



APRIL 12th, 1975: Vietnamese orphans crossing the Pacific Ocean, on their way away from the horrific terrors of war. One of these orphans will later be known as Ralf Lofstad, and is currently working as a journalist for the newspaper “Dagbladet”.
Photo: Robert Stinnett / The Oakland Tribune Collection / The Oakland Museum of California. Video: Thomas Rasmus Skaug.
Still photos: Thomas Rasmus Skaug, Arvid Bryne, NTB Scanpix, Tonje Finvold Lacher and Private.

39 years ago, Ralf Lofstad, “Dagbladet”, arrived in Norway, in a cardboard box.

Now he tells the story of his dramatic escape from war torn Vietnam.

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By Ralf Lofstad

(Magasinet): April 10th, 1975, the long and brutal Vietnam War is coming to an end. In Saigon, the heavily populated capital of South Vietnam, citizens can hear the artillery fire coming closer and closer, and everyone knows it’s only a matter of days before the communist forces are invading and taking over the city. Two days earlier the presidential palace was bombed.

Through chaos, six Norwegians will attempt to get children destined for adoption to Norwegian parents, out and safely to Norway. A task, later shown to be way harder than first anticipated.



PANIC: South Vietnamese, in panic, frantically trying to escape Vietnam by entering the US Embassy on April 30th, the day North Vietnamese forces invaded Saigon.

- Strange and sad

- When I saw the photograph, I actually started crying, and all my friends were also very touched. It was strange and sad to look at. I have received lots of emotional feedback from people who are not necessarily close to me.

It's April, 2014, in Frognerparken, Oslo. This is the first time I meet Jorunn Eidal (39), teacher and married with children, from Hosle, Bærum. We have a common, important, story: In April, 1975, I, Jorunn and 20 other small children, orphans evacuated under dramatic circumstances, from Saigon, shortly before North Vietnamese forces invaded the city.

Destination Norway, to meet our new parents.

The trip to Norway almost didn't happen. Only intense and tireless effort from a small group of Norwegians, as well as coincident, made it possible for Jorunn and I to sit down today and talk about it in Oslo.



PRECIOUS CARGO: World Airways' DC-8 cargo plane, set up to transport rice. The adults had to hold the children in place during takeoff and landing. In the photograph, Sylvia Bukne can be seen standing up. Photo: Arvid Bryne

Coincidence

Jorunn and I met, due to a photograph I coincidentally stumbled upon on Facebook a couple of weeks earlier, on the profile page of Liv Vilde Adams (40), also one of the 22 children, and now lives in the USA. A photograph taken by an American journalist showing rows of small children (us), lying in cardboard boxes on a jumbo jet, on route from Clark air force base in the Philippines on April 12th, 1975, to the USA.

- Despite having always been told we arrived in cardboard boxes, it was still very strange to see the photograph. "I had pictured a luxury box - ha-ha", Jorunn laughs, across the table at the outdoor restaurant patio.

I, myself, really never imagined that the photograph would trigger such strong feelings in people. I have known for a long time about the dramatic evacuation, and they had to improvise how to safely transport as many children as possible. I understand now that this photograph I uploaded as a souvenir from our journey to Norway, trigger something special and it touches people.

Almost 700 people, mostly strangers to me, have “liked” the photograph on Facebook. As a result, I was surprisingly invited to NRK’s “Dagsnytt atten” news show, to talk about this journey, together with Arvid Bryne (75), my retired Dagblad colleague. He took part in this trip, and played an active role in what would have to be called an escape.



REUNITED: Jorunn Eidal (39) and I were the two youngest children on this long flight in 1975. April this year, we met for the first time, in Frognerparken, together with nurse Sylvia Bukne (80). Sylvia had an important role in our escape from Vietnam. Photo: Thomas Rasmus Skaug

Emergency processing

I was not supposed to have left Vietnam until a later date, but Norwegian authorities had suddenly expanded the adoption agency’s authorization to bring more children than first planned. Me and a handful other children were added to the list for emergency processing through the bureaucracy.

I was most likely saved from a death due to illness and malnutrition in Vietnam, and a childless couple in Norway became parents after all.

I was completely without a history, no family history. I had no exact birth date. My name, Luu Hoang Nam, might not even be correct. All I know is that I lived in a catholic orphanage, where I was fed and taken care of by nuns. How I got there, why and from where, we don’t know.

The evacuation of me and the other children in my group, was the last time “Norwegian” children were flown out of Vietnam for many years. April 30th, 20 days after we left, Saigon was invaded by North Vietnamese forces.

Almost 40 years later, my mother, Frøydis Gundersen (68), is still extremely grateful.

- The Norwegians part of this group actually saved children. I am impressed by what an amazing job they did saving the children. The way this all happened, could never have happened today.



MOM OVERNIGHT: My mom, Frøydis Gundersen (68), had resigned, and settled with not being able to adopt a child from Vietnam. However, April 18th, 1975, a contradicting message arrived: The adoption agency had been successful in evacuating a little boy from Saigon. Here shown at her home in Drammen. Photo: Thomas Rasmus Skaug

Volunteered

One of the Norwegians that volunteered is Sylvia Bukne. The nurse now 80 years old, has been sending me Christmas and birthday cards, every year since she participated in the escape.

- I was adventurous, but was not prepared for what was going to happen. Things became very complicated, Sylvia says.

Sylvia is now sitting next to Jorunn and I in Frognerparken. Until today, she had no idea that she and Jorunn have been living within close proximity of each other in Bærum.

Sylvia rewinds back to 39 years ago:

- Ingelise and Henning Jakhelln from the adoption agency “Foreldreforening for barn fra Vietnam”, were my closest neighbors, when I heard they needed people to travel to Saigon to pick up children, I volunteered.



