

Reflection: 70 Years of Refugee Council

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The Seventieth Anniversary of the Refugee Council: Voluntary Action, Living Archives and Refugee Voices

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This issue of *Displaced Voices*, published during Refugee Week, reflects on the 70th anniversary of both the United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the establishment of the third sector organisations that were to become the Refugee Council. Our theme for this issue was: *Twentieth Century Histories of Civic Society Responses to Crises of Displacement*. Throughout these seven decades, the issues of refuge and displacement, and the challenges faced by those undertaking the migration journey, have continued to require an engaged response from third sector organisations, often filling the void left by the relative inaction of national governments. This article considers the key narratives located within this issue, whilst also exploring our role as the host archival repository of the Refugee Council. The anniversary is an opportunity to reflect on our work undertaking anti-oppressive, participatory and collaborative methods working directly with refugees, community groups and third-sector organisations.

There has been a long history of voluntary sector responses to situations of refugee and forced displacement within the UK setting, often co-existing with the expression of anti-refugee discourse and a mixed response from the ruling parties in Government during those particular moments. The Refugee Council is one of the primary not-for-profit organisations working with refugees and asylum seekers in the United Kingdom. The Refugee Council originated from two independent organisations, [British Council for Aid to Refugees](#) (BCAR) and the Standing Conference on Refugees (SCOR), which were both founded in 1951 following the [United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees](#). By the end of the Second World War, it was estimated that there were approximately 9.2million displaced peoples in Europe alone (Kushner and Knox, 1999, p. 43), leading to creation of the United Nations 1951 Convention. The most recent figures published by the UNHCR in 2020 suggest that there are 79.5 million displaced people worldwide (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2020, p. 1).

In light of debates around the current Hostile Environment policy and the New Plan for Immigration from the current Conservative Government in the UK it is interesting to consider the longer history of these policies. These negative approaches towards displaced persons are not new and are in evidence at the turn of the twentieth century with the introduction of the 1905 Aliens Act. In parliament at the time, as Kushner and Knox describe: "Other MPs referred to the pre-war period and how Britain had been flooded by the 'ne'er-do-wells and parasites of the world'; 'the muck, the rubbish, and the refuse of the Continent.'" (quoted in Kushner and Knox, 1999, p. 74). A policy of almost total exclusions of aliens, as refugees were then described, was introduced by the British Government following the end of the First World War

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under the Aliens Restrictions Act at the end of 1919, reflecting a continued anti-alienism and underlying xenophobia.

Historic hostility has been met with resistance by those who have sought to welcome refugees to Britain, including voluntary sector organisations. Successful support of displaced persons in Britain is in evidence from as early as the 1930s, with the inception of the Britain's Aid Spain Movement (BPSM) established primarily to support Basque refugees from the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939. BPSM came to be considered "the most widespread and representative mass movement in Britain since the mid-nineteenth century days of Chartism ... and the most outstanding example of international solidarity in British history." (quoted in Kushner and Knox, 1999, p. 106). The National Joint Committee for Spanish Refugees (NJCSR) was subsequently established on 6 January 1937 at the House of Commons and became an umbrella organisation for at least 150 different organisations. The inter-war period also saw a number of organisations established in response to the increase in refugees from the Nazi regime in Germany. Organisations included the Refugee Children's Movement, formerly the Movement for the Care of Children from Germany, and the Academic Assistance Council, later to become the Society for Protections of Science and Learning and now renamed as CARA, the Council for At-Risk Academics. AAC was founded in 1933 with the aim to support "university-teachers ... of whatever country, who, on grounds of religion, political opinions or "race" [who] are unable to carry on their work in their own country." (Kushner and Knox, 1999, p. 161).

