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"Negotiating Resettlement": Some Concluding Thoughts

Peter Gatrell*

Abstract: »Das Verhandeln von Umsiedlungen. Einige abschließende Bemerkungen«. In this article, I take the opportunity to discuss some recent work on the history of population displacement, including the valuable work represented in this *HSR Special Issue*, with a particular focus on the situation of displaced persons and refugees in Europe in the aftermath of the Second World War. Here, I concentrate on the interaction of multiple actors in the post-war international refugee regime and then turn to some specific issues in relation to the confidential case files of the UNHCR compiled between 1951 and 1975. This allows me a few final reflections on the extent to which digital methods can support research and dissemination as well as the wealth of material at the disposal of any historian who wishes to study the mainsprings of mass population displacement, the management practices and policies of the state, the dynamics of the international refugee regime, the role of activists and relief workers, and not least the responses of refugees who navigated the dangerous waters of displacement, who were caught up in the myriad processes of categorisation, and who encountered officials who had the power to determine their prospects.

Keywords: Population displacement, refugee regimes, refugees, displaced persons, Second World War, forced migration.

In very broad terms, the articles in this *HSR Special Issue* engage with issues of power in relation to refugees and displaced persons – the myriad forms of power, by whom it is exercised, and to what extent and how far refugees might contest it. This may seem an obvious point to make, but it bears repeating that the 20th century in general witnessed the exercise of power by states in Europe and beyond that engaged in mass population displacement for punitive or prophylactic reasons and that continued to claim to ultimate sovereign control over the admission of refugees.¹ Many examples of this claim have come to light during and after both world wars, in Europe and beyond.

The scale and consequences of population displacement are becoming better well known, even if the statistical record can be confusing to interpret, partly because of the difficulties in collecting data at the time as well as uncertainties

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¹ Several classic works by contemporary scholars retain their value for historians of Europe who are interested in these issues, including Simpson (1939); Schechtman (1946); Kulischer (1948); and Frings (1952).

around the classification of people who were on the move. The European dimensions, in particular the management and repatriation of DPs under the auspices of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) and their resettlement by the International Refugee Organization (IRO), have been re-examined in the light of new archival research (Salvatici 2012, 428-51; Cohen 2012, Boehling et al. 2015; Boehling, Urban, and Bienert 2014; Balint 2021). It should be remembered that not all post-war refugee-like situations in Europe fell within the mandate of international organisations, specifically in the case of ethnic Germans forced from their homes in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romanian and elsewhere (Beer 2011; Kossert 2008; Plamper 2019).

It is also important to remind ourselves that the reverberations of wartime displacement were felt further afield, notably in East Asia as a result of the prolonged and catastrophic Japanese occupation of China and the ensuing civil war (Lary 2010). Fresh conflicts and the formation of new states in South Asia and the Middle East also produced enormous numbers of refugees (Gatrell 2013).² As in Europe, these upheavals had profound repercussions for the migration policies of governments at the very time when old polities were being replaced by new states and existing states were dealing with the consequences of wartime occupation and the pressing demands of economic reconstruction. In the case of India and Pakistan, for example, the scale of displacement posed enormous challenges of short-relief, but also involved both states in formulating policies of border control, property rights, and the resettlement of refugees.³

However, the exercise of power over refugees was (and is) not confined to the state. The operation of the international refugee regime was made possible by other actors too. One thinks not only of the capacity of inter-governmental organisations – the League of Nations after the First World War, the IRO and UNHCR after the Second World War – but also of the voluntary agencies (non-governmental organizations) with which they partnered in order to assist and protect refugees. The exercise of these functions in many instances demonstrated the authority which refugees were expected to obey.⁴ Again, this is emphatically not a purely European story: although the international refugee regime had a Eurocentric bias, the refugee regime had important regional and local incarnations (Chimni 1998, 350-74; Peterson 2012, 326-43).

