

## Into the Slums

By: Eric Schempp

I was in a hurry. I had just finished eating dinner on the boat, and I had to meet Chau at 7:00. He was a Vietnamese teenager that made a living selling postcards to the tourists that came by. While trying to sell postcards to me the first day in Vietnam, he started asking me questions about my homeland. We got to talking and before I knew it, an hour had passed. He showed my friends and me around and when people tried to sell me stuff, he told them to get lost. I actually never bought anything, but I think our conversation was pay in itself to him.

Chau looked like any other Vietnamese, but was handicapped. He had two arms that shot down from his shoulders like toothpicks. They dangled down in front of body rather than hanging from his sides. They were of regular length, however elbows were not evident. His hands were turned upright and he had mobility of all but a few fingers. Other than those obvious deformities he was a normal human being.

He didn't get any sympathy from me, as he appeared to not want any. He was out there making money in the same manner as everyone else. He was doing a good job and was proud of it.

I got to the place where I was to meet Chau at about 7:05. Phu'o'ng met me. She sat me down and her mother brought over her schoolbook for me to read.

Phu'o'ng was another beggar that my friends and I met earlier in the week. She was ten years old and basically became our personal escort around the city. We were in

debt to her for all she had done for us. She spoke excellent English, which she learned by listening to foreigners while selling postcards. She told us that she had been going to school of about a year. We were a little apprehensive about believing her because of the nature of her work. She was on the streets every night trying to sell postcards to people. After seeing her schoolbook, I was relieved. It was proof enough to say that she had been going to school. I opened the book and wrote the English translation to many pictures that covered the page.

Eventually Chau came over and we started talking. I had gotten about three sentences out when I realized my watch was missing. I told them that someone had stolen my watch and I couldn't believe the series of events that followed. Phu'o'ng spread the word quickly. Soon there were people gathered all around me. Phu'o'ng's mother came over and was furious. At first I didn't know why, but later I came to the conclusion that someone had stolen the watch of a friend. Two minutes later there was a plain clothed man standing in front of me holding a card that said something about Vietnam Police. Phu'o'ng explained what had happened and he scurried off. To me there wasn't much of a story. There was a sly thief running around Saigon with my four-dollar watch. I really didn't care for the watch, especially since it was cheap, but Phu'o'ng and her clan had a different idea in mind. They were going to find my watch. About ten minutes after my watch was stolen, a Jeep with four men dressed in Military uniforms pulled up. A few things were communicated back and forth, and they were off again.

Chau and I decided to go for a walk while the chaos over my watch evolved around us. After talking for a while, he invited me to his house. I weighed the pros and cons and agreed. It would be a great experience to see a Vietnamese house. Chau assured me I would be back to the boat by 9:30, allowing enough time for me to get back onto the boat. The Vietnamese Government had placed an eleven o'clock curfew on us.

I thought I would be going into a house just outside of the new city. I later learned this was not the case. I was about to experience something I don't think anything could prepare me for.

Before I knew it, I was boarding a Vietnamese bus with Chau. With sweat dripping down my forehead, and my body shaking with nervousness, I decided that I was going to go through with this no matter what. Chau paid for my ticket, something that is hard to come by for beggars. He may have not wanted my wealth to become apparent to other riders on the bus. In the United States we beggars as having nothing, but for Chau, begging was profitable, and it was worth a trip into the city where all the tourists were in order to beg. The ticket cost 2,000 dong. In US currency, that is about eighteen cents but in Vietnam, 2,000 dong can go a long way. It was a nice gesture.

I had soon realized the situation I had put myself in. I was riding on a lousy bus filled with Vietnamese staring straight at me. My apprehension was clearly displayed on my face, although I tried desperately to conceal it. My only communication, or protection for that matter, was a cripple seated next to me with a smile a mile wide. His defense would have been of little benefit to me. I trusted Chau completely. It was everyone else that made me nervous.

I was watching the road and carefully placing objects such as buildings, street signs, and billboards into my memory in case I needed to find my way back on my own. I soon realized that it would be impossible to do had I needed to. I made Chau promise that once we got to his house, he would come all the way back to the heart of Saigon with me.

After three stops, it was our turn to get off. The first thing Chau told me to do when we got off the bus was to wear my backpack in front of my body

with my arms folded around it. That did nothing to ease my apprehension. I soon realized that we were going to have to walk a great distance to reach his house. He said that it should take no longer than ten minutes.

We started walking. We walked over a bridge and past some stores. I soon began to realize, however, that I was in a place not generally visited by foreigners. People started to stare at me. Many would drive by on motorcycles and practice their English by saying, "Hello". Many would just stare. Some stopped what they were doing and laughed. At this point I was a nervous wreck. I kept asking, "how much further?" and he just smiled and said, "only a little ways".

Eventually the overhead lights stopped, but the road continued and did we. Soon we came to a section where there were nothing but nightclubs and people laughing. Later, the width of the road diminished and soon thereafter the pavement stopped. But, once again the road continued and so did we. People continued to stare at me, but by now it was much more intense.