FOLLOWING THE DRAMA; Our escape received a lot of attention from the media at home. Faksimile from Dagbladet, April 9th, 1975, and VG, April 11th, 1975.

Flew over a plane wreckage

Sylvia recruited her friend Per Segelcke, because “he had a good head on his shoulders”, and together they flew into Saigon from Bangkok, in the beginning of April: 1 doctor and several nurses were to arrive from Norway a few days later. It was clear, flying into Saigon, that this would be a far from normal trip.

- We could see the artillery fire and smoke on the ground, and we flew over the wreckage of a cargo plane that we later learned had been transporting children destined for adoption. This was not very encouraging and set a somber mood.

A few days earlier, an American air force cargo plane went down shortly after takeoff from the Tan Son Nhat airport. The plane was one of the first to mass evacuate orphans from South Vietnam to West, in "Operation Babylift". 153 of 313 people onboard the plane perished, of which 78 were children.

The plane crashed due to a faulty cargo door, later proven. Though, at the time rumors said the plane had been shot at by North Vietnamese forces, who were waiting right outside Saigon, pressing on to take over the airport.

- When we landed, we heard gun fire, Sylvia tells us.

She and Segelcke were checked in at a doctor's residence, right next to the Advent Hospital outside the airport.

- I told Per "if they start shooting, I'll be knocking on your door". Sure enough, that night I heard screaming and shooting out on the street, so off I went knocking on his door.

Ran the adoption agency out of their home

"Foreldreforeningen" was run out of the living room of a 2 bedroom apartment in Bekkestua, Bærum, by a married couple - Ingelise and Henning Jakhelln. Henning is now Norway's best known expert in labor laws. The couple started organizing adoption of children from Vietnam, in their spare time and at their own cost, after the shocking chaos around the adoption of their oldest son Jahn.

- This was necessary to complete his adoption. We had no previous experience, but figured things out along the way. It definitely helped us that Henning was a lawyer, Ingelise says.

- A lawyer's office in Saigon chose the children to be adopted, and arranged most of the formalities and paperwork, so the children could arrive at Fornebu, Norway, with completed paperwork. In Norway we would match the children with their Norwegian parents ahead of time, and send social report on the adoptive families to governing authorities in Saigon. The government in South Vietnam had strict requirements regarding adoption, making sure everything is in order with qualifications met, and processing time was about 2-3 years, Ingelise tell us.

- The Norwegian government stepped up and engaged in speeding up the adoption process, they gave us a one-time permission to bring back 50 children, even if their paperwork was not complete. The intention was to arrange all necessary documents after the fact, when the children were on Norwegian soil, Ingelise tells us.



SLUGGER AND SAVIOR: Ed Daly (with hat) profited big time on the Vietnam War. However, the Norwegians managed to persuade the war profiteer to fly us and the stranded adoptive children out of Saigon. Photo: Arvid Bryne

Risky

A team of 6 people was chosen to travel to Saigon to pick up and bring home the children: In addition to Sylvia and Segelcke, nurses Laila Lutnes and Aase Schjerven, Dr Arpad Matlary (later married political advisor Janne Haaland Matlary) went, as well as adoption applicant and the organizations unofficial active officer Bjørn Mogenstad. Everyone understood this mission was risky.

- It was no coincidence that Bjørn was the only one with children, Ingelise says.

Ingelise and Henning Jakhelln gave Sylvia a list of the children who were cleared for adoption and where to pick them up from various orphanages in Saigon. Initially they were to fly out via Bangkok on a regular airline, after obtaining travel documents signed by the South Vietnamese government. However, problems would soon arise.

- We had given the list to the Vietnamese social minister, but he demanded more information, and we were not allowed to leave the country until we had a new "improved" list. In the minister's waiting room, I sat down, trying to improve the list and make it all add up.

The minister's demands were due to the list of children being changed and a new name had been added. However, this had a logic explanation, Ingelise explains:

- The death rate was up to 80 percent throughout the orphanages in Saigon. When the waiting period to adopt is up to 3 years, things can happen. Even so, the South Vietnamese government required everything to be complete and in order.

Finally the minister came out of his office, to go visit refugees from the North that were staying in the coastal city Vung Tau.

- I got up and blocked him, so he had to stop and talk to me. In the end it all worked out, Sylvia tells us.



DEDICATED: Arvid Bryne, Dagbladet, came along the whole way from Saigon to Oslo. On board the plane he helped feed the children and change their diapers. Photo: Dagbladet

Crisis

We finally had travel documents for 28 children, permitting us to leave and take them with us. The plane we were supposed to fly out of Vietnam on, was stranded in Bangkok from damage. New plane tickets for more than 30 people could not be found anywhere, and getting out of Vietnam by roadways with that many children, was out of the question.

- This created a crisis. Though, I had read about Ed Daly in VG at Fornebu, and kept him in the back of my mind thinking "he might become useful", Sylvia tells us.

The American business man Ed Daly was a known and feared figure in Saigon. A war veteran and retired pro boxer, who owned the big charter airline World Airways. Daly had moved his way up by transporting soldiers and equipment during the Korean War, and transporting refugees from Hungary in 1956. He had a golden agreement with the US government for air transport during the Vietnam War - more so a wars profiteer.

- Daly was a peculiar guy. He always wore a cowboy hat and walked around with 2 revolvers in his belt. Every evening he would entertain a crowd in the penthouse suite at the Hotel Caravelle, where we also stayed. He'd do almost anything for a price, Dagblad colleague Arvid Bryne (75) tells us.

Arvid flew in from Tokyo via Hong Kong a few days earlier. During the day he worked his correspondence assignment with help from his chauffeur, who would take him to the war zone, where he got to see the terrors of war up close. In the evening he struggled to send his material back to Norway, because there were only 2 fax machines per 500 reporters.



ALL FLIGHTS CANCELLED: April 30th, 20 days after we left Vietnam, the North Vietnamese forces invaded Tan Son Nhat airport and the rest of Saigon.