In this concluding chapter, I take the opportunity to discuss some recent work on the history of population displacement, including the valuable work represented in this *HSR Special Issue*, with a particular focus on the situation of displaced persons (DPs) and refugees in Europe in the aftermath of the Second

² For a guide to specialist scholarship, see Madokoro, Lynn-Ee-Ho, and Peterson (2015, 430-8).

³ This is a vast topic. Key contributions include Zamindar (2007); Sen (2018); and Samaddar (2003).

⁴ On the international refugee regime, see Skran (1995); Loescher (2001). On power relations, see Harrell-Bond (1999, 136-68).

World War. New work on these issues is appearing all the time.⁵ Here I concentrate on the interaction of multiple actors in the post-war international refugee regime and then turn to some specific issues in relation to the confidential case files of UNHCR compiled between 1951 and 1975: this resource is very extensive and contains a wealth of information on the claims for recognition made by refugees. This will allow me a few final reflections on the extent to which digital methods can support research and dissemination.

When the victorious Allies entered German territory, they confronted a large, multinational population of DPs who had been seized from their homes and compelled to work for the Nazi war effort. In order to prepare the way for their repatriation, millions of DPs were moved into assembly centres that quickly became known as DP camps. As is well known, a significant minority refused to be repatriated, and many of these were assisted with their resettlement to a third country (Seipp 2013; Holmgren 2020, 335-52; van Laak 2017; Dellios 2017; Bailkin 2018). This, too, forms part of a broader history of population displacement and refugee regimes in the 20th century. In addition to research on DP camps in Europe, we now know a good deal more about refugee camps as “in-between spaces” in countries of “temporary” asylum, and what their management tells us about power relations. To take just one example among many, an excellent recent study of Vietnamese refugees in 1975 not only draws attention to the difficult journeys of those who escaped from Vietnam but also examines the power wielded by host states in South-East Asia as they sought to manage the arrival of refugees. Many refugees found that a place of “temporary” protection turned into a lengthy period of incarceration before they were earmarked either for resettlement or repatriation (Lipman 2020). Rass and Tames point out that not all refugees were confined to camps, but this did not necessarily imply that they escaped bureaucratic scrutiny, particularly when they had to make themselves known to officials or relief workers (Rass and Tames 2020, introduction to this *HSR Special Issue*).

Here, as in other instances including of course Europe, one crucial component of the refugee regime was the determination of eligibility, and hence the accumulation by various means – usually intrusive – of bureaucratic documentation about individuals who were applying for recognition under the mandate of the IRO and later on the UNHCR. It is helpful to be reminded by *Christoph Rass* and *Ismee Tames* that the resulting workload was enormous. To be sure, IRO and UNHCR officials received training and guidance in the form of eligibility manuals, but the very existence of these manuals pointed to the need to help officials deal with the voluminous annual caseload, with the additional aim of establishing precedent (IRO 1947, 1-154).

⁵ Important edited collections that give a good flavour of work in refugee history include Pannay and Virdee (2011); Reinisch and White (2011); Frank and Reinisch (2017); and Lässig and Jansen (2020).

Not everything, of course, can be reduced to power relations. We are beginning to know more about the myriad ways in which refugees negotiated the international refugee regime at an international, national, and local level. The regime was a work in progress, and this meant that refugees could develop repertoires of knowledge and practice. In this respect, Rass and Tames are absolutely right to insist that we need to keep ideas of “being” and “being recognised” in the same analytical frame. I return to this point later.

We also need to take account of the power embodied in the archive and its guardians. The modern state devotes considerable resources to national, regional, and local archives, and of course also plays a key role in decisions as to what is to be collected and preserved, and to whom access is granted. One of the many virtues of the foregoing essays is that it obliges us to confront issues about the archives of displacement, including asking questions as to who is responsible for creating and maintaining the archival record. Some non-governmental and faith-based organisations maintain excellent archival collections – one thinks of the American Friends Service Committee, the National Catholic Welfare Conference, and the World Council of Churches. Others, such as the Tolstoy Foundation, retain extensive holdings, but they are difficult to access.⁶ Some collections have been dispersed or destroyed. Other archival sources relating to refugee relief work can turn up in unexpected places (Daleziou 2013, 49-65).⁷

