

“Prospekta Bremen”: Thanh H. Vu

2017. Acrylic on wood. 22 ¾ ” w by 8” h.

David Feinberg and Beth Andrews, with contributions from Storyteller Thanh H. Vu and from artists Michelle Englund, Kimchi Hoang, Jennifer Hensel, Kristin Anton, Sima Shahriar, Paula Leiter-Pergament, Sara Feinberg, Julia Breidenbach, Jane Bollweg, and Annie Nickell.

Thanh H. Vu and four of his cousins left Saigon in May of 1979 and headed to Rach Gia, Kien Giang province. Ten nights later in total darkness, local police loaded 517 passengers onto a 78 ft. long riverboat. The overloaded boat stacked with people like sardines could easily have tipped over. The smells below deck were unbearable. Thanh and two of his cousins sat dangerously on the top deck as the small boat was escorted to open South China Sea waters.

Once alone at sea, two pirate boats carrying thirty Thailan pirates attacked the fleeing ship. Every passenger was robbed, and the pirates separated the men from the women with intentions of rape. Suddenly, a mother holding her baby leaped onto the pirate ship. Since she spoke Thai, the captain was sympathetic and they didn't harm the women. They did, however, damage the engine before leaving, not allowing them to continue on their journey. The ship's mechanic tearfully labored for hours, fearing for all passengers and for his family on board.

Over the next five nights, they continued to be targeted by more Thai pirates. On one of these episodes, a pirate was swinging a sword over his head, threatening to behead people if they didn't obey. Thanh was standing right next to the pirate and was preparing to jump overboard, but stopped when order was obtained.

They had lost hope of surviving when a large white ship marked “Prospekta Bremen” spotted them. The West Germany R&D ship's captain and crew recognized how desperate they were and agreed to let everyone on board. The number of passengers packed into the tiny boat surprised the captain. Within twenty-four hours, all 517 survivors had consumed every edible supply the “Prospekta Bremen” contained. Arrangements were telegraphed to an oil tanker to take them to a UN HRC refugee camp on Pulau Tengah Island, Malaysia.

Negotiations continued for a few months, as many countries rejected refugees. Finally in October of 1979, Thanh was accepted by the USA, as his parents and siblings had been residents in America since 1975. Thanh enrolled in the Minneapolis Technical College and an ESL school and became an Electronics Technician.

“Every day of my life since my escape and rescue, I say thanks to the West German captain, crew, and their ship the “Prospekta Bremen.” They gave me back the miracle of my life.” –Thanh H. Vu