

# Lived Experiences, “Moving Memories” and the Refugee Archive:

## The Ethics of Archiving and Oral History in the Preservation and Re-use of Migration Data

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Paul V. Dudman  
Archivist  
University of East London



# Archives at UEL

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- The University of East London is home to several important archival collections
- Collecting remit currently incorporates the fields of refugee and migration studies; theatre studies; and Olympic and sports studies.
- Our current collections include:
  - The Refugee Council Archive and associated collections
  - The British Olympic Association Archive and Library
  - The Hackney Empire Theatre Archive.
  - Online digital collections incorporating the East London Theatre Archive.



# Refugee Archives @ UEL

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- The Refugee Council Archive
- VOKIM: Voices of Kosovo in Manchester
- Gujarati Yatra
- Crossing the Borders – Wai Yin Society in Manchester
- Council for Assisting At-Risk Academics (CARA)
- Northern Refugee Centre Archive
- UNHCR (London Office) Audio-Visual Library
- Charter 87
- Cambridge Refugee Support Group Archive
- Information Centre of Asylum and Refugees (ICAR)



# What records survive?

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- The surviving records within the Refugee Council Archive and related collections include:
- Traditional Archival materials: Including minutes of meetings; financial records; correspondence and administration files; limited case files; publicity and outreach materials; annual reports and a small amount of photographs.
- Special Collection materials: Including grey literature; reports; journals; conference papers; working papers; magazines; academic and policy reports
- Collecting from communities still a challenge. Issues of ethics and trust whilst overcoming the “University” as a barrier to engagement.



# Archival Challenges and Historical Loss

In the last week, Hackney Chinese Centre: "squatters at The Old Bath House have destroyed much of our precious Vietnamese archive. This represents the loss of 40 years+ of history of the Vietnamese in Hackney"





# Archival Challenges and Historical Loss

[hackneychinese](#): We managed to retrieve the An Viet Vietnamese archive that was thrown on the rooftop by squatters, but they remain in a dreadful state. We're now looking for advice on how to save these valuable documents. Can you help?

[#vietnamesecommunity](#) [#historicalsite](#)  
[#help](#) [#archive](#)

Campaign for Voluntary Sector Archives -  
<https://www.voluntarysectorarchives.org.uk/>





# Archives, Collective Memory & Forced Displacement 1

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- Archives can play a very important role in relation to identity formation and collective memory.
- Especially within the fields of migration and forced displacement within their broadest definitions.
- Archives can have a positive role to play in challenging the negative discourses on this issues within media and society.
- But also need to consider issues of ethics, trust and representation and how we as Archivists use the materials entrusted to us.
- Archives can also be a nexus of power relations where voices and narratives can be either heard or silenced.



# Archives, Collective Memory & Forced Displacement 2

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- Memories of refugees are 'moving', and digitalised oral history archives can be seen as 'a project of human rights'
- Social history and powerful political narratives are situated, memories are situated, and ideas about memories and identities can be challenged through oral history recording of contested lived experience of refugees. Complete new social history can be constructed with every single oral history.
- **The dilemma of accessibility of oral history:** how to make an archive accessible and powerful at a time without distorting the narratives and without affecting the participants and researchers' safety.



# The Nature of Archives

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- Archives have the power to present a narrative determined by the documentary evidence that has survived and to empower a certain representation through the use of language.
- Notions of Memory and Identity
- Role of archives in enabling refugees to have a voice in the social, legal and political empowerment of their communities?
- Active role in documenting the heritage and hidden narratives of the refugee and migrant experience.
- Archives, it can be argued, represent "the basis and validation of the stories we tell ourselves, the story-telling narratives that give cohesion and meaning to individuals, groups and societies." (Schwartz and Cook, 2002, p.13).
- The archivist must research his community well and resist the temptation to "romanticize the marginalized, or feel elated for saving them from historical oblivion: some do not wish to be "rescued" by mainstream archives and seem feel their naming by archivists as "marginalized" only further marginalizes them." (Schwartz and Cook, 2002, p.26).



# Community Engagement with Refugees and Asylum Seekers

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- From 2015, we have been undertaking internally funded civic engagement projects in an attempt to engage with our local communities and develop new partnerships.
- Who can access these Refugee archives and how can we improve access to refugee research archives?
- How does the role of language within the documentary archive impact upon refugee and migrant representation?
- Are refugee archives well-represented in relation to the preservation of lived experience of refugees and migrants? If not, why is this?
- Who gets excluded from refugee-archives, and in what ways?



