

Refugee Stories

Ann-Mari Jordens outlines an interview project she has conducted with refugees and those who have helped them resettle in Canberra

For the past two years I have been preoccupied with recording for the National Library's Oral History Collection the stories of 13 refugees who have settled in Canberra from many continents, and the stories of 15 Canberrans who have helped refugees settle here since World War II.

These are stories of ordinary people whose plans and hopes for the future were shattered by extraordinary political events which forced them out of their homes on often long and painful journeys, to a new home in a strange culture and environment. They are stories of heroism, endurance and adaptation. They are also the stories of Australians whose lives were changed forever through their efforts to welcome refugees into their community and to help them through the difficult early years. Together the stories comprise an archive of approximately 100 hours of interviews, describing events that occurred from the 1930s through to 2008.

The successful settlement of migrants and refugees since World War II is a national narrative which all Australians should know, and be proud of. It did not happen without leadership and funding from all levels of government, and the friendship and generosity of many thousands of ordinary Australians. The combined efforts of governments and communities all around Australia over the past 60 years, to help migrants and refugees cope with the inevitably difficult process of adaptation, has prevented the social and economic marginalisation of newcomers, and helped them to contribute to every aspect of Australian society. It has also encouraged Australians to become a welcoming and tolerant people. This national story is poignantly and personally told through the



voices of each of the very different people I have interviewed.

In structuring this interview program, I decided I wanted my interviews to reflect as much as possible the changing refugee selection and settlement policies of the Australian government since 1947. Initially I aimed to select people whose stories would illustrate the experiences of all the major waves of refugees to Australia, but quickly found this impossible. Those I eventually chose came from Nazi Germany (Peter Witting, TRC 5694), post-war Hungary (Laszlo Makay, TRC 5830), Chile (Elba Cruz, TRC 5489), Vietnam (Van Huynh, TRC 5817), South Africa (Ramesh Govind, TRC 5869), Kosovo (Gyzele Osmani, TRC 5642), Afghanistan (Mahmoud Saikal, TRC 5504; Salima Haidary, TRC 5524; and Mustafa Jawadi, TRC 5868), Sudan (Atem Dau Atem, TRC 5588), Iran (Simin Farzan, TRC 5846), Liberia (Peter Dennis, TRC 5857) and Burma (Paw Gay Ler, TRC 5844).

I succeeded in getting a gender balance and as broad an age range as possible. My interviewees ranged in age from 90 (Laszlo Makay), to two 16-year-olds (Salima Haidary and Mustafa Jawadi). I also wanted to reflect the effects of the distinction made in recent years between 'refugees' and 'asylum

Greg Power
Peter Witting talks to Ann-Mari
Jordens, September 2006



above:
Damian McDonald
*Baxter Immigration Reception
and Processing Centre, near
Port Augusta, 12 July 2002*
colour digital photograph
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an24380740

below left:
Ann-Mari Jordens
Mustafa Jawadi during his oral
history interview, September
2007

below right:
Loui Seselja (b.1948)
Ann-Mari Jordens conducts an
interview for the Library's Oral
History Collection, 2005

seekers', and the introduction of mandatory detention for the latter. Three of my refugee interviewees had been held either in the Port Hedland or Naru detention centres (Gyzele, Salima and Mustafa), and one of the refugee helpers, Sr Jane Keogh, vividly described some of her 98 visits to the Baxter Detention Centre (TRC 5867). I was careful not to interview people who might find telling their stories traumatic, and left it open for refugees to speak as much or as little as they wished about events which caused them suffering. I expect a sensitive listener will be able to sense the trauma behind the sometimes brief accounts given by refugees.

Selecting refugee-supporter interviewees was rather easier, as I have lived in Canberra since 1970 and have over the years had contact with various refugee support groups. I chose individuals who would represent the major categories of support. The contribution of the Commonwealth Government was represented by the torture

and trauma counselling service, Companion House (Dr Christine Phillips, TRC 5842 and Elizabeth Price, TRC 5521), and the Department of Immigration by Brian Essai (TRC 5830) and Paula Kansky (TRC 5968). The support given to refugees by the ACT Government was reflected in interviews with the former Chief Minister Kate Carnell (TRC 5660), who spoke about her welcome to refugees from Kosovo, and by Merran Martin (TRC 5843), who outlined the Canberra Institute of Technology's on-arrival English language and other settlement services.