The establishment of the British Council for Aid to Refugees (BCAR) and the Standing Conference on Refugees in 1951 as a response to the creation of the United Nations Convention on the Status of Refugees saw this voluntary work to support and resettle refugees arriving in Britain continue beyond the Second World War. The Refugee Council therefore has had a long history of involvement in the resettlement of refugees. This included providing a growing level of support services, often outsourced by the British government. An early example is the funding given to both Save the Children (£50,000) and the BCAR (£10,000) in response to agreeing to accept 2,500 Hungarian refugees following the Uprising in 1956. (Kushner and Knox, 1999). During the late 1960s, BCAR was involved with supporting "almost" refugees from Czechoslovakia following the Warsaw Pact invasion. (Refugee Council, no date). Their work continued during the 1970s responding to the Ugandan Asians, Vietnamese and Chilean refugee situations, with the "BCAR settlement section assisted over 2,000 such refugees from 48 countries, mostly African, but also from the Middle East, Asia, Latin and Central America." (Refugee Council, no date). The British Council for Aid to Refugees and the Standing Committee on Refugees merged in 1981 to form the British Refugee Council and continued to play a leading role in responding to situations including the crises in the Balkans during the 1990s and the creation of [The Gateway Protection Programme](#) in the mid-2000s.

Effective and humane resettlement policies have played an important role in the voluntary sector responses to larger scale refugee movements over the Twentieth Century. The current controversy over the housing of asylum seekers within sub-standard conditions during a global pandemic within Napier Barracks in Folkestone and the Penally Camp in Wales is not a stand-

alone incident. BCAR worked with the Government to receive 346 Vietnamese refugees in Kensington Barracks after they had been rescued at sea by the British ship *Wellpark* (Kushner and Knox, 1999, pp. 309-310). Kushner and Knox argue that the Refugee Council took “conventional centralised approach to reception” (1999, p. 315) traditionally in refugee camps ranging in size from under 100 to over 700 hundred. This compared to other charities like Ockenden Venture whose reception work, especially with the Vietnamese, focused on “small reception centres with a family approach and volunteer staff, settling small refugee groups together and encouraging interaction with the local community” (Kushner and Knox, 1999, p. 316). These differences in approach to refugee resettlement reflects the differences in philosophy and approach within the voluntary sector, reflected in an argument outlined by the Refugee Council at the time, that “despite avowed commitment to avoiding refugee dependency, Ockenden gained a reputation as paternalist, inflexible and even authoritarian in its attitude toward refugees,” (quoted in Kushner and Knox, 1999, p. 316), which could even result in competition within the refugee resettlement response.

Archiving Voluntary Action, Retaining Refugee Voices

This issue of *Displaced Voices* focuses on a number of underlying issues that have helped shaped the history of the refugee experience over this period. This has reflected our wider work with both the UEL Archives and the Living Refugee Archive, where we have looked to work with both third sector organisations and diaspora communities to help ensure that we are able to include refugee voices within the journal, both as individual and co-produced articles reflecting the need to ensure the supportive space for these narratives to be included. Our work to date has involved collaboration on archiving and oral history projects documenting the lived experiences of migration and displaced persons. Our Living Refugee Archive virtual portal began as an oral history project to document the experiences of refugees in East London, which one of our participants referred to as a “project of human rights.” Oral history provides an important approach for facilitating the collection of everyday experiences of displacement and we have been able to collaborate on diverse collections including the Voices of Kosovo in Manchester archive; documenting the experiences of Chinese and Vietnamese communities in the same city in support of Crossing the Borders project by the Wai Yin Society; and documenting the histories of the Gujarati communities in Croydon and Brent in conjunction with Rolf Killius and Subrung Arts on their Gujarati Yatra exhibition at the Museum of Corydon and the new Roots and Changes Gujarati Influences exhibition in Brent.

In his article, [Sandip Kana](#) reflects on the importance of narrative approaches to documenting the history of Partition, especially the reliance on male narratives of the period, overlooking the female lived experiences of Partition. The author demonstrates the importance of documenting issues of gender and refugee women’s wellbeing and lived experience in the aftermath of Partition, including through oral history methods. This is an area of work that we have looked at through the use of anti-oppressive oral history methodologies (Hashem and Dudman, 2016) and the importance of participatory and co-productive methodologies to ensure that due agency and empowerment is given to these narratives. (Kaur, 2021).

