

A Space for Montagnards

A Cultural Refuge in Greensboro

A New Homeland

Rev. Y Hin Nie (pronounced ee heen nee) fondly pulls out snapshots kept handy on the bookshelf of his office. He sketches details of his life in a remote jungle in Cambodia a decade ago, pointing to the “church” where he and nearly 400 other Montagnard refugees worshiped in secret. Under the glittering forest canopy, a large wooden cross and podium reign over rows of log benches. “Every where we go,” Nie says, “We pray, we put out a cross, then send people out to patrol and find food.”

For 17 years they struggled to survive and brooded over regaining their homeland in Vietnam. They had no salt or rice. Sometimes they spent days processing poison potatoes with fire, water and sunlight to make them edible. They occasionally took potshots at government soldiers with guns left behind by Americans, but as the years dragged on they saved their ammunition for hunting. They made clothes from the sandbags left behind too, and hoped the Americans would return and help them fight for freedom. But after journalist Nate Thayer exposed the guerrilla camp for the Far Eastern Economic Review in September 1992, Nie was propelled in another direction. Just two months later, he was on a plane with a one-way ticket to the United States.

Since 1986, about 4,000 Montagnards have gained refuge in North Carolina, constituting the biggest population outside of their homeland in the Central Highlands of Vietnam.

Montagnard was a term used during French-colonial rule for a multitude of mountain minority peoples. Most Central Highlanders prefer the term Dega, or Sons of the Mountains. One of the

world's most diverse states, Vietnam recognizes 20 ethnic groups in the Central Highlands alone. Warfare leveled or damaged many villages, driving some to hide deeper in the forests. Since then, social and economic policies have ended many semblances of traditional life. These tribes were once predominant in the Central Highlands; now Vietnamese settlers outnumber them three to one. Ties with the American military and American missionaries have jeopardized life and livelihood for some Montagnards. Those same ties have led to refuge in the United States.

Now Nie is pastor at a church of bricks and mortar in Greensboro, the International Montagnard Bible Church. He's trying to build a new homeland – as American as “Amazing Grace” and as Montagnard as rice-harvest songs – that is better than the one he left behind. But he faces constant reminders of troubles in Vietnam.

Ravages of War

Nie, who is from the Rhadé tribe, was called to the church with little choice in the matter as a small child. He lived among American missionaries in Ban Me Thuot, Dak Lak province, while his parents preached 200 kilometers away. At first Nie lived in a dorm with the children of lepers; later he moved into the home of Carolyn Griswold, whom he calls his adopted mother. Nie says he was hardheaded and didn't want to learn English, eat American food or learn the piano for the church choir. Events in Ban Me Thuot during the Tet Offensive would change his mind.

The night of Tet, the Vietnamese New Year, began Jan. 30, 1968. In the early hours of the morning, Nie was snoozing safely at the house of a friend who had just returned from Cambodia. A loud explosion in Ban Me Thuot sent Nie running to a bunker.

In his book “Free in the Forest,” anthropologist Gerald Hickey, who was in Ban Me Thuot at the time, refers to a missionary's account that says Communist troops detonated

explosives inside Griswold's home. Nie says they shot a rocket out of the jungle. Either way, Nie found a macabre scene of collapsed concrete and brick when he returned home. "I come to the house, and I call 'Mom, mom, mom, where are you? Where are you?'" he says. "I climb up a little bit and I see the foot of her father."

Nie worked with his neighbors and South Vietnamese troops to help extract Griswold, and they finally succeeded late that afternoon. She was mortally wounded, while her father, Leon, had died instantly. Nie says Leon was visiting on vacation.

Two days later, Nie was hiding in a bunker with missionary Robert Ziemer when he ran out and Communist troops shot Ziemer in the back. The other missionaries were killed or captured. The next day American helicopters shot the friend with whom Nie had spent the night. Nie's adopted mother would soon die in Nhatrang, and his parents were hundreds of kilometers away. Nie was grief-stricken and alone.

Eventually the missionaries would return and Nie would pick up the pieces, but it had transformed how he viewed his purpose in life forever. "God keep me," Nie says. "If not, I already die that night. God still keep my life right now, need me to testify to all those who want to know the true thing and the real thing, to witness what happened."