The plight of children and the challenges of formulating appropriate relief measures represent a distinct strand of enquiry. A striking feature of the contribution by *Christian Höschler* (2020, in this issue) is the micro-historical study of Bad Aibling Children’s Village, which provides him with the opportunity not only to remind us that day to day practical considerations as well as a heavy workload loomed large in the accounts that fieldworkers left behind, but also to examine the relationship between relief agencies and unaccompanied child refugees against the backdrop of tensions between the head office (initially under UNRRA, then the IRO) and relief workers in the field, many of whom were thought to lack sufficient training. All of this complicates the story of power relations. Höschler’s case study can be set alongside other recent studies of the attention that the refugee regime devoted at this post-1945 juncture as well as in other contexts to the management of displaced children (Baron 2017; Burgard 2020; Zahra 2011).

As already indicated, one important issue relates to the repatriation of DPs. Much attention has been devoted to the process of arranging the repatriation of DPs in Eastern Europe and to the refusal of many DPs to repatriate (Bernstein

⁶ For a preliminary indication of the holdings of its archives in upstate New York, see Whittaker (2006, 49-70). Among other things, Whittaker points out that the archives contain 130,000 individual cards that were originally created to trace and assist Russian refugees.

⁷ For the records of the Athens American Relief Committee, which worked alongside the Anglo-American Relief Committee in Thessaloniki.

2019).⁸ However, it is often forgotten that the repatriation of DPs to Western Europe was by no means straightforward (Humbert 2016, 606-34). For this reason, *Regina Grüter* and *Anne van Mourik* have performed a very valuable service in explaining the political and administrative challenges and bureaucratic rivalries (such as between the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Netherlands Red Cross) in arranging for the return of more than half a million Dutch former forced labourers (Grüter and van Mourik 2020, in this issue). As they say, the situation was complicated by the presence of Soviet subjects on Dutch territory whose repatriation was a key demand of Stalin. Of particular interest is their finding that considerable numbers made their own way home – a useful reminder that refugees sometimes behave in “spontaneous” ways that do not correspond to planned provision. But not everyone could exercise this option.

As already mentioned, the post-1945 international refugee regime was selective rather than universal. As mentioned already, one manifestation of this selectivity was the neglect outside Germany of the dire situation of ethnic Germans expelled from East-Central and South-eastern Europe under the terms of the Potsdam agreement designed to inflict collective punishment upon them irrespective of age or occupation. In his essay, *Jannis Panagiotidis* (2020, in this issue) advances an important argument about the need for scholars to interrogate the sharpness of the categorical and legal distinction between the expellee population and DPs, and how some expellees sought to pass themselves off as non-German in order to join the queue of those seeking to emigrate. Drawing upon a considerable quantity of files held by the International Tracing Service (ITS Arolsen) and internet databases, he demonstrates how those who were denied recognition by the IRO – often after intensive scrutiny – subsequently exploited diasporic and confessional connections to secure resettlement. The US-based Mennonite Central Committee was particularly significant in this regard. This seems to me a model example of how a fresh conceptualization of the “problem” and the triangulation of source material can provide a better understanding of the operation of the post-war regime.⁹

One aspect of displacement relates to late colonial and post-colonial migrations. The “return” of military personnel and government officials to the European metropole is only now gaining the attention they deserve. The article by *Peter Romijn* is an excellent illustration of this fresh body of research (Romijn 2020, in this issue). As he explains, returning Dutch soldiers – those who had spent a lengthy period of time in the Dutch East Indies, as well as those who had only recently been sent to “liberate” Indonesia and to “restore order” at war’s end – asked themselves where they belonged. Were they soldiers, veterans, or

⁸ On the situation in regard to Yugoslavia, see Corsellis and Ferrar (2005).

