



Refugees in the Library

In the first of a two-part series, Barry York explores the Library's extensive collection of interviews with asylum seekers

The National Library's Oral History Collection has unique and original sound recordings of interviews with refugees, and people involved in their resettlement, dating back to the Jews who fled from Germany in the 1930s.

Refugees—people who leave their homeland because of persecution—have been part of Australian life since the early 19th century. The first refugees to Australia were probably the Germans who settled near the Torrens River, Adelaide, in 1838. Led by a pastor, they were escaping religious persecution in Prussia where they had seceded from the official Lutheran church.

Persecution and displacement caused by war are the chief sources of refugee crises. In the first half of the 20th century, refugees to Australia were mostly Jews and Chinese fleeing from fascism and war. The 60 years since the end of World War II have seen

unparalleled mass movement of desperate people. Australia has accepted more than 620 000 refugees during that period. More than 170 000 displaced persons from Europe were admitted between 1947 and 1952, with more than 63 000 of these being Poles. About 14 000 Hungarians were taken in between 1956 and 1958, and about 6000 Czechs and Slovaks in 1968—all as a result of political uprisings.

These were the principal intakes until 1975, when the defeat of the United States in Vietnam resulted in a refugee crisis in Indochina. More than 54 000 Vietnamese were re-settled in Australia between 1976 and 1982. Thousands of Chileans and East Timorese escaping military oppression, and Lebanese fleeing civil war, were also admitted during this period.

In the 1990s, the main sources of refugees were China, the Balkans, Iraq and Afghanistan. Today, the single largest source is Africa, which accounts for about half of all refugees admitted. About 12 000 humanitarian cases are accepted each year, which is about 10 per cent of all immigrants.

The Oral History Collection holds around 200 sound recordings relating to refugees

Loui Seselja (b.1948)

'Stop the war on refugees, Refugee Action Committee', banner draped on side of overpass, corner of Liversidge Street and Parkes Way, near Australian National University, Canberra, 8 May 2002

b&w negative; 5.5 x 5.5 cm

Collection of photographs of street signs about children in detention centres
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an23672824



above:
Barry York (b.1951)
Portrait of Henryk Javorski with
his wife 1998
col. photograph; 15.0 x 10.0 cm
Polish Australians Oral History
Project
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an14475197

below:
Por Heang Ya's interview with
Diana Giese for the Khmer
Community in Australia project
(TRC 3986) describes how Wat
Khemarangsaram, its Buddhist
centre for community life in
Sydney, was built. He was president
of the Khmer Community in
NSW from 1994-98
Courtesy of Por Heang Ya

in Australia. These are principally interviews but there are also recordings of speeches delivered by eminent persons. The speeches date to 1979, when Professor Jerzy Zubrzycki addressed the Australian National University Convocation luncheon on the topic of Vietnamese refugees. Recordings are also held of British writer William Shawcross, South African activist Donald Woods, Palestinian Refugee Organisation representative Ali Kazak, Australian refugee advocate Justice Marcus Einfeld, and Geoffrey Robertson launching Refugee Day at the National Press Club in 1988. Zubrzycki, Kazak and Einfeld have also been interviewed for the collection.

The interviews can be classified into two categories: recordings with individuals who came here as refugees, and recordings with individuals who have been closely involved with them either as bureaucrats, scholars or advocates.

The collection has significant recordings relating to the Jews, Poles and Indochinese. Examples of the 1930s and 1940s Jewish refugee experiences are found in interviews with Eva Cox, June Factor, Eva Kulka and Richard Krygier.

The Polish experience is captured on tape mainly through the Polish-Australian Oral History Project (PAOHP), which is conducted by the Library in association with the Polish Historical Institute in Australia Inc. This project has recorded Poles who came here during the 1947-52 Displaced Persons program, as well as supporters of the Solidarity movement who

came during the 1980s wave. There are about 50 PAOHP interviews.

Interviews with refugees from Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam form part of a major project conducted by the Library in 1985 and 1986. The Cultural Context of Unemployment Project aimed to create a significant oral record of contemporary unemployment experience in all its variety and complexity. Interviewers were organised into teams, including an Indochinese refugee team which was based in the Fairfield-Cabramatta region of Sydney.

More than 70 interviews providing insights into individual refugee experiences were recorded by the team. An interview with David Ha is indicative of the approach taken. Ha talks about his family background, life in Vietnam, family, education, changes in Vietnam after the war, reasons for leaving, the journey to Malaysia by boat, experiences in a refugee camp, resettlement and life in Australia.

The Cultural Context Project also recorded Janice Crosio, Member for Fairfield; Frederick Elliot, Town Clerk of Fairfield; Hop Van Chu, a former Vietnamese refugee who headed the Ethnic Affairs Section of the New South Wales Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs; and Nola Randall, a teacher of Indochinese refugees and migrants.

There is also a fascinating interview with Tran Van Lam (1913-2001), recorded by Stewart Harris in 1991. Lam was the Republic of (South) Vietnam's Ambassador to Australia and Minister for Foreign Affairs during the Vietnam War. He escaped to Australia via the United States in April to July 1975, and settled in Canberra.

The Chinese and Khmer refugee experience has also been recorded by Diana Giese for the Postwar Chinese Australians Oral History Partnership and the Khmer Community in Australia Oral History Project. Interviewees include Hong Lim, a Cambodian-Chinese Member of the State Parliament of Victoria who once worked as an interpreter in Thai refugee camps; Nairand Kay, former president of the Khmer Community in New South Wales; Peter Wong, a physician who helped found the Chinese Catholic Community and the Unity Party in Australia; and Chanboramy Var who fled Cambodia to a refugee camp in Thailand in the early 1980s.