Jungle Resistance

Nie and thousands of Montagnards fled into the forests during North Vietnam's final offensive in 1975. "Because I am adopted by American missionary, and I am Christian, if I stay I will be in prison," Nie explains.

The soldiers who had fought with U.S. Special Forces were in danger too. One such soldier was Y Djret Eban, who found refuge in North Carolina this summer with his wife, H'Biok. He was arrested and beaten in 1976, then forced to work on a collective farm. For

harvesting two hectares, Eban was paid one bag of rice. “They say to me, ‘because you are soldier to America and make money for America, now you have to reimburse,’” Eban says. “So that’s why I don’t like the Vietnamese Communists.” He continued to labor until he escaped during a protest at the farm in 1991.

While Eban was toiling in the fields, Nie became a commander in the once 10,000-strong Fulro, a French acronym for United Front for the Liberation of Oppressed Races. The guerrilla group first formed in the 1960s and sought autonomy for ethnic minorities in the region. Many Fulro fighters had been trained for battle with U.S. Special Forces.

George Shepard is a director for Save the Montagnard People, an organization founded by Vietnam Veterans in 1986 that sponsors cultural events and provides scholarships for Montagnards. As the head of a military advisory team, he worked with 250 Vietnamese and Montagnards in the Central Highlands. He says he went some places with Montagnards that he would not have gone with an entire company of troops. “There was a great bonding between Americans and Montagnards,” Shepard says. “I think there’s real bonding in a combat situation.”

In 1973, the last American troops withdrew and left Montagnard fighters to their own devices. “There’s no question we abandoned them,” Shepard says. Fulro fighters were painfully aware of this. When journalist Nate Thayer talked to Nie at a Fulro camp in Cambodia in 1992, he said, “I am not angry, but very sad that the Americans forgot us. The Americans are like our elder brother, so it is very sad when your brother forgets you.”

Meanwhile, Nie was preaching and translating sermons he heard over the radio. In 1986 Fulro fighters and family gathered for prayer and announced Nie’s marriage to H’Biuh Buon Ya. They kept moving, even after she gave birth to two daughters. “Seventeen years in the jungle

have never missing Christmas time,” Nie says. “Even when Communists chase, we still have time to do all things that, and God with us.”

In 1992, an exhausted group of 400 men, women and children traveled to the refugee camp in Cambodia. Nie, who says he was the only Montagnard that could carry a conversation in English, asked UN officials if they or the United States could provide more ammunition. Nie says an American military official told him, “[We] cannot provide gun, or military, to fight Communists like before. Because a lot of our own people die, American die, and Montagnard die.... Right now we thinking another way to bring peace to Vietnam.”

At the American government’s urging, he and 30 other Fulro officers eventually agreed that their forgotten army would lay down its arms and gain refuge in America. Nie says they had to find another way to help their people.

On a Mission

Today Nie wears glasses that curve past his graying temples, and his black patent-leather shoes are polished to the point of gleaming. At 42, he owns a home on East Cone Street in Greensboro and has four other Montagnard families as neighbors. While many refugees still have family in Vietnam, Nie lives with his wife and three children, 17, 14 and a son who is 9. “My son in America born in hospital,” Nie says. “He had clothes, diaper, house, everything.” Nie rises at 3 a.m. to study religion, drops his children off at school, and spends the rest of the day directing activities at the church or driving refugees to doctor appointments. He drives 45 minutes each way to Lynchburg, Va., to pursue a master’s degree in theology from Liberty University. Slightly dreamy, he is usually thinking three steps ahead in his zealous pursuit of a self-sufficient community.

Nie was on a mission as soon as he arrived in North Carolina. Because of his abilities as a translator, Lutheran Family Services donated him a car. Nie often spoke for fellow refugees at the supermarket and the doctor's office. "When they came to the [United] States, he was the one who did all the talking," Shepard says, adding that Americans often assigned leadership roles to the best English speakers. "He's got a good heart, he does a lot for the community."

As president of the Montagnard Dega Association for four years, Nie provided many social services to refugees. But after the International Montagnard Bible Church bought and moved into the Crusade Baptist Church building in 1998, he was anxious to move on. Nie resigned, telling the organization that God had called him to return to the ministry. He was ordained in September 2001, and rotates pastoral duties between the International Montagnard Bible Churches in Greensboro and Charlotte.