⁹ Research on long-term patterns of migration among Mennonites and other groups is being carried out by Dr Kat Hill, Birkbeck College, University of London. See <<https://www.kathill.co.uk/global-faiths>> (Accessed 9 October 2020). On disguise, see the discussion of “file-selves” (a term coined by philosopher Rom Harré), in Fitzpatrick (2005, 14-8).

“repatriates”? How did they interact with the civilian population, whether indigenous or of Dutch heritage? The answer, in part, is that before their departure they had already inflicted further suffering on Indonesian civilians who had suffered years of Japanese occupation; some of these military veterans found this brutalisation difficult to renounce when they returned to the Netherlands (Immler, and Seagliola 2020, 1-28).¹⁰ In the short term, their homeward journey was characterised by cavalier treatment inflicted by the American officers who supervised the troop ships that took them home and was made worse by the humiliating sense of defeat. It is important to add that this “colonial return migration” included another dimension, in the shape of the “repatriation” of Moluccan troops who had backed the Dutch against the Indonesian freedom fighters. Furthermore, we are gaining an additional grasp of the broader history of how decolonisation translated into the displacement of former colonial officials and settlers (Eyerman and Sciortino 2020; Smith 2003; Buettner 2016; Ballinger 2020).

In relation to refugees, millions of people became the subject of bureaucratic surveillance and thus entered the extensive documentary record. But they did not enter the record in a straightforward manner. As we have seen, they might try to disguise their nationality, but that is not the only dimension of the tactics that refugees and DPs adopted in order to maximise their prospects of resettlement. *Sebastian Huhn* points out that DPs who resettled in Latin America might present themselves as skilled workers rather than as middle-class professionals, because prospective host states had need of the former, not the latter (Huhn 2020, in this issue). He shows what results can be obtained from the close scrutiny not only of the IRO’s “Application for Assistance” forms (the CM/1-Forms), but also passenger lists, in terms of understanding their ethnic origin and social profile. He thereby paints a more nuanced picture of the people whom the Venezuelan government eventually admitted (the difficulties that they faced subsequently emerge in the confidential case files of UNHCR). Huhn’s essay sits alongside an extensive and growing body of scholarship on resettlement in third countries, notably Australia, where we now have a clearer grasp of the various actors involved in the process, refugees and DPs included (Damousi 2012, 297-313; Balint 2015, 124-42; Edele and Fitzpatrick 2015, 7-16; Persian 2016, 125-42).

Much remains to be done, but this special issue is an excellent starting point to think about the kind of extant archival material that relates to the history of refugees, and how the archival record can be interpreted to generate a fuller and more nuanced refugee history. These considerations need to be set alongside the archive in general. Without getting involved here in debates around materiality and emotion – issues that have been extensively debated by scholars such as Arlette Farge and others (Farge 2013; Steedman 2001, 1159-80) – these articles raise important issues about the process of archiving the impact of population

¹⁰ A recent study of colonial-era violence in Indonesia suggests that memories of massacre constituted a shared or “entangled” trauma for Dutch veterans and for Indonesian survivors and their descendants alike.

displacement, the operations of the refugee regime, and the experiences of refugees.¹¹ It connects to questions of power, such as the power to determine what material is deemed worthy of record and preservation, and power over the dispersal, disappearance, or destruction of written archives. In other words, another aspect of refugee history is the history of decisions about archiving the testimony of refugees and other actors, or not.¹²

Frank Wolff raises important questions about non-state efforts to protect the heritage of the community that was the greatest target of persecution (Wolff 2020, in this issue). He terms this “collective cultural rescue” and pays close attention to the activities of the famous General Jewish Labor Bund, commonly known in short form as the Bund. It is part of an argument that seeks to move the discussion beyond pure abjection and to consider enterprising efforts by refugees including diasporic groups to preserve material objects and linguistic heritage as part of an assertion of their “agency.” Yiddish, for example, was a threatened language not only because of the Holocaust but because of the stance adopted by the Zionist intelligentsia. In this connection, it is worth considering also the enormous efforts by Palestinian refugees to recollect by means of memory books their presence on land from which they had been displaced and, furthermore, to sustain a kind of “surrogate re-population” (Slymovics 1998; Gatrell 2013, 143).¹³ This was social activity with a political purpose. We might also take into account the activities of the Russian Zemgor between the wars, which was somewhat more akin to the Jewish/Bund example, in so far as Russian exiles after 1917 quickly abandoned hopes of returning to their homeland (Manchester 2016, 70-91).¹⁴ Here, too, the accumulated archival material ended up in different locations.

