

**Refugee Voices, Living Narratives:
Reflections, Challenges and
Opportunities for (Re-)
Constructing, Documenting and
Preserving Refugee and Migrant
Testimonies within the Archive**

Paul Dudman

Archivist

University of East London

Scope of the Paper

- ▶ To investigate the role of Archives in preserving the narratives of the migration experience and to consider the notion that the voices of refugees and migrants are often marginalised or left un-heard with the Archive.
- ▶ We have heard concerns raised in relation to the ethics of an oral history methodology in undertaking life history research with refugees and migrants.
- ▶ However, this presentation will reflect on the work we are undertaking, with the Refugee Council Archive at the University of East London and will focus on our civic engagement and outreach work examining how oral histories can contribute to documenting, preserving and making accessible the genuine voices and testimonies of refugees and migrants
- ▶ IASFM [Working Group for Archiving and Documentation of History of Forced Migration and Refugees](#)

Archives and History

- ▶ Archives are traditionally the backbone of history.
- ▶ But how has the legacy of migration been documented and preserved within these collections?
- ▶ Can archives respond positively and effectively to preserve the voices and testimonies of marginalised communities and how can we ensure that archives enable the story of the current migration crisis in the Mediterranean to be told?
- ▶ Archives hold the power to enable material culture to be reinterpreted, forgotten, or rediscovered by later generations and have the power to influence how history is written?

Importance of Refugee Archives

- ▶ Why collect Refugee Archives?
 - ▶ The collection of records relating to refugees is important as refugees are an under-documented and under-represented group in archival collections.
 - ▶ Refugee Archive collections are important for expanding our perceptions of history, culture and memory.
 - ▶ How can we approach trying to ethically document and preserve the life histories and testimonies of migrants and refugees?
- ▶ Who has access?

Refugee Archives at UEL

- ▶ Refugee and Migration based collections held at the University of East London
 - ▶ The Refugee Council Archive
 - ▶ 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)
- ▶ Do we need new ways of archiving to help preserve the material cultures and first-hand testimonies of modern migration?

Archives



Refugee Council Archive

- ▶ Archive of the Refugee Council as an organisation, including correspondence, minutes, of meetings, case files and related materials.
- ▶ Thematic special collection of published books and journals, reports and grey literature incorporating working papers, conference papers, leaflets, newsletters, case studies, field reports, statistical data, press cuttings and audio-visual materials.
- ▶ Over 35,000 items have now been catalogued and we are still trying to add new materials to the collection.

Civic Engagement Projects

- ▶ We have now completed three successful civic engagement and outreach projects with funding from the UEL Civic Engagement Fund.
- ▶ These have included:
- ▶ Performing the Archive: Living Narratives & the Politics of Performance
 - ▶ Project with second year performing arts students creating performances from narratives found in the Archives (October 2015-May 2016)



PERFORMING THE ARCHIVE
LIVING NARRATIVES AND THE POLITICS OF PERFORMANCE

Performing the Archive
An exciting synergy of theatre and archives in the heart of East London

University of East London Performing Arts students, in conjunction with Tom Drayton (Pregnant Fish Theatre) and Dr. Eve Katsouraki (Senior Lecturer), perform a series of unique theatre pieces inspired by the UEL library archives of Hackney Empire Theatre, the Refugee Council and the British Olympic Association.

Date: Monday 18th April 2016
Time: 7.30pm
Venue: University Square Stratford, E15 1NF

Seats are FREE but limited so book your place by going to eventbrite.co.uk and searching for 'Performing the Archive'.

Part of UEL's civic engagement programme through which we invite the communities of East London to share in the innovative work of our students.

#PerformingTheArchive

Civic Engagement Projects

- The creation of a Refugee Mental Health and Wellbeing Portal for Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Health and Social Care Professionals (June 09, 2016)
- Link: <http://refugeementalhealthportal.org.uk/>
- Established as a first stop resource to enable mental health and social care professionals, community organisations, statutory, international and national third sector organisations and refugees and asylum seekers themselves, to easily access the wealth of information and resources, and practical tools many of which are not accessible in one place.



Mental Health and Wellbeing Portal
for refugees, asylum seekers and health and social care professionals.



Civic Engagement Project 2015

- ▶ Initial project: **Democratic Access or Privileged Exclusion? Civic Engagement through the Preservation of and Access to Refugee Archives**
- ▶ Project sought to use existing Archives held within the UEL Library as a basis to forge new partnerships between students, academics, archivists and a community groups.
- ▶ To engage with local communities in an attempt to establish a Living Refugee Archive and to promote and enable accessibility and engagement with our collections.
- ▶ To strengthen and develop partnerships and working relationships between the UEL Archive and our new and existing archive depositors.
- ▶ Collection of and developing original and oral history of refugees to be documented through the Living Archive.
- ▶ To encourage and involve our student community in the Refugee archival collections and to develop their skills in the collection of oral histories.

How can we archive refugee voices?

- ▶ Approaches to Archiving Refugee Voices - Who will write our history? Title of a book by Samuel D. Kassow exploring the rediscovery of a hidden archive from the Warsaw Ghetto.
- ▶ Raises the question: Who will write the history of refugee and migrant communities if will fail to find an ethnical way of archiving and preserving their testimonies?
- ▶ Civic Engagement project, entitled “Democratic Access or Privileged Exclusion: Civic Engagement through the Preservation and Access to Refugee Archives.”
- ▶ To engage with local communities in an attempt to establish a Living Refugee Archive and to promote and enable accessibility and engagement with our collections.
- ▶ Collection of and developing original and oral history of refugees to be documented through the Living Archive.

