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## South Australians at war – transcript – OH 250/3

**Interview with with Sister Elizabeth Nghia, recorded by Helen Chrissy on 17 January 1994**

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### **What year did Saigon fall?**

The 30 of April 1975 - that was the date of the very sadness for our country.

### **What happened to you then?**

For that day I was in charge. I was the matron one of the orphanage already. Under my care I have to look after about one hundred children already from nought to twenty years old, and for us that is a very sad day and very worry for me, yes. First time in my life I never had that experience. Because under the roof - under the care of myself and another three sisters working together with me - we have no idea when we will die or what can happen to us. Because the bomb is in our premises, in our property, and among us is many hundred or thousand of the people come to us, among us and some of them already killed because the bomb is drop on the premises. We just is waiting to see what happen, and that I remember and still remember like yesterday at the moment.

### **So what happened - what did you do?**

After the communists took over Saigon many of the children have no parents to go anywhere, and we receive the notification from the communist government that all of the orphanage will be take place and hand over to the communist government. And we very sad to hear that news because we was with them for many years, and the convent with them for many years to look after them, and suddenly we heard the news of that. It look like we have to send our children to somewhere - we don't know what happen to them. We had a lot of discussion and with the Superior decision we are looking for the family who will be able to take some of the children home with them and look after them. Instead we have to hand over to the communist government. We success for quite a good number of the children. Only the one we not be able to do, the one who are disabled. No family will be able to take care for them. Because the situation of Vietnam then very difficult. We have no social benefit. Nobody have any funding, nobody have any benefit like the Australian government now. Whatever we got we survive then. We have to working hard every day. If we not working and then we have nothing to eat and everybody, adult and children, have to working together to survive.

After the hand over of our orphanage, because all of my brothers already escape on the last day of Saigon because they was in the army, my family became a situation of danger for that reason. And my father, the one who was in the prison for many years under the communist regime in the North Vietnam, and he advise myself need to get away, and my family helping me to escape from Vietnam to Australia, and that is my story.

### **How did you escape from Vietnam?**



I was in a very small fishing boat with another thirty-one people.

**And one of them were your relations?**

No, no, no. And I didn't know them before either. This is the arrangement my family, and I just step into the boat and we gone.

**And when did you go?**

The day was the 7 of June 1976.

**And how long were you in the boat?**

I was on the boat about two weeks. But our preparation for the journey only about four days because we planned to, they planned, I didn't know what to do, where to go, but the group of the people planned to go either to Thailand or Malaysia. But in the middle of the way we - - - only about a few hours after we left Vung Tau one of the communist police saw our boat and they chasing us. And when the people cry. The sailor was so nervous, and all of us so nervous because they shooting follow us, he was lost his...

**The compass?**

The compass, right, and we have nowhere. We didn't know where to go. We go backward or forward, we didn't know. But they just ran. The boat was just running. And after four days we didn't know where we were and we ran out with food, with petrol and with water - everything - and everybody was so worried and so upset. We don't know what to do. After four days we have only a very little of everything. We give for two children - for two young children - and for the people who are on duty, have enough energy to go further. But after the next few days the same. We run out everything and every day long we were so worry. We discussed together of it - definite we are going to die. And in that boat only myself as the Catholic person, and all the non-Catholic, and they say, "Sister, the reason we let you go with us into this boat, because you are Catholic nun and we are sure God will look after you". And they have all the respectation that now is my duty. I didn't know them. If I know their expectation certainly I will not go into the boat. But since they told me that I had a very strong feeling about God, even more and more. And I already start to pray every day on my life already, but since I got into the boat my duty even more. Because all day long I was lie down. I can't do anything because I was sea sick. I was so tired but every day I can't eat, I can't drink, I can't do anything - I just lie down and pray, "God, save me".

And then since they tell me that and I have to pray harder. And I had a very strong feeling of "Yes, I will have some future". Something in my mind - "I will have some future". What my future is I have no idea, but at the same time I already promise God, "Please save me, and when I am saved in any other country I will offer my life to you - to God, to serve many people in the hardship, in the suffering" and here I am.

**And so what happened to you?**



When we run out with the food like that and I continued to pray. The day was eleven day. We saw the big ship go past to us and everybody was come out from our - what do you call it?

### **Cabins?**

Yes, and we had the signal to ask for their assistance, but they didn't stop - they go past.

### **They saw you though?**

They saw us. They go past and we very upset and we cry for the whole day. We thought, "My goodness, when we have the next chance to be survive?" And I continued to pray again, and everybody keep remind me, "Pray harder". I was even teaching the people how to pray then. Everybody was bonded together even stronger and whenever we tell each other to do something, and we did the same thing. At least twice a day we pray together, to asking for God help.

And for the next day early morning, suddenly we saw another ship and we gave the signal and they was stop. They stopped. But they stop for a little while - is far from us. We try to run near to them but they said - - -. They give the signal to us not. They was so big and we were so small. They were so scared if we come near to them and our boat will be sink. And then suddenly they start slowly - they move away from us - and we was so upset again and again. And suddenly one of the older men come to me and say - asking me, did I have my nun habit. I was so sick, very ill, and I remember I said, "Yes I've got it, but I don't know where", because a little bit hand bag and we just put on the boat and I don't know where, and everybody searching for that bag and they put the habit on for me. I was so ill I can't sit, and they was helping me, to put me into the cabin again with my habit, with a nun. And with the big ship they already go past, not too far, but they still look back to see us. The captain, he was a Catholic. He had - what do you call?

### **Binoculars?**

Yes. He saw me dressed as a nun and he make a decision to contact the company again. The first stop they asking the permission from their company, but their company not give the permission for them to stop and pick up the refugees because they know then, if they pick up, they have a lot of duty - they have a lot of responsibility - and they say no. But the captain was very upset then and the second time he was sure he saw me dressed as a nun and he make a decision very firm and strong that he have to pick up those people particular. He know for sure on that boat he saw a nun - that is myself.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A:

TAPE 1 SIDE B

### **You were picked up by the ship. What country did the ship come from?**

The ship belonged to the company belonged to Hong Kong, Japanese and Norwegian. As I mentioned, the captain was a Catholic man he was very upset at the first time



when the company not allow him to stop and pick up. And the second time when he saw me clear like that and he rang them back and he said if they not allow him to pick us up, he will resign at once, and the company had to give him the permission to return back in our spot and pick up. And as I mentioned before, our boat was so little - very small. The ship had to put a net around us, under our boat, just in case the boat was sink. This story the captain was telling us when we got into the boat - I mean, got into the big ship - for the next day. They asking us all of the story and we telling them. I can't speak English then - I can't speak any English, but a very little, but we speak a little bit French just for communication or something. But on the boat we have someone who could speak good French and a good communication - can tell them - and that story telling me.

When I got into the big ship like that, it's like we were in heaven. We know sure we was saved since then. But we are very lucky. We got into that ship, the people look after us very well. They giving us food, they have doctor to look after us because everybody was so ill. We were in that ship for nearly one month because they have to go all the other country. We not allowed to get in but we was on the ship only, but we very happy. And every day, every day in the evening, we come together. We thank God for our safety journey, for our miracle. Even the people not Catholic is still come to pray together with me every evening. And with us captain, the Catholic captain.