

**Hmong of Germany:
Preliminary Report on the Resettlement of Lao Hmong Refugees in Germany**

By

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ABSTRACT AND INTRODUCTION

This paper briefly describes the resettlement of Lao Hmong refugees in Germany since the fall of Laos in 1975. Data for this paper were collected during my two visits² to the Hmong community of Gammertingen in southern Germany. Although, it has been known that there are Lao Hmong refugees living in Germany, literature about their resettlement in academic journals and the western media has been nonexistent. Therefore, information about their population, social, educational and economic status has not been available. While serving in the U.S. Army, I was fortunate to be stationed in Germany and had several opportunities to visit and interact with this isolate Hmong community. Therefore, I would like to share what little information I have gathered about this forgotten Hmong community. This paper provides a preliminary report on the resettlement process, population, social, educational and economic status of this community. Data were collected primarily through informal direct interviews with the head of household from four families³ of the original five families that resettled in Germany.⁴ As of the writing of this paper, there is no other known Hmong community in Germany other than this Gammertingen Hmong community.

THE JOURNEY

The Hmong residing in Germany all came from the province of Sayaboury, Laos and were interned at the Nam Yao refugee camp in northeast Thailand. From the Nam Yao refugee camp, they applied for resettlement to Argentina.

¹ **Disclaimer:** The opinions expressed in this paper do not represent that of the United States Department of Defense, Department of the Army, or any institution or organization. The opinions are that of the author as a private citizen.

² My initial visit was from August 31 to September 1, 2002. I went back on my second visit from 9-11 November 2002.

³ Interviews during my two visits were with Mr. Xai Khue Lor (*Xaiv Khwb Lauj*), Chang Teng Xiong (*Tsaav Teev Xyooj*), Seng Lee Cha (*Xeev Lis Tsab*), and Chia Teng Xiong (*Txiav Teem Xyooj*).

⁴ Data collected from the Hmong community have not been verified with official German government. Thus all information was taken at face value from the Hmong community. Therefore, information presented here represents only the Hmong perspectives.

A Detour

In November 1979, they were granted entry to Argentina and were on their way there when things fell apart. At the last minute, right before boarding their flight to Argentina at the Bangkok International Airport, the Argentine government had a change of heart and refused to let them on the plane for no apparent plausible explanation. The only official explanation expressed at the airport of why they couldn't get on the plane was due to medical problems experienced by the families. They were transported back to the transit camp. Once reaching the transit camp, however, there were no further medical checkups or treatments for any of the families. Therefore, the official explanations at the airport were merely a face saving for the Argentine government.

The refugees were told at the transit camp that since the Argentinean government no longer wanted them, they would be sent back to Nam Yao refugee camp. The families were preparing for the return trip back to the Nam Yao refugee camp when they received word that if they wanted to they could resettle in Germany. Apparently, the German government was willing to take all of those refugee families that were bumped off the Argentina trip as a one-time special case. The only other alternative to Germany was heading back to the Nam Yao refugee camp and taking their chances again at applying for resettlement in other third world countries. After considering their alternatives, the five families opted for Germany rather than heading back to the Nam Yao refugee camp. Of those families that got bumped from the Argentina resettlement plan, there were five other Lao families that were in the same situation as that of the Hmong families. The five Lao families also opted for Germany. Thus, in the end, ten families consisting of five Hmong and five Lao families made the unexpected trip together to Germany.

Germany

On November 19, 1979, the ten refugee families reached Germany. They were placed at a refugee camp near Stuttgart in southern Germany for about two weeks while the government looked for sponsorship. The refugees' resettlement program in Germany was unlike that of the U.S. where the refugees have sponsors in place to support them. Germany had no individual, church or association to sponsor and help the Hmong families settle in. Basically, the German government was unprepared to receive the Hmong and Lao refugees. The initial German government plan was to split the five families and scatter them throughout Germany. Even with limited Lao language skills,⁵ they pleaded their case with the Thai-German social worker to keep the five Hmong families together. Fortunately, the German government was receptive to their request and kept the families together. After two weeks in the refugee camp, the local government of the town of Gammertingen was willing to take the five families for resettlement.