To focus my attention on something else, I started talking. I told Chau that in a few days I would be leaving and heading for India. A big smile grew on his face as he

said, "I like India. He then proceeded to say, "Take me with you." Thinking he was joking, I said, "I can't do that." His face drew a look of disgust and he said, "why not?" "uh-oh." I thought, "I'm in the middle of Vietnam and I've upset the only person I know in a two mile radius." I quickly changed subjects and asked, "how much farther?"

Through this quick interaction, I learned a lot. Chau was frustrated with his situation in Saigon and wished that he could live anywhere else in the world. However, India would not have necessarily been better than the conditions he presently lived in, nor would changing societies automatically relieve him of the burdens of poverty. He didn't care. He saw tourists come from all over the world and figured that any place would be better than Saigon. He was also relying on me to make his life better by dropping him off where everyone was full of wealth. He did not understand that I could not just simply intervene like he wished. It would have been impossible to explain this, as communicating was hard enough. I didn't even try, and besides my mind was preoccupied with other things.

Finally the road ended. What appeared in front of me was a series of run down shacks. At that point I knew I was in the slums of Vietnam. Determined to see what I set out to see, I continued walking with Chau.

We walked down an alleyway only big enough for four people to walk side by side. Fences lined the path and on each side of me were houses that lay in ruins. The alleyway twisted and turned left and right, and had I needed to I would have been unable to remember which paths to take to get out of that slum. At first we passed only a few Vietnamese children whose eyes curiously challenged my presence. However, before I knew it, Vietnamese lined the alleyway to stare at me. Had I been attacked, I would have

been defenseless. We passed a mob of people watching television outdoors and I began to grow feverish as I walked by them. As soon as we rounded the corner and no one was in sight, I stopped Chau and told him I wanted to go back. He calmed me down and told me we only had a little bit farther to go. And so we continued.

A few minutes later, we were there. We climbed up a ladder that led through a hole in the ceiling of another renter. A mob gathered around the ladder below, talking animatedly and looking upward. "This," said Chau, "is my home." I was standing on a piece of wood, which made the ceiling of the neighbor below and the floor of Chau's place. There was about a seven-foot span between the floor and the ceiling. There was a thin piece of carpet on the ground, which made up his bed. There were no walls. When it rained, he got wet and it rains daily in Vietnam. The floor space that he slept on was about ten feet by fifteen feet. I was in shock and couldn't believe the level of poverty that he lived in. He said he paid 100,000 dong for a month's rent, which amounts to a little less than nine U.S. dollars.

We were only there for about three or four minutes. I saw all I need to see in about two minutes. Chau knew that I appreciated him for respecting my wishes.

I don't know how I ever got up the courage to descend the ladder into the mob of Vietnamese. We waded our way through the mob and I was fiercely clutching my backpack. Eventually we made it out of the slum, and into a more populated area. I began to feel a little more at ease. After inquiring what time it was, Chau realized that we would not make it back to the heart of Saigon by nine thirty. We decided to signal for a cyclo so fast, the driver didn't know what to do. Chau came too, as promised. As soon

as I was in that cyclo, all tension and fear was drained out of me. I actually enjoyed the ride into Saigon. It only took about thirty minutes.

When we arrived at the point where I had met Phu'o'ng earlier in the day, I was relieved. I could not believe that I was actually going to be safe. I was rather shocked by what I had been through. We got out of the cyclo and I paid for the ride. Chau said good-bye and was going to walk back home. It would have taken him a good three hours to walk that distance. I forced him to get back in the cyclo and the driver another 10,000 dong to take him home. It was the least I could do after what he had given me: An experience I'll never forget.

I met my friends where I left Phu'o'ng and her gang. They already knew that I had lost my watch. Phu'o'ng had told them the whole story. Soon we were approached by one of Phu'o'ng's guardians. We started talking about the probability of getting my watch back. He laughed and in excellent English said, "Don't worry, I have lived here for over twenty years and know how the system works." It wasn't until after we finished talking to him that we figured out that we had basically dealt with one of the ringleaders for the crime scene in Saigon. His workers were children such as Phu'o'ng. However, by gaining the friendship of Phu'o'ng, we gained friendship of her entire clan.

I would like to say that I got my watch back, as it would make a great ending to the story. However, that is not the case. I believe they honestly tried to find it, but just didn't succeed. They apologized for not being able to recover it.

It's not every day that I gain the trust of a crook. But maybe Vietnamese are different. Maybe they are willing to open themselves up to anyone willing to listen. Maybe trust is intertwined when one tries to understand their situation. Maybe that is why Pho'u'ng went out of her way to help me.

She helped me in more ways than one. She blatantly challenged my ignorance and stupidity. At one point she successfully opened my backpack and took everything out without my knowing, just to prove to me she could do it. She gave everything back and then scolded me for allowing it to happen. I smiled as my new found friend shook her finger at me and unleashed a lecture fit for any foolish American wandering the streets of Saigon.