[Yusuf Ciftci and Larysa Agbaso](#), in their article on the VOICES Network, reflect this approach in their work through meaningful participation as an approach to healing trauma when working with refugees. The VOICES Network aims to provide a safe platform to help facilitate empowerment and integration to help in the promoting of confidence and wellbeing. Co-production and agency in supporting the support under-pinning a lived experience approach involved a value-driven participatory approach, involving both equal and reciprocal partnerships and the opportunity for healing through narrative engagement, whilst providing a safe space to open up.

The [work of Juan delGado](#) considered in the article by David Andrews explores how conventional approaches to capturing refugee stories risk "stereotyping the refugee as a passive victim prey to malign external forces". The author considers how delGado avoids this in his work by "framing the refugee narrative as one of mutual involvement with the struggles of communities they have joined". We can see this approach of co-production and mutual collaboration [in the co-authored article by Mrs. Babar](#), a mature-aged woman living in Australia as an asylum seeker. This article adopts the participatory action approach modelled in a previous issue of *Displaced Voices* (edited by Kiran Kaur): both involve co-authorship of articles but with the first author being the writer who wishes to share their lived of experience of migration, creating a safe and participatory space to tell their story in the way they choose to tell it. In this case, Mrs. Babar was keen to focus on the importance of gender and access to higher education for seeking asylum, an issue which will resonate with participants who have attended our OLLive course for refugees and asylum seekers at the University of East London.

[Lina Fadel](#) also takes a very personal reflection on a refugee's experience of everyday microaggressions and the internationalisation of colonial forms of narratives. Fadel considers first-hand experiences of migration and the importance of writing as a sort of catharsis - "For people in the diaspora, writing becomes a form of therapy and healing, a way to stay connected and break the silence." (Fadel, 2021, p. 60). Fadel argues "against the homogenisation of migrant narratives and experience and in favour of "historical context visualisation" that appears to be missing in migration and refugee studies." (Bhambra quoted in Fadel, 2021, p. 61).

Kushner and Knox have reflected on the Government reliance on voluntary organisations to assist with refugee resettlement throughout much of the Twentieth Century. This is made clear in [Zibiah Loakthar's article](#) for this issue of *Displaced Voices*, where the author reflects on the ebb and flow of migrant organisations in London, powered by volunteers. With the move towards ideas of integration rather than multiculturalism in policy, ethnic-based organisations found it harder to source funding leading to the changing face of community organisations. Loakthar eloquently initiates the call for the preservation of the collective memories of those organisations. Loakthar's call to consider donating materials to archives in order to ensure their survival, long-term preservation and to ensure their accessibility for future generations interested in this important aspect of our cultural heritage.

But, “charity archives are under threat” (McMurray, 2014, p. v): according to a report on the state of the charity archive sector which considers that “most charity archives are operated on shoestring budgets, with in-house archival provision almost impossible for most with incomes under £10 million ... [with] ... poor understanding by senior management about their organisation’s histories, their archives and the value they hold for their organisations is exacerbating this problem.” (McMurray, 2014, p. v). Yet these archives are crucial for exploring refugee experience: as Peter Gatrell argues, “Refugee history cannot be understood without considering their relationships and intersections with governments, national and international NGOs, it is impossible to write about one without considering the other.” (History Workshop Online, 2021). This was a view echoed by one of McMurray’s interviews for his report on charity archives: “British history can’t be written without looking at the voluntary sector.” (McMurray, 2014, p. 1). This can be highlighted by the damage inflicted to the *An Viet Foundation* archive and library, which had documented over thirty years of a community organisation working directly with the Vietnamese communities in Hackney, showing how easily the legacy of a diasporic community can be lost. Fortunately, after being left out on the roof by squatters and being heavily water damaged (Sheridan, 2019), the *An Viet Foundation* archive is now undergoing initial conservation as a consequence of receiving a grant from The National Archives Covid-19 Emergency Fund (The National Archives, 2021).

If archives are under threat, then collecting refugee stories becomes ever more important. In her discussion of the virtual exhibition on *Arriving and Belonging: Stories from the St. Albans Jewish community*, [Helen Singer](#) considers the importance of stories in documenting migration and displacement, and the universal themes that could apply to other migrant groups as they settle in the UK. Over 100 stories were collected from community members of the St. Albans Mascrati Synagogue (SAMS) and the virtual exhibition includes photographs of community members outside of their front doors, holding objects that illustrate their stories and showcased on the virtual photography wall, a similar methodology to that undertaken in *Life Under Lockdown: On Mehetabel Road and Isabella Road in Hackney, 2020*, which focused on the experiences of Lockdown by residents of two local streets in Hackney, and the objects that sustained them (Nightingale, 2020).