Gammertingen, Germany

Gammertingen is a small town of approximately 6,000 people, located in the state of Baden-Wurttemberg, Germany. It is nestled at the foothills of southern Germany close to the borders of Switzerland and Austria. It is approximately 60 miles south of Stuttgart. The local government of Gammertingen converted a local hotel into an apartment complex to accommodate all of the newly arrived refugee's families. For the next 8 months, the local government sent two social workers to teach the Hmong families rudimentary German in the basement of the apartment complex and perform other services (i.e., health care needs, social, and educational needs of the children, etc). One of the social workers was a Thai-German that was able to converse with the Hmong families in Thai. After eight months of rudimentary

⁵ Only 2 people out of the five families (23 people altogether) speak Laotian. The rest speak Hmong only.

German language training, the men of the families found employment and social services ceased. They were on their own from this period onward.

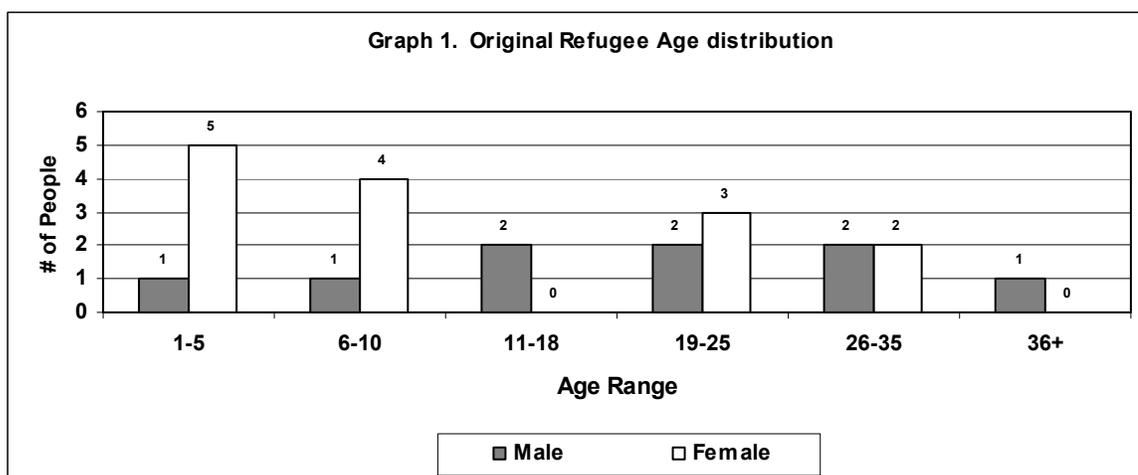
GAMMERTINGEN HMONG COMMUNITY

Original Families – November 1979

There were five original Hmong families that came to Germany as refugees in November 1979. The clan distributions consisted of 2-Xiong (*Xyooj*) families and one family each for the Lor (*Lauj*), Cha or Chang (*Tsab los Tsaab*) and Vang (*Vaj or Vaaj*). The family structure is depicted in table 1 and 2 and age distribution in graph 1.

#	Family	M	F	Total
1	Family #1	1	5	6
2	Family #2	2	3	5
3	Family #3	2	2	4
4	Family #4	2	2	4
5	Family #5	2	2	4
Total		9	14	23
(%)		39%	61%	
M= Male F= Female				

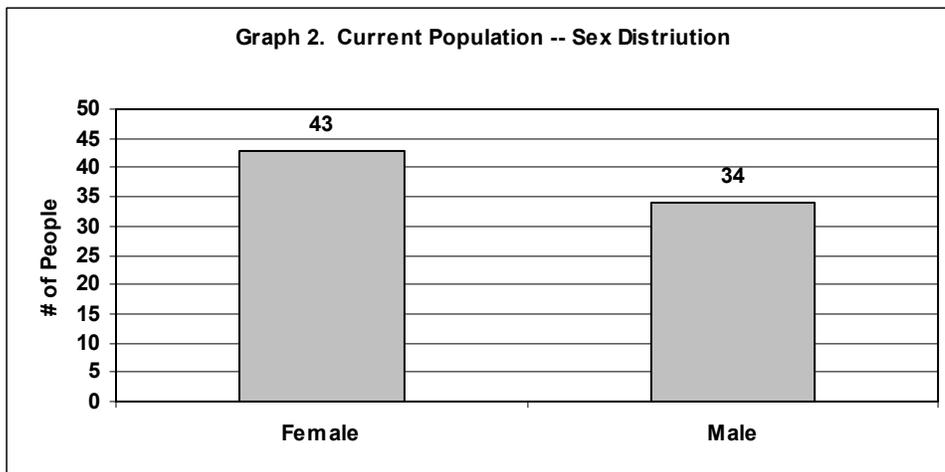
D	S	GD	H	W	Br	Si	Total
4			1	1			6
1			1	1	1	1	5
1			1	1	1		4
	1		1	1		1	4
	1	1	1	1			4
6	2	1	5	5	2	2	23
D= Daughter S= Son GD= Granddaughter H= Husband W= Wife Br= Brother Si= Sister							

