the PRG published its new rules for taking over a large city. One point was to quickly secure the water supply and power plants against sabotage. The electricity plant is on the road to Bien Hoa, and is already PRG, and those polite folks seem to be doing their best to keep it on. We don't care about the lights, but the ceiling fan means a lot in this weather. There's been no lack of water.

The Americans could have left weeks ago without all this dramatic stuff, but they had to wait until the last, to leave in a "burst of glory." It's nice that the GVN itself kicked them out, in the end.

April 30, 1975 (Wednesday)

LIBERATION VIETNAM! Minh surrendered to the Provisional Revolutionary Government.

May 1, 1975 (Thursday, May Day)

Yesterday (April 30) was a memorable day, with no time to write. It was absurd to think that the PRG would negotiate at that final hour—with victory much faster and less chaotic. The streets were and are full of people, soldiers who took off their uniforms and civilians moving around, looking at everything.

At 8 in the morning, some loud bangs brought Sophie, Paul, and Julie into the living room to join us, listening. The surrender was at 10:30, and we stayed in our house

until 12:30, when Manh Tuong came to our house and invited us out to see the events. We went to Van Hanh University where sounds of shooting turned out to be only the emptying of rifles the students had collected. They were organizing and disarming ARVN's long before the outside PRG army arrived. Local people were in charge, well organized, polite, firm, and happy. They were going out in Jeeps, collecting the discarded military articles on the streets. Loudspeaker cars announced the surrender, and urged people not to burn piles of trash, because of explosives thrown in the piles. The streets are littered with papers, including secret identity cards of spies and police.

At Van Hanh the student leaders issued us our first official papers, allowing us to go anywhere in the city. The streets were mobbed with people, and the tanks proceeded slowly in the traffic jam. Buses and trucks brought in hundreds of smiling, curious PRG soldiers. I even saw a Westerner, tall, dark-haired, with a thick beard and mustache, on the fourth or fifth tank. The soldiers waved, someone near me tossed them cigarettes, they looked at the city. Looters ignored them completely and continued hauling pillows, couches, vases, windows, chandeliers, even a computer. The students were trying hard to stop the looting.

A neighbor, a doctor who fled from Danang, had been so panicked the night before the surrender that he asked us how to get the helicopters to stop and pick him up. We calmed him down, and the next day when the change had happened, suggested that he go help out at the Van Hanh Infirmary. He went with us, eager to please the new officials, but very frightened. When he walked in and the three young PRG nurses in white coats heard he was a doctor, they all clapped and thanked him for coming. He smiled in relief, and

then he set right to work.

Keith and I spent the night at Van Hanh, talking and visiting, and sleeping on a fifth-floor roof. I never would sleep outside before in Vietnam, and especially not on the roof of a tall building. But it was calm and peaceful—a new Saigon. I felt very safe.

Today (May 1) no one is allowed to shoot guns for any reason. Downtown the soldiers have removed most of the barbed wire and barriers and sightseers are roaming around looking at Thieu's old American-built palace. Wherever we drove we got stuck in incredible traffic, but everyone was laughing and good humored. The arriving troops are calm, and their assurance spreads over the city.

Many people were just released from prison, and others just came out of hiding. We went to the newly liberated Student Union building downtown, and met Buu Chi, an artist who was just released, and Nguyen Huu Thai, the chairman of the student revolutionary committee, in hiding until yesterday after several years in prison. We also had a long talk with Le Cong Giau, just out of hiding after being imprisoned from 1971 to 1973. Giau talked of how the PRG brought arms into the city on fish carts, under piles of smelly, salty fish. A man sitting nearby said, "Yesterday I saw people I recognized as secret police. They shook my hand as if they were my good friends. I just shook their hands, because it's time for a new start." For two months when Giau was imprisoned he had what is called "administrative torture," meaning torture for eight hours a day. Giau is 30 years old. He says that now that there is peace he dares to think about having a family.

We met student leader Huynh Tan Mam. He was such an important prisoner that he had 15 guards just for himself. By the last day, he said, all but one guard had fled, and that one opened the cell door.

May 2, 1975 (Friday)

Great improvement in garbage today. People gathering it in huge piles, and big trucks picking it up. Deserted houses are locked up today, no more looting. At the Student Union we saw the exhibit of the Life of Ho Chi Minh. I met my first woman cadre, a strong, smiling 24-year-old, hair thick and straight down her back, a cadre for 10 years. I could talk with her much more easily than with the men soldiers. I asked her about her brand-new AK 47 rifle, and told her I didn't know how to shoot a gun. She smiled and said, "I can teach you if you want to learn."

May 3, 1975 (Saturday)

Today we saw our friend Dung. After the surrender, she and her 16-year-old sister, Thu, took their home-sewn PRG flag to the local administrative office, tore down the old flag, and put up their new one. Fleeing ARVN soldiers saw them and started piling their rifles at their feet, to get rid of them. Dung and her sister don't know how to shoot, but they each picked up a rifle and stood there looking official, while collecting more and more arms.

We visited Huynh Lien. She and the other Buddhist nuns were preparing to send their 50 orphans back to their home in the countryside.