Edwin Klijn rightly emphasises the scattered nature of archival holdings. His observations about the difficulty of navigating these holdings are very pertinent:

For many fields of interest, including war studies, a wealth of research data remains hidden in analogue formats in archival depots. Also, there are legal and ethical barriers that complicate research into collaboration and large-scale violence during World War II. For instance, privacy legislation restricts the possibility to open up collections with indices of person names. Even if legally allowed, many ALMs are very reluctant to release ethically sensitive data in

¹¹ Although not concerning refugees, Weld's article (2014) is an important to archives and state power. In the same vein, reflections on colonial and post-colonial archives include Allman (2013, 104-29); and Bailkin (2015, 884-99).

¹² On archival dispersal, see the blog post by Nick Underwood, April 2019, at <<https://migrantknowledge.org/2019/04/18/following-the-archives-migrating-documents-and-their-changing-meanings/>>. On plunder, see Sela (2018, 201-29); on destruction, see Anderson (2015, 142-60).

¹³ The phrase “surrogate re-population” belongs to Ghada Karmi.

¹⁴ On the Leeds Russian Archive, specifically the Zemgor collection, see <<https://explore.library.leeds.ac.uk/special-collections-explore/164110>> (Accessed 9 October 2020).

relation to collaboration, national socialism and fascism, perpetrators, etc. (Klijn 2020, 247, in this issue)

I have been acutely aware of this in my own research (see below). Klijn's suggestions for creating a timeline of individuals through "event modelling" are indeed promising, but as he says the issues around confidentiality and privacy can mean that the barriers are difficult to overcome, even assuming that the gatekeepers facilitate access to the researcher.

The sense of a dynamic archive emerges clearly in the article by *Filipp Strubbe* (2020, in this issue), who traces the evolution of the Belgian Public Safety Office and the Aliens Police, and the voluminous documentary records they generated, including encounters with the judiciary. He makes the important point that: "In short, refugees' files opened during the period between 1947 and early 1954 must be treated with caution, since they mostly reflect the administrative practices of the (former) archivists, instead of the actual migratory movements at the time" (86). It is also important to remember, as he says, that some refugees slipped in under the radar. All the same, this extensive surveillance now enables the historian to trace the multiple movements of foreigners including refugees who came and went, and to build up a picture of their social networks.

As Strubbe reminds us, the Belgian Foreign Ministry delegated responsibility for determining eligibility on to UNHCR officials. This is significant in research terms, because it multiplied the number of agencies that reported on and registered refugees and DPs, including around 22,000 DPs who were recruited to work in Belgian coal mines (replacing the 8,000 Soviet POWs who were forced to work during the Second World War) and refugees who came within the mandate of the IRO. He goes on to explain how the Hungarian refugee crisis in 1956 (when Belgium admitted around 7,000 Hungarian refugees) coincided with a shift in registration practices, in so far as the Belgian state now paid closer attention to the country of origin of those claiming refugee status and whether they intended to remain in Belgium or seek resettlement elsewhere.

The extraordinary potential of the Arolsen Archives, created from the digitized holdings of the International Tracing Service, emerges in *Henning Borggräfe's* contribution (2020, in this issue). He insists that we need to understand the history and purpose of the collections, including the process of registering DPs who found themselves in Germany at the end of the Second World War and whose status and future would be determined by the Allies (Borggräfe, Höschler, and Panek 2020). By 1947 this process was entrusted to the IRO, whose officials ruled on eligibility, that is who qualified for recognition as a refugee under its mandate and was thus eligible for potential resettlement to a third country, given that many of them were adamant about not returning to their homes in Poland, Latvia, Ukraine, and so on. One of the merits of Borggräfe's article is that he discusses the criteria that IRO eligibility officers took into account and also the variables that influenced the decisions taken by individual DPs. Nationality was a significant, but not the only, variable and, as he points