Fought with soldiers

In the days prior to the North Vietnamese invasion of Saigon, Ed Daly had advertised himself as a savior of the South Vietnamese using the much talked about "last flight from Danang", where he fought South Vietnamese soldiers who were panicking and trying to get onboard the plane before the nation's second biggest city was invaded by the communists. Several people died from falling off the plane after takeoff.

Ed Daly had also offered the use of his planes in President Gerald Ford's "Operation Babylift". The operation intended to evacuate as many orphans as possible, before Saigon fell to the communists. Many people feared that the orphans, several thousand children fathered by American soldiers in particular and the Vietnamese women, would be mistreated and killed after government takeover - a fear later shown to be unprecedented.

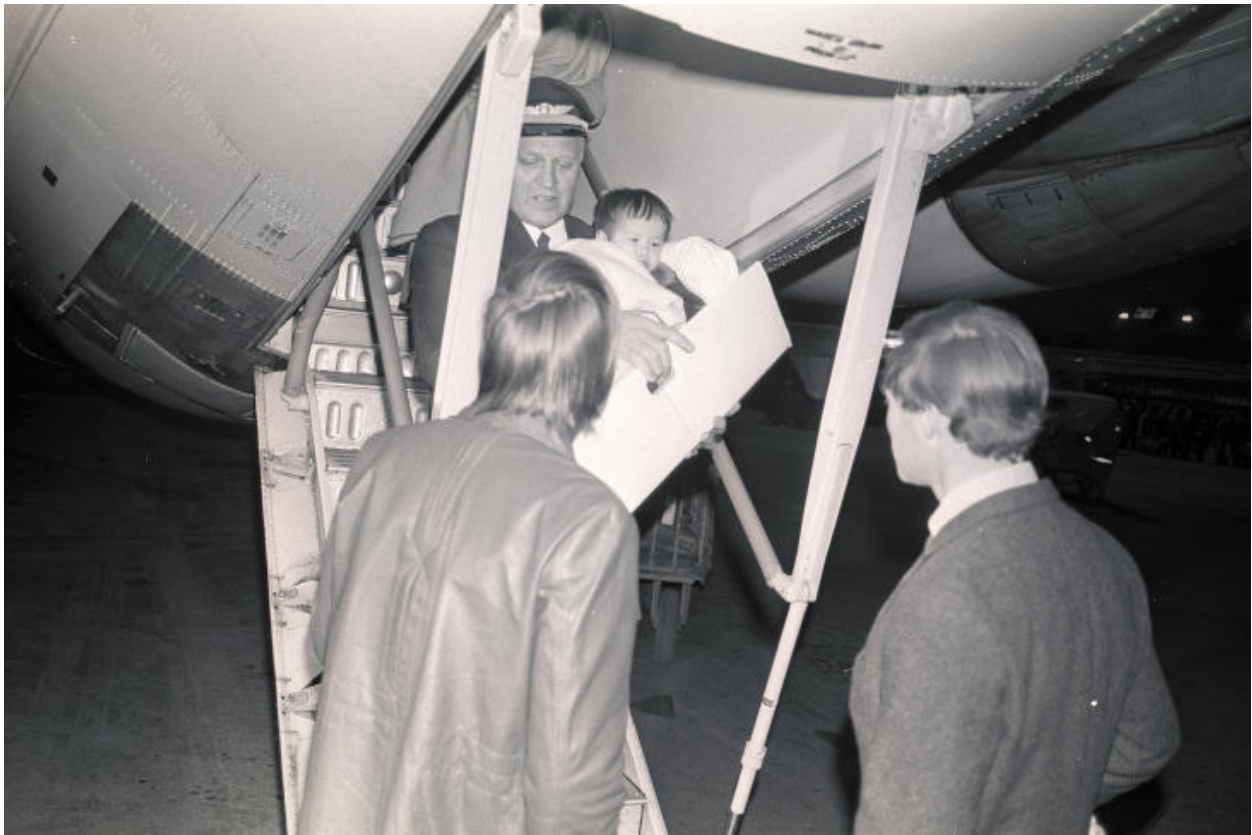
It was during these circumstances that Daly was persuaded to let us fly out of Saigon on one of his DC-8 cargo planes. However, the Norwegians have somewhat different views on how it all happened.

Arvid Bryne tells:

- I spent a lot of time with NRK's correspondent Kjell Gjøstein Resi. One day we were walking down the street, we heard Norwegians talking. The Norwegians turned out to be nurses who were here to pick up orphans for adoption in Norway, but they were stranded due to their flight to Bangkok being cancelled.

After our conversation, Arvid and I went to the penthouse suite at Hotel Caravelle to find Daly, who was throwing his daily "bash" in the bar.

I walked over to Daly, and told him "Listen up; this is your chance to do something good without receiving anything in return."



ON NORWEGIAN SOIL: April 13th, after 3 days of travel, we landed on a SAS plane at Fornebu. Seen here, Liv Vilde (Nicolaisen) Adams who grew up in the Oslo area and later moved to the USA, being carried off the plane by the pilot. Photo: Arvid Bryne

- Shot the ceiling

Arvid told Daly about the 28 children who were stranded with no way to get to Norway.

"You have the chance to save 28 small children out of this hell hole, so they can go to good homes and families. That would be something to tell Saint Peter - if you get that far", I told him. He then pulled both revolvers and shot through the ceiling, plaster was drizzling. "You go to hell!" he yelled. "We are already in hell", I replied. We left the bar without any hopes of having been heard.

Next day the phone rang. Daly himself was calling.

- He said he had an empty cargo plane; it had delivered rice in Phnom Penh, capitol of Cambodia.