Var's description of the course of her escape highlights the insights and feelings that can best be conveyed through first-hand spoken word testimony. She says:

I was near the front line, like, we walk in line, and we were told [by paid guides] to walk on each other's footsteps in case we walk on a land mine ... So I'm up the front, and my sister were at the back, at the end of the line. And we don't talk; we don't communicate at all ... when we got deep inside the forest, the guides started to give us a rest ... while we were waiting, there was a bad storm, like pouring rain falling on us. We were all completely wet—soaking wet. Lots of mosquitoes. We were shivering ... And rain didn't stop—didn't stop; it just continue and continue. And one of the guides finally came back and said, because of the heavy rain, the patrol along the border, the Thai authorities, has gone away to take refuge. So it was a good opportunity for us to continue in the rain and to cross the border. And it was pitch dark. We couldn't see anything ... we continue walking in the pitch black dark night. And finally we climb up the mountain. [The Thai refugee camp is at the foot of the mountain.] And it was the most difficult time to travel. Because on the mountain was rocky, and we couldn't see the rock, and we didn't have shoes ... We were all barefoot. And so it was very, very painful, and we got cuts and bruises, and because of the falls, we were all holding to each other ... we were stranded on that mountain—there was no food. We were starving; we were hungry and thirsty.

More recent groups of refugees, from the Middle East, Afghanistan and Africa, are yet to be recorded, though there is an interview with an Iraqi woman who was detained at Woomera in 2001. This interview, with Ferial Al-Khil Khali, was recorded by Gwenda Davey for an oral history project called Tradition Bearers. Khali's work as a seamstress has been displayed at the Migration Museum in Adelaide. In addition to talking about her handicraft, she speaks of her experiences as an asylum seeker.

The other category of interviews ranges from academics who study refugee issues through to officials who administered policy. The Library has interviewed James Jupp, Director of the Centre for Immigration and Multicultural Studies at the Australian National University, and Sev Ozdowski, Australia's Commissioner for Human Rights. As part of a project about former diplomats, it recorded John Hoyle who, in

the late 1970s, headed the Commonwealth Government's inaugural Refugees, Immigration and Asylum Branch.

Some academics are themselves former refugees. Egon Kunz's book, *Displaced Persons: Calwell's New Australians* (1988), remains the definitive work on the topic. Kunz was a Hungarian displaced person who came to Australia in 1949. He was interviewed in 1988.

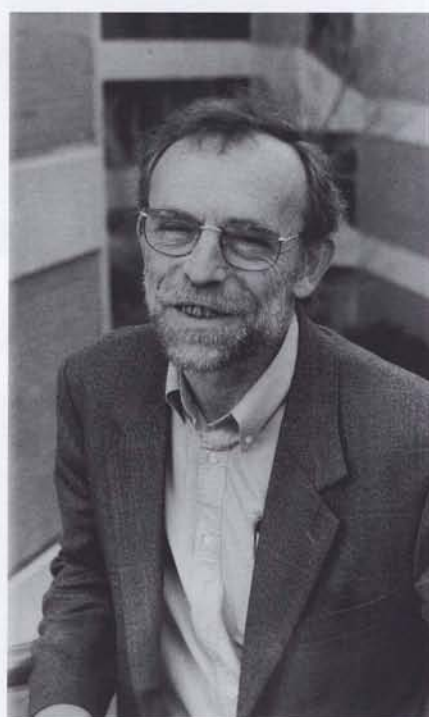
Michael Cigler (1923–90) left Czechoslovakia after the war and was a displaced person until migrating to Australia in 1949. Cigler, who was interviewed in 1989, was a pioneer in the study of ethnic groups in Australian history. He edited the innovative Ethnic Heritage Series in the 1980s, which included studies of refugees.

Some eminent advocates have been interviewed. Erik Lloga was recorded in Melbourne where he was chair of the Australian-Albanian National Council which coordinated Albanian community efforts for Kosovar refugees. In 1999, Australia gave temporary protection to 4000 Kosovars. It was the largest single humanitarian evacuation Australia had undertaken. Lloga was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia in 2002 for service to multicultural affairs, particularly to the Albanian community.

An interview was also recorded with Marion Le, perhaps Australia's best known refugee advocate. She became active in 1977 over the Vietnamese issue. In 1979, she married Tong Le, a chef and former Vietnamese soldier who had arrived in Darwin on the vessel *Song Be*. The interview is particularly useful for its insights into the IndoChinese Refugee Association and the workings of the Community Refugee Settlement Service. Le received the Medal of the Order of Australia in 1990 for service to the Indochinese community.

Such a range of interviews provides many perspectives on the subject. For conditions of access to each interview, check the Library's online catalogue.

BARRY YORK is an historian who works in the Biographical Dictionary Unit of the Senate. His email address is: garocon@pcug.org.au



top:
Damian McDonald
Portrait of Dr Sev Ozdowski,
Australian Human Rights
Commissioner, speaking at the
National Press Club, Canberra,
8 February 2002
b&w negative; 3.5 x 2.5 cm
Pictures Collection, nla.pic-an23418854

above:
Barry York (b.1951)
Portrait of Eric Lloga 1999
gelatin silver photograph;
sheet 21.5 x 16.5 cm
Pictures Collection, nla.pic-an21921074