out, it was a contested category. In addition, we need to consider that age, marital status, occupation, qualifications, financial status, and so on determined the prospects of DPs. His article points to the diversity of experience among DPs, even when (as in the case of Spanish DPs) they might appear at first sight to have a great deal in common. Meanwhile, as Filipp Strubbe notes, “If the answers to this field may sometimes look a bit repetitive or ‘standardized’ during the 1950s, the replies [i.e., to questionnaires issued by UNHCR] become more personalized in the 1960s and 1970s, when refugees’ files sometimes contain detailed handwritten statements from the asylum applicants themselves attached to the standard forms” (87). My own work on UNHCR’s confidential case files indicates that such statements were already common practice in the 1950s.

GIS offers promising results in terms of enabling the visualization of resettlement, based upon the enormous volume of material on individuals that is held by the Arolsen Archives. Resettlement suggests a more or less straightforward journey from A to B, but many DPs embarked on complicated trajectories. In this connection, Borggräfe asks a very good question: “Were there connections between migration to certain countries at certain times and socio-biographical similarities of the DPs involved?” (298) The answers to this question will have important implications for debates about the agency of refugees.

Olaf Berg (2020, in this issue) meanwhile makes a stimulating statement of the challenges and opportunities presented by a mixed methods approach that takes full advantage of new and evolving digital humanities is worth quoting in full: “Paradoxically, the use of computational technologies that reduce complex social interactions to a calculable constellation of data ideal for algorithmic processing can stimulate reflection upon the interrelation between knowledge production, the medium of that knowledge production, and its representation” (298).

I am attracted by this invitation to greater reflexivity on the part of scholars who work with individual case files and who might doubt what conclusions can be drawn from a single file. Whether we look at a single file or try to combine hundreds, thousands, or even millions of files to generate big conclusions, a reflexive approach to knowledge production and representation should remain at the heart of what we do.

Let me finish by reflecting on one major repository and the issues that arise in analysing the contents. The Records and Archives division of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)¹⁵ in Geneva holds a vast archive including more than 23,000 individual case files that chronologically cover the mid-1950s until the early 1970s. The files themselves are contained in several hundred original binders, organised alphabetically by family name, in line with the original filing practices. I have at present sampled less than five per cent of the total with the aim of examining a cross-section of cases according to country of origin.

¹⁵ IC13858.

In working with this extensive material I recall a comment by the late Daša Drndić, who in her sprawling historical novel, published in English in 2013 under the title *Trieste*, described the enormous archive of the International Tracing Service in Bad Arolsen, Germany, in which “lurk unfinished stories, trapped fates, big and little personal histories, embodied histories [...] people huddled there who languish, ghost-like” (Drndić 2013, 246-7). I have begun to appreciate that many individual case files are tantalising: the paper trail comes to an end and the voices trail off, without any clear indication as to what happened to the “case.” The thrill of the chase, so to speak, often ends in frustration and disappointment, complicating my emotional response, albeit hardly in the same league as the frustration and disappointment that many refugees felt at the time. Like Jannis Panagiotidis, I have managed to locate some individuals after conducting an internet search, but my search has often been fruitless.

In terms of the materiality of the files, much of the first-person testimony comes in the form of handwritten or typed letters, translated where necessary (sometimes only in an abbreviated form), for example from Albanian, Hungarian, and even Esperanto. In addition, as might be expected, the files contain a lot of inter-agency correspondence and comment on the individual case. I also came across newspaper clippings and even magazine articles that publicised the plight of certain individuals. From time to time one comes across questionnaires and other standard templates, such as a formulaic “social history” or the results of medical inspections. Occasionally, perhaps not as often as might be expected, the files include photos. From time to time, refugees underlined a word or put an entire phrase in capital letters for emphasis. Ahmed T., an Algerian refugee, who wrote from Casablanca to UN General Secretary Dag Hammarskjöld in January 1960 asking for his help in getting medical treatment in a foreign clinic went a stage further. Having signed his letter he added “S.O.S.” in large capital letters; inside the letter “O” he pasted a small black and white photograph of his face for added dramatic effect, in the hope that those who read it would not ignore his appeal (UNHCR).¹⁶