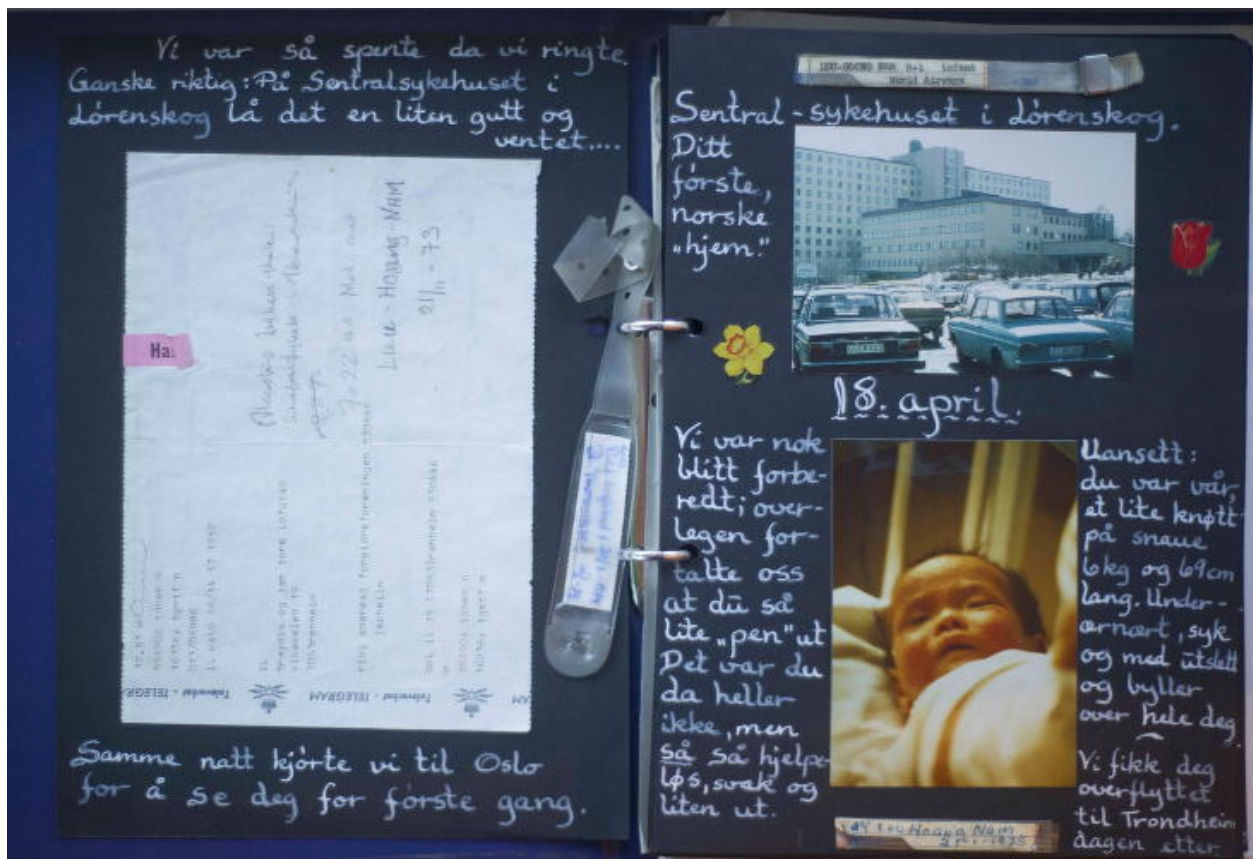
He could fly us out the same evening from Tan Son Nhat to Clark air force base in the Philippines. "There's no chance of making it. What about curfew?" "I'll take care of that" he said; he had the police in his pockets.

On the other hand Sylvia Bukne tells us that she went up to Daly's suite and rang the doorbell.

- There were 2 guards outside his door; I told them I wanted to talk to Mr. Daly - and I was let in. Inside Daly's suite it was like the Wild West; on a shelf was his Stetson hat, and sure enough there was his revolver belt hanging from the ceiling. He offered me a glass of champagne and I accepted. I had not eaten all day.

When Daly was presented with our dilemma of the children not being able to get out of Vietnam, his face lit up.

- He had thought I wanted to save all of Vietnam, like me, ha-ha. "You can borrow the plane to Manila, tomorrow night", he said.



MEMORABILIA: My mom would save and scrapbook photographs and other memorabilia from my first year in Norway. This page shows me at the hospital - "Sentralsykehuset i Akershus", April 18th, 1975. On left: the telegram about my arrival to Norway. On the right, above: Luggage receipt, also serving as identification. Photo: Private

Police escort:

In both scenarios, the outcome was the same: In the evening April 10th, with police escort arranged by Daly to prevent being shot at during curfew, the Norwegians drove to 4 orphanages spread across 4 different areas of the city. The plan was to find and gather all the children on our list.

At the orphanages they walked around with flashlights to find the right children. One by one, as we were found, they picked us up and put us in the van.

One orphanage, however, refused to co-operate and denied us access to the children.

- Later this seems completely logical. What would we have done if the roles were reversed, a gang of Norwegians coming storming in to collect children? Sylvia Bukne asks.

So, the Norwegians had to leave this orphanage without the 6 children. Aase Schjerven and Bjørn Mogenstad stayed behind in Saigon, to make another attempt to collect the 6 children, and the next day they succeeded. They flew out of Saigon April 13th.



FIRST MEETING: Here I am meeting my dad, Jan Tore Lofstad (1943-1984), for the first time at the hospital "Sentralsykehuset I Akershus". Photo: Private

No visa

As we, the children, were picked up, we were gathered in the hotel to be transported to Tan Son Nhat airport. However, upon arrival, we encountered yet another problem: Arvid did not have a travel visa to exit Vietnam.

- The newspaper Dagbladet was criticizing the war, so the South Vietnamese government saw me as a communist, and as a result they would not issue me a travel visa. Talk about bureaucracy to the very end, he says as a matter of fact.