Chilean Exiles and Archival Futures

It has been estimated that half a million Chileans were forced to flee as exiles in response to the September 1973 military coup of the Socialist Salvador Allende government. Voluntary sector organisations including the World University Service (WUS) and the Refugee Council played a significant role in supporting Chilean refugees arriving in Britain following the 1973 Coup, which was important given the low-key response from the British Government, Ann Browne, Coordinator of the Joint Working Group for Refugees from Latin America, argued that “In Britain, the immediate response of to the coup was more muted than in many other countries.” (quoted in Kushner and Knox, 1999, p. 294). On their arrival in the UK, Chileans were initially reliant on the established third sector organisations including BCAR and the Ockenden Venture, founded initially as a response to refugee children in European DP camps. The Joint Working Group for Refugees from Chile was subsequently established as a partnership

between organisations including BCAR, WUS, Ockenden Venture, and Christian Aid to help facilitate the reception and resettlement programme for Chilean refugees. The Joint Committee also included newly established solidarity groups including the Chilean Solidarity Committee and the Chile Committee for Human Rights. These solidarity groups reflected a growing grassroots response to supporting Chilean refugees and helped facilitate an approach which helped to reflect the needs of those arriving from Chile.

The writing of [Carole Concha Bell](#) highlights the challenging experiences of the exiles from Chile and the role of literature in second generation identity struggles. For Bell, the complexities of identity, exile and belonging between first and second generation Chilean exiles played out in the form of identity fiction as a vehicle to begin interpreting the author's experiences of exile, and just as importantly, the impacts of returning to Chile. The role of fiction in discussing the experiences of second-generation returnees was the narrative form that the author felt could best resolve her notions of identity, cultural belonging and what it meant to be a returnee. This is an interesting comparison to the review of *Exiliado in Buckingham Palace* by [Gloria Miqueles](#) which acts as an autobiography of a first generation Chilean exile, which also considers narratives of historical exile in the light of current immigration plans and the lived experiences of displacement.

The role and significance of objects as cultural heritage and symbolising notions of home and belonging has become a recurring theme in the civic and community engagement work we have undertaken at the University of East London. Material culture plays an important role in the migration experience but is often overlooked in favour of the more traditional approaches of locating the refugee experience within more established narratives of trauma and loss, and the challenges of the journey. In 2018 the UEL Archives hosted an exhibition entitled *Crafting Resistance* which focused on the history of the Chilean diaspora in London and their experiences as political prisoners during the dictatorship in Chile following the military coup of the 11 September 1973. Their experiences were told through over 100 individual objects loaned specifically for the Exhibition, primarily of objects created during periods as political prisoners in Chile. The exhibition was immensely powerful as it was able to bring together both physical objects, with documentary materials within the Refugee Council Archive and a documentary where Chileans were able to discuss and reflect upon their experiences and discuss the importance of the objects within the exhibition and their importance as objects of resistance. Kushner and Knox (1999) reflected on how the dissipated nature of the Chilean diaspora post arrival made their stories dependent on the collection of oral histories given their relative absence from established archival collections, and the *Crafting Resistance* exhibition (Gideon and Miqueles, 2018) offered a tantalising opportunity for how we could more effectively work with diasporic communities to help better document their collective memory, whilst facilitating a sense of agency and empowerment to their collective histories.