The Greensboro church is nondenominational, and its pews hold a congregation of 250. Its halls hold a community that speaks in six native languages. Nie preaches almost simultaneously in English, Rhadé and Bunong each Sunday, at times nearing a clamor worthy of Babel. "When they come to the church, they must understand the Bible, the word of God, through their own language," Nie says. "Absolutely right now we still pay the mortgage, but we thank the Lord we have space for ourselves," he says.

A little space for Montagnard culture is the keystone of Nie's undertakings. It seems a rarity to him in Vietnam. Nie lists his grievances: persecution of Christians, repression of Montagnard culture and loss of ancestral lands to Vietnamese settlers. In an attempt to modernize the region, the government has at times encouraged mass migration, forbidden teaching in native languages and discouraged building traditional longhouses and farming by

slash-and-burn. Nie disagrees with the tactics. “The Montagnard dream is they want to have free life,” he says. “They don’t want to have the yoke of any dominion or regime.”

Nie says racist attitudes began long before Communist rule in South Vietnam. Traditionally, Vietnamese settlers have called Montagnards moi, or savages. Shepard agrees many South Vietnamese officials were condescending to Montagnards. At a talk he gave in the Central Highlands in 1969, Shepard says he likened being Montagnard in Vietnam to being black in Mississippi in the 1950s.

Not surprisingly, the acceptance of all colors, races and tribes is a common theme in Nie’s sermons. “God never mention majority or minority. God mention each people, each tribe, each language will come to the Lord and the throne,” he says. He says his church is a spiritual beacon that empowers Montagnards and helps preserve their culture. “This church we can keep own language,” he says. “We want to keep our heritage. We have to be proud of what we are.”

Nie is highly aware of American freedoms and recites them often. He says he tells newly arrived refugees they have religious freedom and don’t have to attend his church, or any other. As president of the Montagnard Dega Association, he testified to Congress about human rights in Vietnam. Nie has protested in front of the New York Stock Exchange and the Vietnamese embassy in Washington, D.C., since the Vietnamese government’s crackdown following Montagnard protests in Dak Lak province last February. When approximately 900 refugees fled to Cambodia and were moved to a UN camp in Phnom Penh, Nie sent a message encouraging the refugees to trust Americans who came to assist. But the Cambodians have since closed the border, and Human Rights Watch has reported at least 30 arrests and heavy surveillance, especially in the homes of church leaders. Nie doesn’t want his church to endanger Montagnards by encouraging protests or flight to Cambodia. “Church is church. Political is political,” he says.

Now his church is helping 41 of the 907 refugees who began flying to North Carolina this summer. He estimates about 750 have arrived. “We not come here to get rich in America,” Nie says. “The Montagnard community, they come to this country, they want to build a new life.”

Rebuilding Lives

The Eban family’s apartment looks and feels much like those of other newly arrived Montagnard refugees. The living room walls are bare and lacking the usual family mementos, while two faded and unmatched sofas vie for space. The VCR plays a Cambodian musical with dancers whirling in extravagant gold costumes. The family’s caseworker and translator from Lutheran Family Services checks the thermostat. “Every apartment has heat, but it looks like theirs is not working,” he says, noting he will fix the problem.

It has been four months since the family arrived in Greensboro. Y Djret Eban, his daughter H’Doung, his son-in-law Y Gor Eban and his son Y Kroh are anxiously waiting for jobs. “I can do everything if they give me job,” says Y Djret. The youngest son, 14-year-old Y Toung, attends high school, while Y Djret’s wife, H’Biok, has severe heart problems. “I can cook, because my health problem that’s all I can do,” she says. While Y Toung is at school the family spends the morning in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. Y Gor plays guitar in the International Montagnard Bible Church’s band each Sunday and recently recorded an album with them.

The Ebans did not want photographs taken for this story, fearing government retribution against relatives in Vietnam. When asked about the government attitude toward Montagnards, Y Gor says in Vietnam he could attend college, but wouldn’t get a job unless he renounced Christianity. He had to pray with family members in the privacy of his home. The government brought in settlers from the north who took Montagnard land, he says. On Dak Lak’s city limits,

he says, the government is selling the land where their houses stand to foreign companies. Y Gor, who is Rhadé, says their community is breaking apart. “If we don’t have our community, then we won’t have our culture.”