Daly to the rescue yet again, Arvid tells us.

- He threatened airport guards and fired his revolvers again, which got us past the barricades.

- The airport personnel were furious, they couldn't stand the noise and crying of the children. We solved the problem by driving around in circles, Sylvia remembers.



COLLEAGUES: Several decades after the escape from Saigon, Arvid Bryne and I ended up as colleagues in the newspaper Dagbladet. Arvid have been collecting all the newspaper articles he wrote about the Vietnam war. Photo: Thomas Rasmus Skaug

No seating

Late in the evening the 22 children, 4 Norwegians from "Foreldreforeningen", as well as the journalists Bryne and Resi, board the cargo plane equipped to transport rice and had no seats. They were told the children could not be secured to the cargo netting on the floor, due to risk of getting hurt; bone fractures.

- We sat with a child on each arm and each leg, Sylvia says.

- We feared that the children would fly all over the place during takeoff and landing. However, I have never experienced a plane being maneuvered so gently. I later found out that the pilot was the same as the one flying "the last flight from Danang", Arvid said.

Safe arrival at layover 1 - Clark air force base in the Philippines - we, the children, were taken care of by army nurses stationed on base, they fed and changed our diapers.

- Everything was a little overwhelming. All I saw was the flight stairs and nurses running off with “my” children, Sylvia says.



LIKE A PREGNANCY: My mother, Frøydis Gundersen, says the process for adopting me was like a long and tough pregnancy, because of all the contradicting messages and information she and my father received. The process was like an emotional roller coaster, but it was worth it, she says.

Wrote “Norway” on their chests

After 2 days we continued our trip to Los Angeles, on a World Airways jumbo jet – it was on this leg of the trip the newspaper, Oakland Tribunes, journalist snapped the shot of us in cardboard boxes.

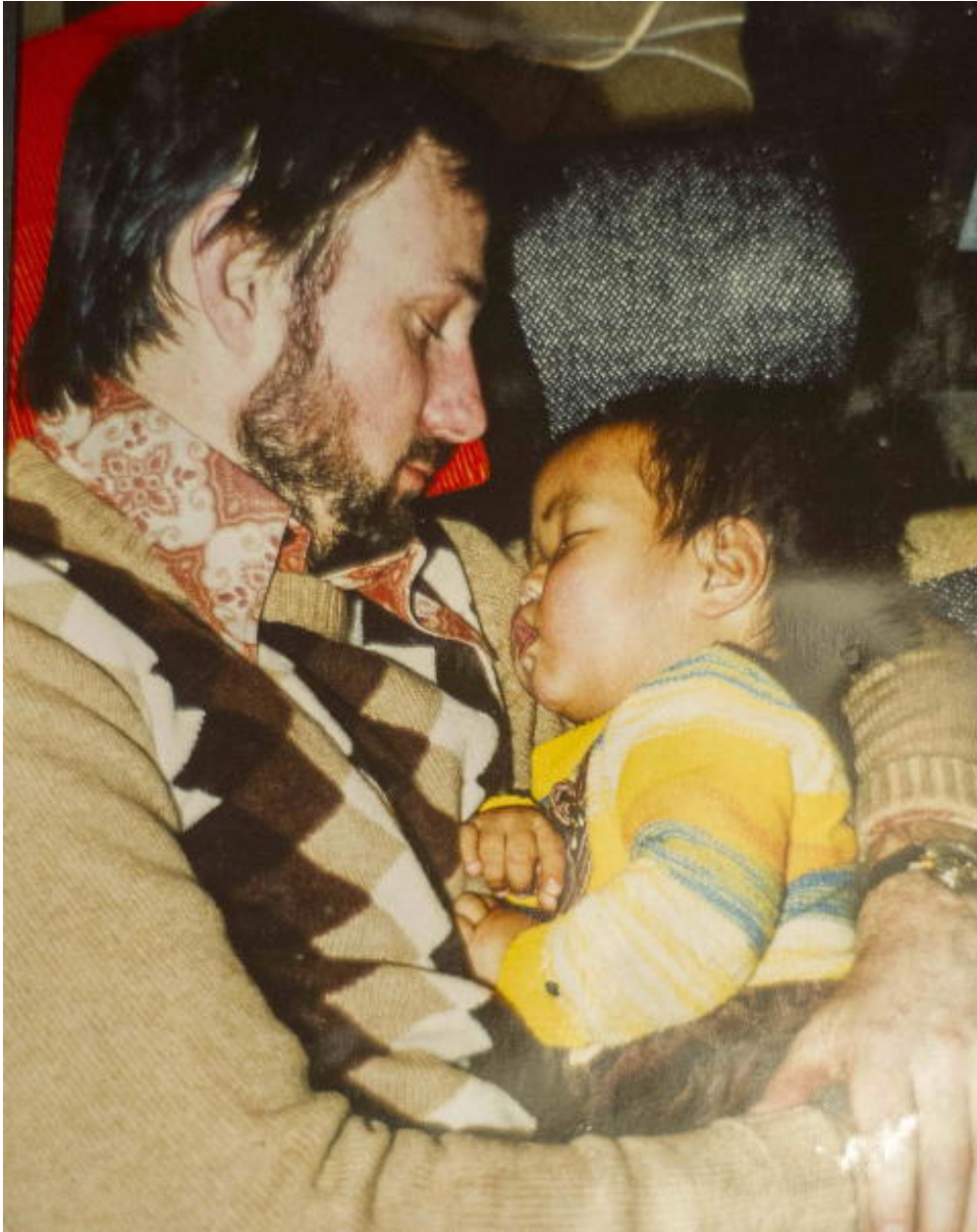
- **We said that we thought that some of the children had measles - so we had a separate area to ourselves in the front of the plane. To not lose control of the children, I wrote “Norway” on their chests with a marker, Sylvia tells us.**

The flight to Los Angeles was noisy and smelly. In addition to the “Norwegian” children, were 52 Cambodian children, courtesy of “Operation Babylift”.

