This is a story about Maia Lee, a Hmong refugee who escaped from war torn Laos and the communist regime that her people had been fighting against on behalf of the United States during the Vietnam War era. What follows is a representation of Maia’s descriptions of her journey to, and life in, a refugee camp as a child.

Maia was born in Laos, in the city of Long Cheng in November 1965.

During the Vietnam war, there were over 40,000 Hmong soldiers that fought the communists on behalf of the United States CIA. This action by the Hmong is often referred to as the “Secret War”. In April of 1975, the United States withdrew support for the war and the Hmong were essentially abandoned. They had to take it upon themselves to find safety because they were being hunted by the communist forces in Laos.

Near the time that the communists came to Long Cheng in May of 1975, Maia’s father had decided it was time to leave because of the imminent danger to their family.

He decided to move the family to the Laotian city of Vientiane which is on the border of Thailand and the Mekong river. During the journey to Vientiane, they were delayed because the road to the city was blocked by a military checkpoint where no one was allowed to pass. It was during this delay that her mother gave birth to Maia’s younger sister, Keo. Her father invited one of the checkpoint soldiers to the celebration of the birth. In return, the soldier allowed them to pass the checkpoint and they were able to reach Vientiane.

Maia’s father was able to arrange passage over the Mekong river via boat and the family moved across the river during the night to the relative safety of Thailand.

Nong Khai refugee camp in Thailand was built because of the influx of refugees from Laos. Maia and her family were among some of the first to arrive at the camp. There were no structures built for the refugees, so they built bamboo shelters for themselves. There was no electricity, and no running water. This would become Maia’s home for the next three years.

The refugee camp was divided into two sections: the Lao side and the Hmong side. Those who spoke Laotian, were assigned to the west side and those who spoke Hmong were assigned to the east side. In front of each structure the Hmong had built a small bamboo shack for their cooking. There was lots of space between the Hmong buildings, and they used the space for gardens where they grew cilantro, onions, and other vegetables. They also raised pigs and poultry.

The east and west sides of the camp were separated by a small field, and a pond. The field was used by the Hmong to play soccer, and the
pond was used for watering their gardens. Besides the pond, their other sources of water were a well with a bucket and rope, a water tower, and a container that they would catch rain in. Maia recalled that they used the water from the well to bath with and to wash their clothes.

In the field between the Hmong and Lao sections there was an open-sided building where Hmong women would sell textile handicrafts.

While in the camp, Maia also attended school. At first, she attended a Thai school outside of the camp; this was not the norm, as most of the children attended school within the camp. Eventually they were not allowed to attend the school outside of the camp. During lunchtime at the camp school, the children would go home. They would go to the garden and pick cilantro and green onions. They would mash up the herb and onion in a mortar, and mix it with rice for their meal.

There were other sources of food that they were able to get while in the camp. The Thai government would periodically rations that included rice, tuna, sardines, and cuttlefish. Maia noted that she’s not actually sure of her age now because her father “adjusted” her age at that time. The government rations would be slightly larger depending on your age, so they were able to get a little more in this way.

There were rice paddies owned by local Thai civilians near the camp. They were allowed by the locals, to go into the paddies and forage for fish (that were very small, like a minnow), wild vegetables, bamboo shoots, and crabs.

Maia had spent most of her childhood in a hot, rainy, tropical climate. She would soon experience snow for the first time. In August of 1978, Maia and her family arrived in the United States via airplane. They flew into the Minneapolis/St. Paul Airport. She was 12 at that time and spoke no English. She recalls that her cousin had to show them how to operate things like toilets, electric ovens, microwaves, and showers, all of which they had not used before.

Maia currently lives in St. Paul, Minnesota with her family.