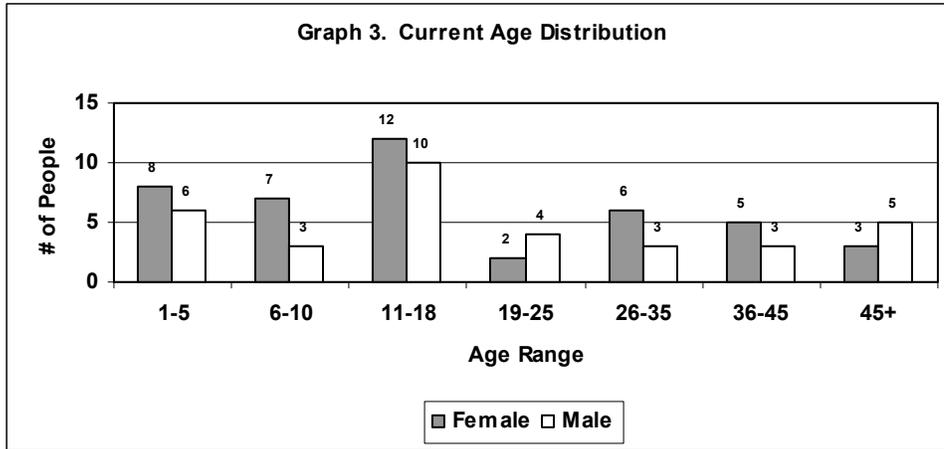


The data show that the original five families consisted of 23 people with a range between 4 to 6 people per family for an overall average of 4.6 people per family. The female-to-male ratio was 1.56 or 14 (61%) females and 9 (39%) males. Graph 1 shows that the five original families were a relatively young population. Virtually, all the people were 35 years or younger and 13 people (57%) were 18-year or younger.

Growth of the community

From the initial five families of 23 people, the Hmong population has grown to a peak of 16 families with a total population of 92 people for an average 5.8 people per family. However, due to death and emigration to other countries, the current population as of November 2002 was reduced to 14 families and 77 people (see Graph 2 & 3.). The average number of people per family is 5.5 and the average number of children per family is 4.4.





The increase in population is not due entirely to the direct growth of the original five families. There are several sources that have contributed to this growth and they are briefly touched on here.

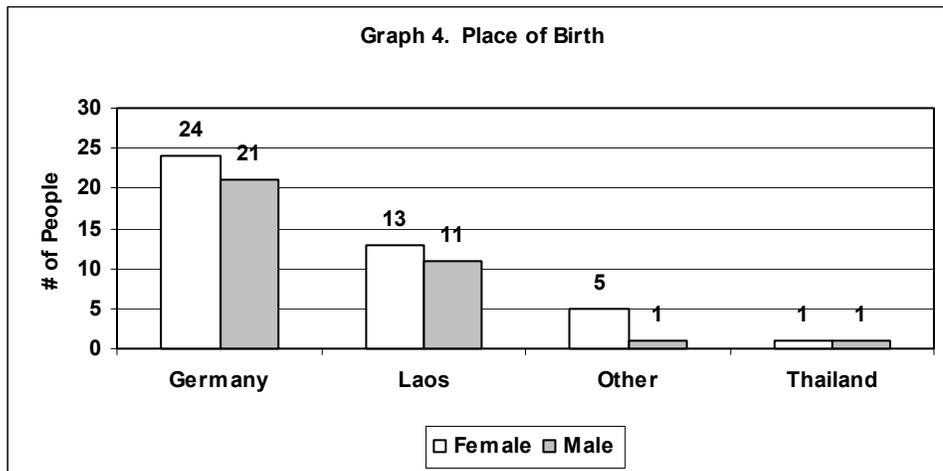
Two people came to Germany originally as students sent by the government of the Lao PDR to study in the former country of East Germany. These two students elected to remain in Germany when the two Germanys (East and West) reunited into one nation in 1990. They later went back to Laos and Thailand, one to Laos and the other to Thailand, to marry and then brought their wives back to Germany. Their families have grown to a total of 4 and 5 people each.