There have been so many people in the Canberra community helping refugees settle over the years that I found it hard to choose. I finally decided on a number of people. Domenico Romano (TRC 5602) tells the story of the Good Neighbour Movement which helped migrants and refugees settle all over Australia from 1950 to 1980, and of the later Canberra Migrant Resource Centre. John and Denise Molony (TRC 5640) talk of having assisted refugees since helping found the Indo-Chinese Refugee Association in the late 1970s. Geoff McPherson (TRC 5780) speaks as one of the founders of Canberra Refugee Support Inc., established in 2001 to meet the settlement needs of asylum seekers. Also in 2001, Helen McCue (TRC 5770) and two friends established the highly successful Australia-wide movement Rural Australians for Refugees, whose records will be deposited in the National Library.

Simon Siharath (TRC 5617), from the Lao community, represented the invaluable services which ethnic community organisations provide for their refugee members. Professor William Maley (TRC 5657) described the work of refugee advocates and community educators as he spoke of his many years with the Refugee





Council of Australia, the Red Cross Society and the ACT Refugee Week Committee. The name of migration agent Marion Le was mentioned with gratitude by many of my refugee interviewees, and her interview (TRC 5159) illustrates the sometimes extraordinary lengths she went to in order to prove the refugee claims of those who have sought her help. Sr Jane Keogh, who has worked with the Refugee Action Committee in Canberra from 2001, described the practical and emotional support refugee advocates gave to detained asylum seekers.

Some interviewees wore several hats. Simin Farzan was not only a refugee herself, but also works with Centacare, the non-government agency currently contracted by the Department of Immigration to help refugees settle in Canberra. Before becoming a teacher of English for migrants at the Canberra Institute of Technology, Merran Martin was a Department of Immigration shipboard education officer.

I suspect that every interviewer has his or her particular style of interviewing. Over the almost 10 years I have worked for the National Library I have developed my own ways of operating. I like to have a preliminary meeting with my interviewee. This allows us to get to know one another and gives me an opportunity to explain the interview process, answer any questions they might have, and assess vulnerabilities which might influence the way I conduct the

interview—for instance, Brian Essai feared that at 85 his memory might not be accurate enough, and Van Huynh thought her English would not be adequate. (Both interviews were splendid, although Van's rather plain account of her dreadful five-day ordeal on a leaky boat with her two desperately ill little boys and her struggle to keep them alive for months in a Malaysian refugee camp, made me realise how difficult it is to convey deep emotion in a language you learn as an adult.) During this preliminary meeting I also get an overview of the subjects' lives, on which I base my questions, and sometimes I am given important background material to read and am shown photographs or documents which might be valuable additions to the Library's collection.

When I first started interviewing, I didn't show my questions to my interviewees beforehand, fearing that this would destroy the spontaneity so essential to an interview. I have found from experience, however, that this fear is unfounded, and that there are some very good reasons for involving the interviewees in the preparation of the questions. It gives them the opportunity to add questions relating to events I might have overlooked, to correct awkwardly framed questions, or to delete questions they can't, or don't want to, answer.

This is particularly important in the case of newly arrived refugees, the lives of whose family members still in refugee camps or in

John Crowther, Australian Information Service
A Group of Indo-Chinese Refugees Arrives in the National Capital, Canberra, 1979
b&w negative; 8.1 x 10.5 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an24522902

Michael Jensen (b.1943)
Vietnamese Boat People, Darwin,
November 1977, 3
b&w photograph; 27.5 x 39.6 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3209928

their country of origin could be imperilled by certain information. Older interviewees might be embarrassed by too-detailed questions about long-ago events regarding which their memory has become a bit hazy, and young interviewees might not yet understand the broader political and social contexts that have impacted so violently on their lives. Because these interviews will be used by researchers, I order my questions chronologically, and seeing the questions beforehand, the interviewees know we will eventually get to the topics which they feel are most important.

For me, the process of researching the context of a person's life as thoroughly as possible, and thoughtfully and imaginatively composing the questions I intend to ask them, is essential psychological preparation for each interview. It allows me as much as possible to enter into the interviewees' lives and feel what it must have been like to have been in their shoes. I have wandered with Atem as a child alone with thousands of Sudanese desperately seeking sanctuary. I have experienced with Paw Gay my life

seeping away in the mud and boredom of a Thai refugee camp, and I have walked to school with Peter Witting and his sister, through the shattered glass of Jewish shops in Berlin the morning after Kristallnacht.

Australians need to hear these stories now, more than ever. We need to understand the waste of human potential in refugee camps, and what life is like in the detention centres. We need to share in our imagination refugees' fears and losses and dreams for the future. Their voices remind us of the international obligations we accepted when we signed the 1951 United Nations Convention on Refugees, and of our proud and generous history as a safe home where refugees can rebuild their lives and their families.

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