We are currently working with Gloria Miqueles and members of the Chilean diaspora community in London on a new project to help collect and document materials relating to the Chilean experience of exile and adaptation in the UK along with experiences of life under the

military Junta in Chile. Entitled *Proyecto Documentando Chile del Archivo Viviendo como Refugiado de la UEL / Documenting Chile Project on the Living Refugee Archive*:

“We hope to connect with individuals and organisations who may have either documents or objects from on the situation in Chile from the 1970’s through to the present that might help to preserve the collective memory and lived experience of the Chilean diaspora, ensuring your voices and stories are both heard and are also told in a way that you want your stories to be told.” (Dudman, 2021)

We will also be launching a curated virtual exhibition of the materials included in the *Crafting Resistance* exhibition along with new materials collected since the exhibition at the International Association for the Study of Forced Migration Conference in July 2021. Through this project we will be reflecting on the role of material culture in supporting the understanding of the lived experience of displacement through objects and artefacts and the role of participatory creative practice. Our original exhibition was held in conjunction with two craft-based workshops held in the Archive at UEL by Jimena Pardo, a second-generation Chilean, focused on how we can document experiences through creative praxis. Jimena’s work has focused on the arpilleras (Spanish for burlap), which are “brightly-coloured patchwork pictures stitched onto sackings are chronicles of the life of the poor and oppressed in Chile in the 1970s and 1980s during the totalitarian military regime of General Augusto Pinochet Ugarte.” (O’Toole, 2014). Originally conceived as a creative form of protest under the Pinochet regime in Chile, arpilleras have come to represent important visual records of the experiences of ordinary Chileans, especially women, who experienced life under military rule. Through her creative practice working on the *Bordando por la Memoria (Embroidering for Memory)* project, Pardo reflects on the arpilleras and “how they act as a platform to reconstruct and visualise memory by representing historical accounts and experiences through textiles.” (Fashion Space Gallery, no date).

This resonates with the work of [the Qisetna project](#) outlined in the article by Sarah Barker, which considers the significance of storytelling and community focused collecting in her article on the Qisetna virtual platform, representing both a digital archive documenting the cultural heritage of Syria and Syrians and a communal platform for the sharing of stories. Barker reflects on the fragments of memories documented within the archive, and the role played by storytelling as a fundamental aspect of Syrian identity and culture. In a similar fashion, Miqueles has considered the importance of documenting memory as being a key aspect of preserving Chilean diasporic collective history. Mezna Qato raised the challenge to consider the distinction between refugee archives and the more informal refugee collections, which are curated by refugees themselves. Archivists have traditionally helped shape what we mean by refugee histories. How can we distinguish the encountering of collections produced by refugees themselves, which can include ad hoc collections of photographs and scraps and shards of documents on plastic bags which survive and are handed down from generation to generation. As Qato reflects, “these collections have a different kind of provenance and historicity and wouldn’t class them as refugee archives, this is not doing enough work to do so.” (History Workshop Online, 2021).

Conclusion

This issue of *Displaced Voices* touches on a number of key issues, including the role of voluntary sector organisations in supporting displaced voices; the importance of allowing space for empowerment and agency in refugee narratives and the role of refugees in modern history and the importance of archives in terms of what we collect, how we collect it and the importance of the stories we enable for empowering refugee narratives back into the historical record. However, we should ensure that we do not place pressure onto refugees to tell their story and contribute to refugee historical narratives and thereby reclaiming them back into history. Rumana Hashem in her article to close this volume of the Journal considers how anti-oppressive methods can help create space in the Archive for community engagement and challenge existing paradigms for ensuring ethical documenting of refugee narratives.

It is not possible to consider the history of the nation or the state without including the history of refugee. We as archivists and historians should look to ensure that refugees are not just caught in the moment of their displacement and not to consider the refugee as an exclusive category of history. Examples from this issue of *Displaced Voices* highlights how displaced persons can also be part of political movements and have wider political, community and individual identities beyond the fact of their displacement. Heather Faulkner articulately describes how "Being a refugee is part of a whole constellation of belongings beyond being a displaced person" (History Workshop Online, 2021) and we should ensure we incorporate these identities and notions of belonging within the archival collections we look to establish, and not to focus on their identity solely as a refugee.

The importance of home and the sense of identity this engenders is reflected in several of the articles in this issue, whilst Qisetna's vision to move away from the rhetoric of labels and focus on storytelling, advocacy and co-production presents us with a positive example of how a proactive community-focused project can help develop and support a sense of agency and belonging amongst dispersed communities. Something we continue to strive to achieve through archival collecting work with the Refugee Council Archive and related collections at UEL and through our community-focused outreach and engagement work with the Living Refugee Archive.

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