Y Gor joined protesters in Dak Lak in February 2001. He says police began showing up at the homes of protesters to question them, beating and arresting some. On April 27, Y Gor left a friend’s house where he was hiding and headed for the Cambodian border. “I had no choice, I couldn’t go back home,” he says.

While crossing the border, Y Gor met his future father-in-law. Y Djret Eban and his family, who are Mnong, lived near Cambodia. Y Djret was transporting refugees from Dak Lak, hiding 11 of them in their coffee plantation. Fearing for their safety, on the third trip to the border the Ebans headed toward the refugee camps. They hoped for a better life in America.

Now the Ebans are living in a borrowed world at Glen Haven Apartments in Greensboro. Everything they have was given to them – the clothes on their backs, the television, the furniture and even the apartment. Life is bittersweet for Y Gor, who hopes one day it will be safe for him to return to Vietnam. “Right now I’m homesick,” he says, though he looks forward to owning a home in North Carolina. H’Biok has a different take. “I am here, happy,” she says. “My people back home they make many difficulties.”

“We have many things that we are really happy,” Y Gor agrees. “Many people bring us clothes, food. We were surprised.”

A complex network of agencies, associations and volunteers have helped the approximately 400 Montagnard refugees who began resettling in Greensboro in June, according to Shirley Thoms, the Reception, Placement and Match Grant Program manager at Lutheran Family Services in the Carolinas. “It was a huge undertaking,” she says. Her Office of Refugee

Resettlement, as well as Jewish Family Services and World Relief, found housing, hired Montagnard caseworkers and arranged English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. The Special Forces Association provided much of the manpower for setting up apartments. It's easy to eat through a one-time grant of \$400 from the U.S. State Department, so when families like the Ebans couldn't find jobs, they relied on Lutheran Family Services' Match Grant Program.

The International Montagnard Bible Church, which sponsors the Eban family, also played a role in smoothing the transition. "Y Hin was one of our major, major volunteers," Thoms says. "He was there from the beginning."

"We don't have money, but we cooperate with the American church, we do labor," Nie says. The church gathered donated sofas, beds and dining sets with just a month's notice of the impending arrival. Nie often picked up refugees at the airport and whisked them to their new homes. Many Montagnards brought food to the church to sustain families until food stamps arrived two weeks later, he says. With some new arrivals living just around the corner, Nie asked Lutheran Family Services to provide ESL classes at his church. Nearly every day Nie doubles as chauffeur and interpreter, driving refugees to the doctor, the local Dega market or even job interviews.

"Right now is big shock is job placement," Nie says. "What should be done if they don't have job?" He and Lutheran Family Services keep an eye out for job openings, and he says Montagnards are religious in attending ESL classes to improve their chances. Recently, Nie obtained Macintoshes from UNC-Charlotte and had a basement room outfitted for computer training.

From the moment of resettlement Nie pictures an ambitious two-year schedule for attaining the American dream. It begins with ESL and doctor visits, and ends with enough

money saved from work to buy a house and bring over family members left behind in Vietnam. This year's new arrivals are not yet a quarter of the way there, and Nie's job is far from over. "They struggle very hard for self-sufficiency in this country," he says. "They always dream about independent life."

Community Blueprint

Despite the daunting task of helping refugees catapulted into a foreign culture with no possessions and little education, Nie is dreaming big. He envisions Montagnard homes clustered around the church. He hopes to enlarge the building to include a fellowship hall, a library and a center for students of Montagnard culture and language. Older Montagnards can pass on memories of traditions and customs that would otherwise be lost, while youth can earn the college education that positions them to help others.

Nie hopes the next generation will go help Montagnards in Vietnam, where he says 500,000 widows and orphans need social services. He doesn't think he can safely return after giving Congressional testimony, or bear to see more suffering. Nie instead wants the church to find the resources to make it happen. "All those who want to go to Vietnam to help Montagnard and come through us, and we will guide them, work together to help Montagnard out there," he says. "God will help us establish our people."

But Nie isn't optimistic about when, or whether, he will have the resources to help the Central Highlands that tug at his heartstrings. He has plenty of work ahead of him – building a new homeland for 4,000 Montagnards in North Carolina's rolling hills.