# Democratic Access or Privileged Exclusion

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living  
refugee  
archive

- A six month project working with the Refugee Council Archive at UEL, in collaboration with academic colleagues from the UEL Centre for Migration, Refugees and Belonging (CMRB).
- Aims:
  - To begin preserving and documenting the new refugee and migration testimonies using a bottom-up oral history methodology.
  - To engage with local communities to establish a [Living Refugee Archive](#) and to promote and enable accessibility and engagement with our existing collections. This will be documented through the collection of oral histories.
  - To develop a network for continued discussion on the methodology and ethical considerations associated with attempting to documenting the testimonies of vulnerable communities.



# Voices of Kosovans in Manchester (VOKIM)

Oral History  
collection  
developed by the  
Manchester Aid to  
Kosovo now hosted  
by the UEL Archives

“ We did not have enough food.  
It was not a normal life. It wasn't secure.  
You couldn't work.  
Since 1990, the situation changed.  
It started to get much worse.  
I had to leave my job and they shut  
a lot of schools.

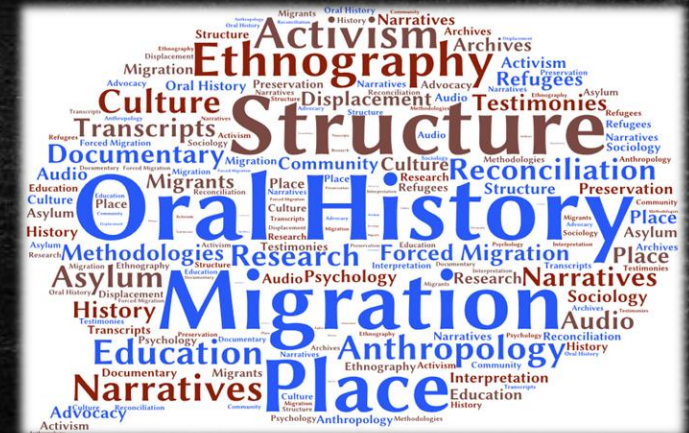
They killed my family in the garden.”

**SELATIN BOGUJEVCI**  
MaK LEADER  
MANCHESTER



# OHS Migration Special Interest Group

- Oral History Society Migration Special Interest Group – [ohs.org.uk/information-for/migration/](https://www.ohs.org.uk/information-for/migration/)
- MSIG seeks to bring together oral historians, practitioners, students, and researchers who are working within the fields of oral history and refugee and migration studies.
- Aim to gather and share knowledge and experience on the ethics of working with refugees and migrants and to highlight oral history projects which are active in this area.
- Through the SIG, we were able to support the [Wai Yin Society](#) in Manchester to successfully apply for HLF funding to undertake an oral history project called Crossing the Borders.
- Link: <http://www.ohs.org.uk/information-for/migration/>





# Collaboration

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- My apologies again for not being able to make the Seminar in person.
- We would be very interested in exploring ways in which we might be able to collaborate with organisations, speakers, and participants at today's seminar.
- International Association for the Study of Forced Migration [Working Group for Archiving and Documentation of History of Forced Migration and Refugees](http://iasfm.org/adfm/) - [iasfm.org/adfm/](http://iasfm.org/adfm/)
- Focal point for people interested in and/or working within the fields of forced migration and refugee archives e.g. documentation, preservation and researching the history of forced migration and refugees.
- Generate new partnerships and networking opportunities for developing forced migration archives and for helping with the creation of knowledge on, and the collection, documentation and preservation of forced migration history.



# Reflections

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- ▶ Pre-established oral history methodology and interview (semi-structured and qualitative)
- ▶ Critical anti-oppressive methodology, a bottom up approach to better balance power relations.
- ▶ Decolonising knowledge – dialogical, situated and reflexive – producing ethically accountable knowledge.
- ▶ Ethical challenges faced in the undertaking of oral history recordings with vulnerable communities



# Contact Details – Paul V. Dudman

- By Email:
  - [p.v.Dudman@uel.ac.uk](mailto:p.v.Dudman@uel.ac.uk)
- Twitter:
  - [@PaulDudman](https://twitter.com/PaulDudman) / [@RefugeeAchive](https://twitter.com/RefugeeAchive)
- Address:
  - Refugee Council Archive  
University of East London  
Docklands Campus  
4-6 University Way  
London, E16 2RD  
United Kingdom
  - [www.paulvdudman.org.uk](http://www.paulvdudman.org.uk)





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