- The children were crying, and pooped all the time – all of you had diarrhea, Sylvia says.

Even the Norwegian journalists stepped in and helped, on the plane.

- We shuffled back and forth, taking turns changing diapers; at home I had a young son, so I had good practice. All of you had intestinal worms, so it was important to wash our hands, Arvid tells us.



RECOVERY: I recovered quickly and was feeling way better after a few months, when we moved from Trondheim to Austevoll in Hordaland where I grew up. Here I am taking a nap with my father, in the teacher's residence where we lived the first few years. Photo: Private

- Children were stolen

After landing at LAX international airport, we were all transported to the military base Fort MacArthur, outside Los Angeles. Even there we encountered problems.

- We got close to being arrested, when we tried to get in to see the children, who were put in a big hall, with the children from "Operation Babylift". The Norwegian consul general had our passports, and we were denied entrance. We felt stupid not being believed, Sylvia said.

Sylvia was later told that extra security had been added, due to strangers breaking in at night and stealing children from another group than ours.

Next day the trip continued on a SAS plane to Copenhagen, where we were met by Mr. and Mrs. Jakhelln, who joined us on the last leg to Oslo.

- I have no idea what we did when we arrived at Fornebu, we were all so exhausted. I can't even remember my thoughts, Sylvia said.



BASE IN BÆRUM: Together with her husband Henning, Ingelise Jakhelln (74) ran the mission in Vietnam from an apartment in Bærum. Photo: Ralf Lofstad

Message not received

At Fornebu, several adoptive parents had shown up to welcome their children. Nobody showed up to welcome me, since I was among the children who had been “emergency processed” and was not assigned to any adoptive parents. I was also close to dying from illness and malnutrition, and needed hospital care. I ended up in the hospital “Sentralsykehuset I Akershus”, with a group of other children.

- You landed at Fornebu, April 13th, but we weren't told until April 18th, because they didn't think you would survive, mom Frøydis Gundersen tells us.

She is sitting across from me at the dining table at home in Drammen, where she's been living with her current husband since 1991. We have talked many times, during my childhood, of the dramatic story about the journey from Saigon in 1975. Now we're recapturing the story one more time.

Literally overnight, she and my now deceased father went from being childless to becoming parents, after first being told there was no hope of getting a child from South Vietnam.

My parents had started the process of adopting a year previously. Since the average waiting period was 2-3 years, they had - as opposed to most other parents – still not been assigned a child, when Sylvia Bukne and the others went to Vietnam. Our expectations of success were low.

- We assumed the money was lost and were ok with it, my mom says.

She and my dad were both teachers, actually living in the small island community Austevoll, Hordaland, but at the moment they were completing continued education in Trondheim. The 17,000 NOK they had paid the “Foreldreforeningen”, made up, roughly estimated, one of their student loans.



SEARCHING: In the Catholic Church Chua Cuu The, that was responsible for the orphanage I was in. Here father Qang tells me that the documents from back then are lost. Photo: Tonje Finvold Lacher

Jumped in the car

April 18th was the last day of school at the university in Trondheim. Suddenly we received a telegram from the south.

The telegram told us to call Jakhelln immediately. When we called, he told us they had succeeded after all, in bringing home a baby boy, who was now at the hospital in Lørenskog. We jumped in the car and headed Southbound.

The contradictive, to earlier, message that they were going to become parents after all, came as a total surprise to my mother and father.

- We had abandoned the idea of adopting, and had no baby equipment at all. Hurriedly we had to buy diapers and other necessities like baby formula and bottles. We received help from 2 of my siblings, who lived in Oslo.

Upon arrival at the hospital, my parents saw others children who had been on the same flight, it was not promising.

- A 2-3 years old girl was clinging to a bed, but came running, clinging to us instead. We also saw a boy who just sat in bed, rocking back and forth, banging his head against the headboard.



RAN THE ORPHANAGE; The French-Canadian priest Lucien Olivier (1904-1987) ran several orphanages in and around Saigon, including the one I was in. Photo: Private

Sedated

The apparently traumatized boy was, to my parent's relief, not me. I turned out to be lying heavily medicated, a few beds down. I was not visually traumatized, but very sick from malnutrition and infections.

- It was a strange feeling to pick up this child, who was completely out of it from sedation. You were very sick, and had the typical big and bloated stomach from malnutrition. We had to change your diaper 15 times in 24 hours.

Despite everything, we were soon on our way to Trondheim, in my parents' blue Mazda.

- Everything happened so fast, we didn't have much time to thin. You were sedated, rolling around in the backseat, wrapped in the blue baby blanket we had bought.

On arrival in Trondheim April 19th, I was admitted to St. Olav's Hospital. I had to stay in the hospital until October, with the exception of ***. We moved back to Austevoll after a couple of months, where I had a fairly normal childhood without any health problems.

- We had no guarantee that your health would get better, but you have been surprisingly healthy ever since - hardly ever sick.

With help from a doctor, my parents determined my birthday to be July 21st. They estimated my birthday by the fact that my skull was still soft and had not grown together yet, and I had signs of 2 bottom teeth. Still, we assume that this date is not completely accurate.



THE CHURCH: Chua Cuu The (Our Savior) is one of the bigger catholic churches in Ho Chi Minh City. The orphanage I stayed in was located behind this church, but is now ***

- Prepared for late complications or side effects

At home in Hosle, Bærum, Ingelise Jakhelln has neatly organized folders with documents from the Vietnam adoptions. The list for our trip shows my mom and dad still not among the parents who had been assigned with a child before the trip to Saigon. Along with a handful of other couples, they are listed in handwriting at the end of the otherwise typewritten list.

