

Subj: Hmong (message 2 of 2)  
Date: 96-04-19 10:31:13 EDT  
From: [REDACTED] (roger warner)  
To: [REDACTED]

Last week I returned from a conference on Hmong youth held in Washington, D.C. and sent out some observations that most of you received. The gist was that with all the Hmong students in college and with a new generation of leadership emerging, a new phase has begun.

The young Hmong at the conference spent a lot of time on the question of their identity -- on trying to figure out who they are and how to stay together as a group within mainstream America. They included Hmong high school students from Detroit disappointed at having to sit through sessions where only English was spoken; Hmong college student associations from Minnesota, Wisconsin and elsewhere; angry young men asking pointed questions of ex-CIA officials like Hugh Tovar and Bill Colby; and suit-wearing professionals in their thirties who mentor younger Hmong on the weekends and evenings. There were the emerging leaders (most of them college-age women, as mentioned); and only one member of the older generation, Kue Chaw, who was a battalion commander in Laos and who is the leader of a small community of Hmong in North Carolina.

From my vantage point as a writer and historian, the Hmong are a people of exodus, deeply affected by the long, difficult journey that they and their forbears endured. Certain experiences common to Hmong families in this country have nearly biblical proportions, like the dangerous crossing of the Mekong river from Laos to Thailand. I found myself thinking about the Hmong and the original people of exodus, the Jews.

To me, Jewish groups in this country offer a positive role model for newer groups like the Hmong who are attempting to redefine and reposition themselves in American society. Jewish groups have long emphasized education and professional achievement, and a segment of the Hmong population here is beginning to do that, too. Jewish groups have long made a point of sending funds back to Israel and visiting Israel and in some cases Holocaust sites; and the Hmong newspapers in this country are full of accounts of young American Hmong visiting Hmong in Thailand and China and stories about the repatriation of Laotian Hmong.

Where the Hmong have made least progress, following the Jewish model, is in the remembrance and teaching of their own history. The Hmong have no

Holocaust museum, and very little literature on their own wanderings and persecutions. The young Hmong who grew up in this country have, for the most part, only oral accounts from their elders, and they find these stories hard to reconcile with their experiences of mainstream American culture.

Out in the hallway in this conference I was test-marketing a book whose purpose is to help close that gap in the historical record. It's called OUT OF LAOS: A Story of War in Exodus, Told in Photographs. I put the book together in conjunction with a couple of maverick educators from California -- Lue Vang, a Hmong with a doctorate in education, and Judy Lewis, of the Southeast Asia Community Resource Center outside Sacramento. I want to go off on a promotional tangent about that book for a moment and then return to the larger issue, which is the archiving and teaching of Laotian history, and the roles that some of you are in a position to play.

OUT OF LAOS is a photographic, visually-driven account of the Laos war. It's a 250-page narrative of wall-to-wall pictures and minimal text, a book where turning the pages is like watching scenes from a film. Many people contributed images to this book -- Americans, Thais, Laotians. There's a bilingual Hmong-English version in the works, and at the DC conference I attended, copies of OUT OF LAOS (English version) practically flew out of the cartons and into eager hands. Out on the west coast, my colleagues Lue Vang and Judy Lewis have also gotten positive reactions from the book, and thus we have preliminary signs that the book will successfully fulfill its role as a "roots album" for Laotians who came here and their children. OUT OF LAOS also provides a visual history of the Laos war for anybody else who's interested; and if you want to obtain a copy, please contact me.

The larger issue is that no single book or conference can fill the enormous need for Hmong in this country to connect with their past in order to strengthen their cultural identity. Americans who worked in Laos, and Hmong-Americans, can help this process along. First, Laotians and Americans in leadership and upper-level roles in the Laos war are ageing and some have already died; so any interviews for historical projects ought to be done sooner rather later. Second, people with papers, photographs, and recorded memories of the Laos war might want to find archives to donate them to. (The Air America collection at McDermott Library One at the University of Texas at Dallas is beginning to achieve critical mass for scholars, but there are others as well.) And third, we ought to start thinking about ways (college scholarships? informal assistance?) to help the next generation of Laos war historians and cultural anthropologists. Most of them are going to be from Hmong or other Laotian background, and that's as it should be.