Tonight I went with two women friends of mine—one of whom has a half-American daughter—to a community women's meeting in a refugee camp on the north side of Saigon. We traveled on their Honda #50, Minh driving, me next, Oanh on the back, all straddling, feeling great. My good friend and former language tutor, Yen Thu, was leading the meeting. About 200 people were crowded together calmly listening as Yen spoke in her slow, soothing voice, welcoming all the "relatives of our uncle Ho Chi Minh" (she always referred to Vietnamese that way).

Yen said, "Many of you sisters have heard propaganda and are scared. You are wives of soldiers, policemen, officials, and you've heard you'll be arrested. We're now a country of peace, there's been enough killing. We don't want to arrest anyone. We want to work together and rebuild. Some of you have American husbands, or half-American children. The revolution is not angry at children, or people, but only at the dominating American government." She said there will be free child-care centers where the children will sing songs and play games. Older people and children who never went to school will be able to go to special classes.

In the new society women can go out on the streets after dark with no fear (this statement drew great applause) and women don't have to be afraid of the "self-defense forces" any more—those "defending" the people would really defend them (this drew a standing ovation!). She said, "the money each of you has is your own private money. You've heard that if you have a chicken you'll have to eat it in the dark of night [huge laughter]. No, you who have chickens can eat them anytime you like, and you who don't just don't." A young student asked about taking a postponed baccalaureate exam. She said the new government would give the exam in a few weeks, after the students who have been helping reorganize the city have some time to study. Yen spoke with the love and emotion of someone who's been working for her country's independence for 20 years.

May 14, 1975 (Wednesday)

Keith and I had breakfast at a local noodle stand. A woman eating near us said she had eight children and jokingly offered me the youngest, who sat in her lap howling. She left the north in 1954, while her family stayed behind. She wants very much to go back, says the climate is nicer there. She'll wait until there's a cheap train for her to travel on with all her children.

May 15, 1975 (Thursday)

Today is the first day of a three-day victory celebration all over Vietnam. On the viewing stand we recognized Madame Nguyen Thi Binh, Madame Nguyen Thi Dinh, Le Duc Tho, Nguyen Huu Tho, Huynh Tan Phat, and other famous leaders. They stood in front of half a million or more people protected by no guards, no bulletproof shield, nothing. We did see some temporary bomb shelters, a very realistic precaution given the news this morning that the United States had bombed some ships in a Cambodian port.

May 26, 1975 (Monday)

Today our friend Long told us about when he went to Vung Tau as a member of the Prison Committee to meet prisoners returning from Con Son Island. He had been asked to look for a friend's wife among the prisoners. He located the woman, and she asked him how he knew her name. He said her husband had asked him to look for her. She began to cry. She was arrested in Saigon in 1969, and hasn't seen her husband since 1954. Almost every family we know has just become acquainted or reacquainted with a relative who's been "on the other side."

May 28, 1975 (Wednesday)

Anh Tuan, who came to us before Liberation asking about leaving the country, visited us today and thanked us for helping convince him to stay. He said he no longer has much money but had splurged on a piece of cloth for a wedding dress for his fiancée. He's attended five weddings in the last five days. We asked him why there are so many, and he said for three reasons: because at last there is peace; because it's cheaper now than before; and because no one knows the future. He said that as a devout Christian he is very impressed by the sacrifices made by the soldiers and cadres.

May 30, 1975 (Friday)

This morning we ran into a medical roadblock, where they were giving immunizations against plague, typhoid, and cholera. There were four teams working together, with cotton and alcohol, written records, and air guns for sanitary injections. People on the street grinned at the sight. Everyone was used to roadblocks set up to arrest deserters or to draft soldiers.

June 14, 1975 (Saturday)

Today we had a special visitor. Chi Mai, our good friend and receptionist at the center, came from Quang Ngai with five other people. The delegation asked us about our shipment for the center. They verified what we'd learned from other friends, that the center never closed down. The new government has provided a full-time doctor, a "political officer" administrator—and salaries will be paid on the same scale as before! We heard that the hospital itself has many new doctors and is finally functioning as a hospital ought to.

July 4, 1975 (Friday)

Today is our last day in Vietnam. I'm listening to the Liberation music tapes—our going-away present from the AFSC team. They're beautiful. A real culture. The Thieu regime had no culture, no purpose, no meaning. These people of the revolution are full of love and hope. The country people especially feel the new freedom. I cried over one of the most beautiful songs, one that our friend Quynh Chi did a ballet to. We learned that the composer was killed in the Liberation Army just a few days before the victory in Saigon. The change was so hard and yet so easy. Overnight, the Americans are out, the war is over.

Claudia Krich is working on a book-length version of her journal. The American Friends Service Committee is continuing to send aid to Vietnam based on specific requests from the Vietnamese, and to work for the normalization of relations between Vietnam and the United States. The AFSC main office is at 1501 Cherry Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19102.



Author Claudia Krich and AFSC team members Julie Forsythe and Sophie Quinn-Judge pose with North Vietnamese journalists after Liberation.



Top: Saigon, May 1, 1975—crowds on first day after Liberation. Above: Three PRG women soldiers—medics and communications workers.



Claudia Krich's language tutor, Yen Thu, with her three sons.