"Boy or girl, as young as possible", is my parent's preference. Mom explains:

We knew about children coming to Norway when they were several years old, and several of them had psychological problems. We wanted a young child, because that meant less baggage. We weren't sure if you would have any sustained problems, but we were aware of the risk. Sure enough, you were scared of loud noises like fighter jets and thunder the first few years, but no lasting effects.

Some parents on Jakhelln's list have a longer list of preferences: "Not mixed race", is required by several couples.



ON TV: In 2010 I participated in a talk show, live on Vietnamese national TV, where they showed photographs of adopted children seeking their biological parents, me included. Photo: Tonje Finvoll Lacher

Rejected

The list shows I was never supposed to end up with mom and dad; originally I was assigned to a different couple, in East Norway.

- They thought you were too old and rejected you.

So, you were offered to the Lofstad's.

I'm listed as age between 12 – 14 months old.

Ingelise tell us that some adoptive parents are shockingly demanding, even after receiving their child. She and her husband ended up becoming parents to a 5 year old girl, in 1974, due to a straight up “return”.

- She was adopted by a couple who after only 1 day, left her on our doorstep saying she was too sick. Today the girl they cared for and raised, is a healthy women with a manager’s position and a teenage daughter.



IN AN ORPHANAGE: At the Go Vap orphanage in Ho Chi Minh City (previously Saigon) in 2010, where we, adult adoptees, got to meet orphan children much like ourselves. Photo: Tonje Finvoll Lacher

No documentation

Many of us adoptees had little to no documentation about where we came from. In my case, I had documents showing 2 completely different birth dates, November 1st, 1973 and January 21st, 1975, where neither can be correct. The name my documents were showing, Luu Hoang Nam, may not be correct either.

When I was young, I was told by my parents that my biological parents were dead. However, as I grew older, I realized that we can’t really be certain, since most of my information is missing. I attempted to find out about my biological heritage and background, but the odds were not very good.

The search has taken several years, and brought me to several countries. I’ve been to Vietnam 3 times so far in the last few years.



IN CANADA: Outside the big pilgrims church Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupré in Quebec, summer of 2012. Father Olivier is buried here, and I met a priest who knew him. MMS Photo: Tonje Finvold Lacher

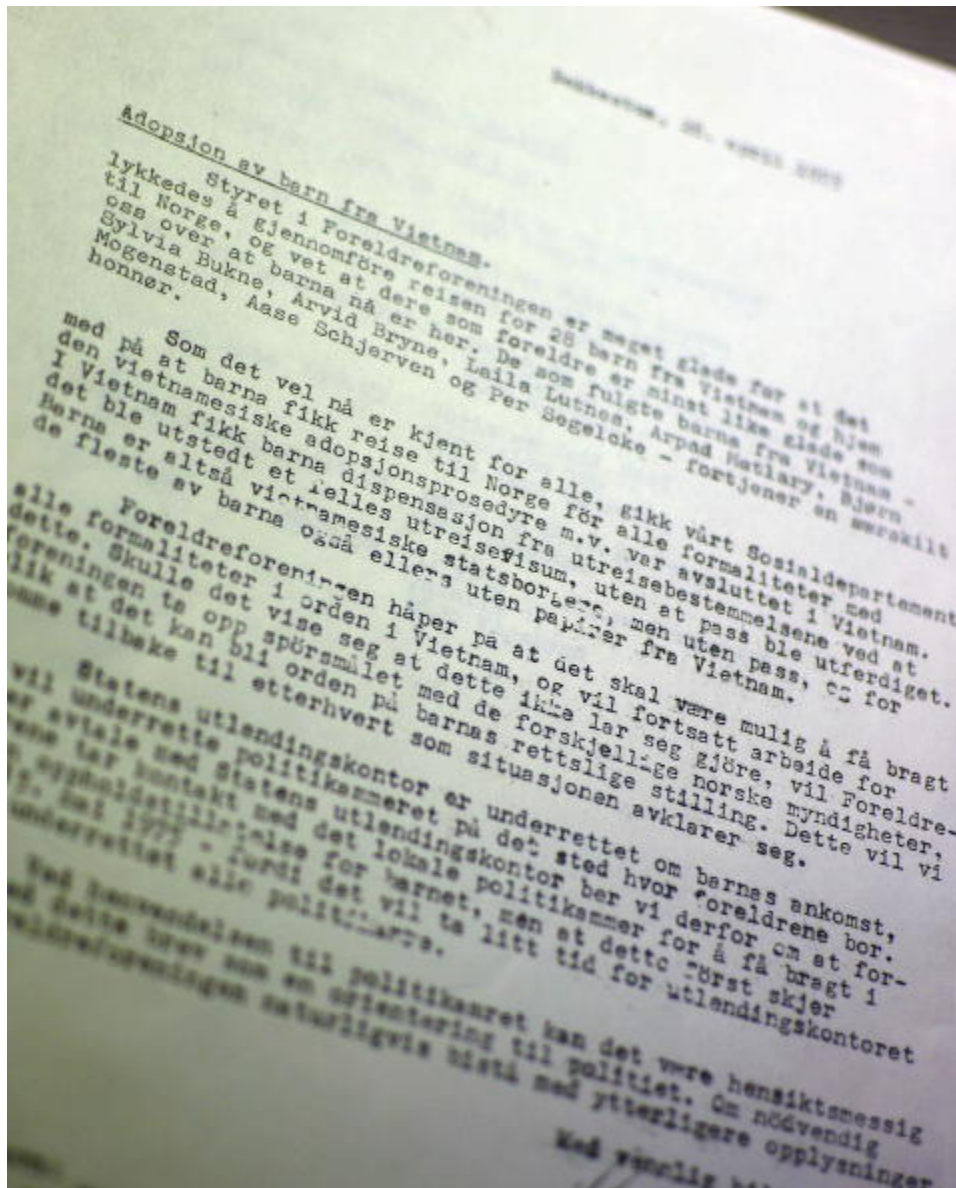
Thrown out

First time I returned to Vietnam, in 2007, it went rather terrible. My actual intention was not to dig into my past; I traveled to Vietnam to write my Master's Thesis at the university - academy of journalism, and had an ambitious project of interviewing the members of the forbidden democracy movement.