Oral History

- ▶ Democratic Access or Privileged Exclusion
- Oral History
- ▶ Role of Oral History and narrative interviews: Importance of oral history in documenting the life histories and living testimonies of migration which are so often absent from the archival record.
- ▶ Critical anti-oppressive methodology, a bottom up approach to better balance power relations.

Living Refugee Archives

- ▶ Migration can lead to the Displacement of Voices and Forgotten Narratives.
- ▶ How can archives document, preserve and make accessible the material culture and first-hand testimonies of migration?
- ▶ We need to encourage greater engagement with both migrant, refugee and local communities, including the third sector, and oral history provides a methodology to help restore these narratives to the historical record.
- ▶ We cannot rely on just official, policy, or academic discourse to provide us with the first-hand accounts of those seeking to migrate.
- ▶ Living Refugee Archive website: www.livingrefugeearchive.org

living
refugee
archive

Documenting and Accessing the hidden narratives and Contested Lived Experience: A Conclusion

- ▶ **Shifting/living narratives:** Memories of refugees are ‘moving’, and digitalised oral history archives can be seen as ‘a project of human rights’
- ▶ **Contested Lived Experience :** Social history and powerful political narratives are situated, memories are situated, and ideas about memories and identities can be challenged through oral testimonies and life 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 do we make an archive accessible and powerful without distorting the narratives and without affecting the participants and researchers’ safety?
- ▶ How much of the true story can be told and published?

Preservation of first-hand testimonies and oral narratives

- ▶ Contribution of Archives to memory and identity formation
- ▶ 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.
- ▶ How much of the true story can be told and published?

Life Histories of Migrants in Calais

- ▶ The UEL Centre for Narrative Research has begun short university courses on 'Life Stories' with residents at the Jungle refugee camp in Calais.
- ▶ Organised by Professor Corinne Squire Life Histories of Migrants in Calais, the courses involve discussions on life history research and Residents are already engaged in storytelling through forums such as [Refugee Voices](#), initiated by a resident who wanted to share stories from the camp.
- ▶ Showcase the centre's life stories course in the Calais "Jungle" refugee camp and will include contributions from those who have taken part. The course combines photography, art, textual materials and writing.
- ▶ Detail:
<https://centrefornarrativeresearch.wordpress.com/2015/12/03/life-stories-at-the-jungle-refugee-camp-calais-university-for-all/>

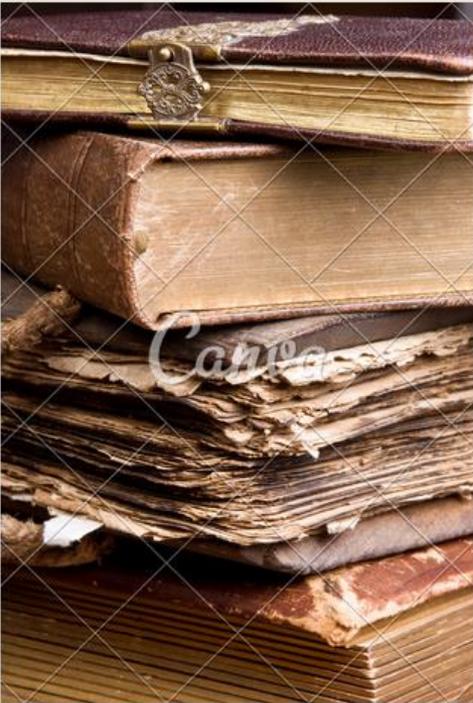
IASFM Working Group

Given the significance of documenting the current migration crisis, especially in light of the situation in the Mediterranean, we were able to secure seed funding from the International Association for the Study of Forced Migration (IASFM) to create a new working group, entitled:

Working Group for Archiving and Documentation of History of Forced Migration and Refugees

IASFM Working Group

- ▶ The purpose of this Working Group will be to serve as a focal point for members of the IASFM interested and/or working in within the fields of forced migration archives e.g. documentation, preservation and researching the history of forced migration.
- ▶ Website and Links to our Social Media content: <http://iasfm.org/adfm/>
- ▶ Archiving and Documentation of History of Forced Migration and Refugees (ADHFMR) will hold a meeting on Wednesday July 13 at 5.30 pm.



IASFM-WG
Archiving,
Documentation,
and
History of
Forced Migration
and Refugees
<http://iasfm.org/adfm/>



ADHFMR
Working Group

Plans for the Future

- ▶ Our initial civic engagement project was very much a pilot project to test the waters and see what might be achievable in this area.
- ▶ We are certainly open to feedback, suggestions and partnerships to consider how we can take this forward.
- ▶ Current ideas include:
 - ▶ Further work in relation to the collection, development and accessibility of oral histories.
 - ▶ An archive mapping exercise to document the provision and accessibility of refugee archives.
 - ▶ Digitisation and the potential for making materials from our collections available online.
 - ▶ Developing new Civic Engagement projects with an emphasis on documenting the life history of migrants.
 - ▶ Running future events and outreach services including open days, workshops, webinars and conference papers

Questions for the Audience?



How can we manage, preserve and make accessible the life history narratives of those caught up in the current refugee crisis?

Who will document the current migration crisis and what kind of archive should we be looking to create?



Contact Details

▶ Paul Dudman

- ▶ Telephone: 020 8223 7676
- ▶ Address: Library and Learning Services:
Archives, UEL Docklands Campus, 4-6 University
Way, London, E16 2RD.
- ▶ Email: p.v.dudman@uel.ac.uk
- ▶ Web: www.livingrefugeearchive.org/
- ▶ Twitter: https://twitter.com/refugee_archive/

▶ IASFM

- ▶ Twitter: [@ADHFM_WG](https://twitter.com/ADHFM_WG)
- ▶ Facebook: www.facebook.com/groups/adhfmr/