There are issues around identity and identification. Sometimes, the files point to the difficulties that could be created – for refugees as well as for officialdom – in transliterating names from Russian and other languages. In some instances, this became absurd: was the individual concerned called Willy (or Willi) K., Vely C., Ali D., or Wille M.? In a rhetorical question in 1972, an official asked plaintively, “whether it is possible to ascertain the real name of this man?” He apparently held a passport that identified him as Ivan S., although UNHCR officials remained in the dark as to whether he had been born in Yalta, in a DP camp in Klagenfurt, or somewhere else. What was known for certain is that he had stowed away on a Norwegian merchant ship and was believed to be evading

¹⁶ IC13858.

justice in Turkey. He was evidently adept at covering his tracks and he vanished from the record (UNCHR).¹⁷

Let me give one example of a convoluted case where the UNHCR files are simultaneously rich and tantalizing. It concerns a Croatian woman, Hanny K., born in Yugoslavia in 1906, who sent two letters from Sweden to the IRO, one in June 1952 and the second to UNHCR in April 1954. Both letters were requests for help in obtaining a visa for admission to the United States. She pins her hopes on the fact that she had worked for the US Army in Austria at the end of the war. Writing in English, her first letter included the following biographical details:

I am a Yugoslav refugee born in 1906. I am Roman Catholic. My marriage to Viktor B. was cancelled for political reasons under the pressure of the Ustachis [sic]. According to the Ustacha, a member of the Greek Oriental Church must be a communist, but no Croatian would believe that we have been compelled to take up another religion for reasons of opportunity. My husband was divorced. The Catholic Church does not allow the marriage of a divorced person and civil marriage does not exist in Yugoslavia, we therefore had to change our religion. After all sorts of vexations, my husband was interned in a concentration camp in Croatia and I was sent to the Labour Service in Germany.

In January 1946 I began working with the US Army as a supervisor of the char-women. When the IRO started its activities in Vienna I reported immediately. My employment was not permanent and could only last as long as the occupation. I therefore wanted to emigrate to the USA. In November 1947 the IRO informed me that my request for a visa to the USA had been accepted by the American Consul and that I was put in the third category. But in November 1948 I was informed that I was only eligible for a limited assistance by the IRO. Why limited? Perhaps because I had a job and those living in camps and unemployed had a priority. However, many people who had a position emigrated from Vienna through the IRO. I finally accepted the limited assistance and received a certificate to this effect. I emigrated provisionally to Sweden where I accepted employment as a housekeeper. I thought I could emigrate more easily from this country but all my attempts failed. Further I lost the DP status on 1 January 1949. I left Austria 3 weeks too late (on 18.1.1949).

Affidavits are of no use to me. I am told that the Yugoslav quota is exhausted for the next 5 to 10 years. (People having relatives in the USA have a priority but I cannot rely on that and must remain in Sweden.)

Perhaps the IRO could redress the mistake I made when I accepted the limited assistance fearing to lose everything. I did not want to remain in Austria on account of the Russians. People were deported every day and I wanted to leave Vienna at all costs. Please help me, you must have my file in Geneva and you will see the reason why I acted in that way.