The third Hmong family to join the small growing Hmong community came from Argentina. A Hmong individual came to be reunited with his father and younger brother. Originally, he had gone to Argentina first and his father along with his younger brother and daughter were supposed to join him there. However, as previously discussed, Argentina had a change of heart at the last minute which ultimately split his family with half going to Germany and the other to Argentina. Rather than trying to get his family to join him in Argentina, he moved to Germany in 1991.

The last Hmong family to join the Gammertingen Hmong community was a family of four people that came to Germany in 1992 as refugees from the refugee camp in Thailand. One of the original five families acted as a sponsor for this sixth refugee family. This family, however, stayed only 6 years and then moved to the United States in 1998.

Birth

The birthplace of the 77 Hmong still living in Germany is depicted in graph 4. There were 45 (58.44%) people that were born in Germany. This is an increase close to 200% over the original 23 people. Five people, out of the 45 German-born Hmong, were born to Hmong mothers and German fathers.



Death

There has only been one death since the Hmong came to Germany. A baby boy was stillborn. Therefore, in terms of mortality, this community has not truly had a death and dying experience, for the Hmong's funeral dealing with a stillborn is vastly different than that of a child or adult death. With only one death, there is insufficient data to analyze the death pattern

of this community. However, remarkable as it is, this trend of limited deaths will change. As the community continues to grow, birth and death will be a part of this community. If nothing else, deaths due to natural cause (old age) will eventually be a part of this community, for the parents of this community are getting older. The data shows that at least 5 people are between the ages of 50 to 60.

Marriage

There have been a total of 18 marriages since the Hmong came to Germany. In terms of population, marriage is both a gain and loss to the community. For this Hmong community, the losses outweigh that of the gains. For the 18 marriages, ten of those involved have moved away to other countries; 5 to the United States, 2 to France and 3 to French Guyana. Of the 8 marriages that remain in Germany, three are Hmong women who have married German men and the rest are marriages between Hmong-Hmong. The three marriages of Hmong-to-German, are exogamous, and are considered by some a loss to the Hmong community.

Employment and Housing

All of the husbands are employed while all the wives are fulltime housewives taking care of the children. This means that at least one member from each of the remaining 14 families has a full-time job. Additionally, there are several unmarried children who also hold full-time jobs while others are in semi-vocational school and part-time job training while attending high school. The average salary is around €10.50⁶ per hour. The annual income range is €18,000 to €27,000 with an average of €22,000 per year.

The employment types are basically low wage factory jobs such as leatherwork, metal/machinist, assembly, local government sanitation worker, and highway construction. One

⁶ The average exchange rate between the US dollar and European Euro at the time of the writing of this paper is approximately \$1= €1.

twenty-three year old male is a staff sergeant in the German Army. The students in part-time training are in the legal assistance and dental hygienist fields. Whether or not these students will pursue the jobs they are currently training in remains to be seen.

Although there is no welfare system like that of the U.S. where the whole family receives financial assistance, the German government does provide financial assistance to all her citizens in the form of child support. Children under the age of 18 received a certain amount of financial assistance. The amount of financial assistance depends on the number of children under the age of 18 that a family has.⁷ This financial assistance allows for the Hmong mothers to stay at home and be a full-time mothers and housekeepers.

Six (43%) families had purchased their own home while the rest were still renting. This ability to purchase homes is related to the stability of the jobs held. With the exception of only a few younger Hmong who recently joined the work force, the older Hmong have held their jobs for 10 years or more. Once hired, the jobs are pretty much secure until retirement. There were only two to three people that have experienced a change of jobs twice. The rest have been at the same job ever since they were hired.

Educational Status

Education is universally available to all people. However, reaching the top in the German educational system is rather difficult. Students are initially separated after the fifth grade for their academic abilities. For those that have the potential to go on to university level, they are put into a more academically challenging preparatory high school. And those that are average, continue on the normal track until their 10th grade. After finishing 10th grade, the student will choose a profession and start part-time job training while finishing high school (13th grade). It is this job training that the student will most likely do for the rest of his or her life.

⁷ For example, a family that has 4 children received approximately €540 to €600 per month.

To be accepted to a university, the student must be a high school graduate from an academically challenging preparatory high school. This requirement has prevented the Hmong youth in Germany from going on to university. Of all the Hmong youth, there has only been one student that has qualified to go on to the university level. However, this person elected not to pursue post-secondary education.