Turns out the Vietnamese government had received a tip about my plans, and they had put me under a widespread surveillance in both Norway and Vietnam.

After only 6 days in Ho Chi Minh City (previously Saigon) I was picked up by the police, and put through an extensive examination of 19 hours altogether, before they threw me out of the country. Reason for deportation was that I was a danger to myself and to the country, since I had been in contact with “terrorists”. I had a rather harsh first meeting with my birth country.

Though, the trip gave me a sense of belonging and interest to find out more about Vietnam. I took a chance and went back to Vietnam 3 years later, to participate in the 35th year anniversary celebration of “Operation Babylift”. I met several foreign adoptive children who were also flown out of Vietnam April 1975. Even though I noticed the Vietnamese government still watching me, nothing dramatic happened.



HONOR: In the letter from Mr. and Mrs. Jakhelln, sent to adoptive parents after we arrived in Norway, they are applauding the 6 “heroes” from “Foreldreforening” and Arvid Bryne for their remarkable efforts. Photo: Ralf Lofstad

TV and net meeting

The program for the 35th year anniversary was big with nationwide TV coverage and net meeting with one of the biggest newspapers in Vietnam. I also found the orphanage I was staying in as a baby, Chua Cuu The (Our Savior). The orphanage is no longer there, but the church is still standing.

- There's a possibility you were the first child of a young couple that could not afford to keep you. This happened often, father Quang (with the Chua Cuu The ministry in Ho Chi Minh city, district 3) says.

Father Quang informs us that the Chua Cuu The orphanage was 1 of 10-15 in the Saigon area ran by the French Canadian priest Lucien Olivier. The orphaned children came from all over South Vietnam.

When the orphanages were shut down after the war, father Olivier left the country in 1976. The documents were lost during the chaotic aftermath of the war.

- Documents were burnt

Jorunn has a similar experience. In 2008 she found the orphanage, also Catholic, where she thinks she stayed.

- I met an abbess who told me that all the documents had been burnt.

Children in Catholic orphanages were often baptized. Father Quang tells us that baptism records typically contained: first and last names, birthdate, what district the parents belonged to, as well as the parents' names if known. Very valuable information, but the papers can't be found.

My mom's biggest fear the first few years was that my biological parents would show up on their doorstep demanding to return me to them.

- I thought what if the parents are actually alive and want me back? We had heard about lawsuits abroad, she says.

DNA test

Despite the nationwide coverage, where potential biological parents could call into the show if they recognized their child, none of the adoptees participating ever heard anything afterwards. I have also submitted a DNA test without learning any more about my family tree.

I went to Quebec, Canada in 2012, based on information received from Chua Cuu The 2 years earlier. I made the trip to visit the pilgrim's church Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupré, where father Olivier retired to at the end of his life and where he died in 1987.

I met a father Maurice Dionne (almost 90), who knew father Olivier. He doesn't know where father Olivier's documents are either.

- However, your name is listed somewhere, concludes father Maurice.

Nothing in the archive

Where the documents could be located, remains a mystery. When I asked the child, youth and family directory ("Bufdir") to see my adoption papers, the answer was that they could not find any, not even a single document.

- Unfortunately it's common for you Vietnam children, was the response from the admin. Quite a sensation, when you think of how big the pile of documents are for an adoption these days.

- Our son Jahn also came to Norway without papers, if that's of any consolation to you, Ingelise Jakhelln says.

These are the circumstances. I can't get anywhere in my search, and have pretty much resigned to the fact that I may never know my biological heritage. Life goes on.

Right and wrong

This is raising an important question. Is it right to take a child out of its familiar environment, when the child will have limited to no possibilities of finding out its biological heritage?

Sylvia, who after the trip in 1975 made several more trips to pick up children, tells us about struggling with guilt for many years.

- I started thinking that you can't just go and take children out of their familiar environment. Earlier I wouldn't even have thought twice about picking up children from orphanages in another country. I went through some tough years, she tells us.

- Children are children. I, myself, was opposed to the war, but there was nothing ideological about helping to evacuate the children to a better life, Arvid says.

He emphasizes:

- This was big, I felt like I was doing something important. I was glad to be useful, but it was Sylvia and the others who did the work.

Despite the disagreement about who secured the plane out of Saigon, Arvid in particular, is mentioned in the letter the Jakhellns sent to the adoptive parents after we arrived in Norway. I, as well as the other 6 from "Foreldreforeningen", deserve a special tribute.

- Orphanages are rarely ideal

Ingelise tells me that more and more of "her" children are coming to visit these days, most are my age, about 40 or older.

- Some are having a hard time relating to being adopted, she says.

How do you view the moral in taking a child out of its familiar environment this way?

- This is a very complicated question. To grow up in an orphanage is rarely ideal in Vietnam or here in Norway, Ingelise Jakhelln says.

She emphasizes that children are better off with their biological parents.

- Though, this is dependent on there being enough food and clothes, education and housing. To grow up in poverty is not good, like in Vietnam, 1975.

Without a doubt

She adds:

- I'm completely convinced that no mom would ever volunteer to give up her child, but if she does, it's because she believes that someone else can give her child a better life, a better chance to grow up.

My mom Frøydis has no doubt:

- You would never have survived in Vietnam. After you came to Norway, you've been healthy and hardly

ever sick. This confirms the “survival of the fittest”; they cling to life and grab a hold of it.

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