What stands out is her persistence and her keen grasp of rules and regulations. UNHCR forwarded her application to the National Catholic Welfare Conference, but the outcome left her disappointed. Hanny was advised that she “would not be eligible [to emigrate to the USA] under the Refugee Relief Act, because

¹⁷ IC11530.

she was firmly resettled in Sweden by IRO in 1949.” Her ex-husband’s fate is unknown, but an online search reveals that she married a Swedish man and lived in Sweden until her death in 1984.¹⁸

There are countless other instances in which refugees wrote as desperate supplicants who had exhausted all other avenues. An elderly Hungarian woman who had moved to Indonesia to join her sister who had married a Dutch doctor, wrote to explain that she had lived in Indonesia for nearly 30 years:

Since my arrival I never went back to Hongary [sic] during the last 28 years. During the Japanese occupation I was an internee together with most of the Europeans. After the war I was informed that all my relatives in Hungary were exterminated by the enemy and our properties confiscated by the communists. Being abroad so many years I automatically lost my Hungarian nationality. I must say that, after all the disappointments, I did not regret it and I even did not intend to go back.

Her sister needed to go to Holland for medical treatment, but “because I have no nationality and therefore cannot go with her. But for God’s sake I must go. I never had a job, was supported by my brother in law until his death on 20 September 1935 and since by my sister/widow. If my sister leaves, what am I to do?” The Dutch High Commission rejected her application for nationality in 1952, on the grounds that she should have applied within two years of the transfer of sovereignty. “To be honest, I am not but a poor old lady, knowing nothing of all this kind of regulations. From where should I know and who is interested enough in me to tell me?” UNHCR’s chief legal adviser Paul Weis got involved and wrote to a contact in the UN Technical Assistance Mission to Indonesia, to explain that “in the light of the particulars given in her letter, she is to be considered as a person coming within the competence of the Office of the UNHCR,” and should be provided with an Indonesian travel document and a Dutch entry visa.¹⁹

These and other case files disclose a multitude of diverse voices that register hope, desperation, bewilderment, anger, and determination on the part of refugees. The letters on file often express gratitude towards UNHCR, but also frustration and despair at their failure to get the response they hoped for from an institution that, for many of them, appeared, after they had exhausted all other avenues, to be their last resort. In short, they demonstrate the “power geometry” at work in the international refugee regime.²⁰

Ultimately, the files defy generalisation and stereotypes about the people who became the object of UNHCR attention. They tell of escape from the hazards of war, discrimination, and persecution. They are rich in stories told by people of diverse origin and background, with different attributes and capabilities. They point to the creation of a bureaucratic record and testify to the ways in which individuals were transformed into a “problem,” a “question,” or a “condition,”

¹⁸ IC3913.

¹⁹ IC11136. Unfortunately, the file gives no indication of the outcome.

²⁰ I have appropriated this term from Massey (1993, 59-69).

and perhaps became part of what Julia Morris terms a “refugee industry sector” (Morris 2021). I make no claim that the files are “representative” of what is sometimes called “the refugee experience,” although they are representative of UNHCR procedures and practices. I am more interested in how individual refugees understood and framed their experience of displacement and how they asserted and sought to establish claims for protection and assistance, often with admirable patience and determination.

For all the remarks on file about cases of successful resettlement and even a transformation in status, the files also tell stories of fragmented and fragile lives, of hopes abandoned or crushed, and of neglect and being discarded. There is also plenty here of failure: failure to achieve a satisfactory resolution of status and insecurity, as well as a failure to listen and engage fully with individuals beyond a superficial acknowledgement of their “case.” There are lots of missing pieces: stories that are untold because they are deemed to be superfluous or irrelevant, as well as loose ends and dead ends, tantalising mysteries that will probably never be solved. Countless pieces are missing because refugees chose or were forced to remain invisible. What does seem certain is that, although there are plenty of stories of successful resettlement, family reunion, or recompense, many refugees arrived empty-handed, so to speak, and were left with nothing.

In sum, there is a wealth of material at the disposal of the historian who wishes to study the mainsprings of mass population displacement, the management practices and policies of the state, the dynamics of the international refugee regime, the role of activists and relief workers, and not least the responses of refugees who navigated the dangerous waters of displacement, who were caught up in the myriad processes of categorisation, and who encountered officials who had the power to determine their prospects. I hope and expect that the illustrative examples and methodological approaches provided in this collection will provide further inspiration for historians of “refugee crises” in Europe and further afield.

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