Religious Experience

All of the Gammertingen Hmong families have converted to the Christian faith, specifically the Christian Missionary Alliance (CMA), either in Laos or at the refugee camp in Thailand. Although, there is no Hmong ordained pastor or church, every Sunday, the small community gathers at Mr. Xai Khue Lor's (*Xaiv Khwb Lauj*) house to celebrate church service. Mr. Lor, although, he is not an ordained minister, normally performs the service and is basically the spiritual leader for the community. Once or twice a year, the Gammertingen Hmong made trips over to France to join the larger Hmong CMA community in celebrating Christmas and revival retreats.

Communication to the Outside World

Within a few months after reaching Gammertingen, Germany, the community members were able to make contact with the Hmong in Strasbourg, France. With time, they were able to establish communication to the rest of the Hmong communities in France and extending to French Guyana, United States, and Argentina and back to Thailand and Laos. More importantly, they were able to establish contact with Hmong students within Germany and were successful in persuading them to join the small community.

With a growing population of eligible marriageable girls, Hmong from France frequently visit this community looking for prospective brides. Prospective grooms come from as far away

as the United States, Thailand and Laos. Additionally, U.S. Hmong serving in the U.S. military have come into contact with this community while stationed in Germany. Of the five marriages to U.S. Hmong, two are to U.S. Hmong military service members.

FUTURE OUTLOOK

The future outlook for the Gammertingen Hmong is unknown at the present. However, the fear that the population will slowly die out is a thought that is on the minds of the elder Hmong of this community. Two factors that will likely contribute to the death of this community that can be readily seen are marriage and emigration.

As the girls come of marriageable age, they will marry Hmong from other countries (i.e., U.S., France, and French Guyana) and move to live with their husbands. As in any multicultural society, members of the smallest ethnic community are more likely to marry out of their ethnic group. Moreover, the female-to-male ratio is 1.26 or 43 (56%) females and 34 (44%) males. These factors are likely to mean that many Hmong women and men will eventually marry non-Hmong, most likely to members of the mainstream group, such as German men and women. For these marriages of Hmong-to-German persons, the prospect of upbringing their children to be Hmong looks bleak and there is a fear that they will eventually become a loss to the Hmong community. For the Hmong men, they too will follow the same path as the girls. For, which Hmong girl in her right mind will want to marry a boy from this isolated community and move here when they can stay where they are, surrounded by a larger Hmong community. The data has shown that out of 18 marriages, only four (22%) marriages were a true gain to the community while the rest were losses.

As the parents of these children grow old themselves and can no longer take care of themselves, they too will eventually move to other countries following their children. Thus, in the end, the community will slowly lose its members and eventually die out.

In terms of education and employment, the future looks bleak. Who knows when the Hmong in Germany will eventually be able to go to the university? For almost 23 years, there has not been a university graduate in this community. With a lack of higher education, the prospect for this community to move up in socio-economic status will be limited for years to come.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCES AND OBSERVATIONS

Hospitality

The hospitality that my family and I received from this community is reminiscent of what I have experienced in the traditional Hmong villages in Laos. Without any family ties or prior meetings between my family and this community, they have welcomed us with open arms and warmth that my family has not received since my days back in Laos. We were invited to have lunches and dinners from one family to the next until we couldn't eat nor drink anymore. We exchanged news and participated in church services together. When we left the community to go back home we were sent off by half of the community. My family's visit to this community was truly an experience that we will cherish for the rest of our lives.

Language Maintenance

The maintenance of the Hmong language among the younger Hmong of this community is surprisingly good. With our limited ability to speak the German language, we were able to effectively communicate with all the younger Hmong of this community using the Hmong language. Like the many Hmong youth in America and France, who speak Hmong with

distinctive American and French accents, the German Hmong youth also pronounce Hmong words with a distinctive German accent.

From casual observation, the maintenance of the Hmong language among the Hmong youth of Germany is far superior to that of those in France. When we have visited Hmong communities around Paris, France on multiple occasions, to participate in the Hmong New Year celebrations and private functions, we have only been able to communicate with the Hmong youth of France in the Hmong language about 10% of the time as compared to an almost 100% rate with Hmong youth in Germany that are able to speak Hmong. Whether this trend of language maintenance among the Hmong youth of Germany continues in the future is unclear and is a concern to the parents.

This is only a preliminary report on the Hmong community in Germany. What I have presented here is what I have observed and gathered through informal interviews with the community members. I did not apply any race relations or minority-majority adaptation models to this community simply for the fact that this is only a brief introduction paper on this community. A more comprehensive study and analysis of this community is needed. Even without following a scientific data collection method and without validating the data with the official German government, I am confident that what I have presented in this paper reflects the experience of the Gammertingen Hmong community.

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