

Archives in / of Transit: Historical Perspectives from the 1930s to the Present

Workshop at the Shoah Foundation at the University of Southern California, Los Angeles, June 28–29, 2024. Organized by the GHI Washington; USC Shoah Foundation; Holocaust Research Institute, Royal Holloway, University of London; Queen Mary, University of London; Wiener Holocaust Library, London; USC Dornsife Center for Advanced Genocide Research; in partnership with Thomas Mann House, Villa Aurora, and the Feuchtwanger Memorial Library, USC. Conveners: Simone Lässig (German Historical Institute Washington), Jennifer Rodgers (USC Shoah Foundation), Swen Steinberg (Queen's University, Kingston), in cooperation with Jane Freeland (Queen Mary, University of London); Wolf Gruner (USC Dornsife Center for Advanced Genocide Research); Christine Schmidt (Wiener Holocaust Library, London); Dan Stone (Royal Holloway, University of London). Participants: Eliyana Adler (Penn State University), Svenja Bethke (University of Leicester), Jadzia Biskupska (Sam Houston State University), Miriam Chorley-Schulz (University of Oregon), Atina Grossmann (Cooper Union), Charlotte Lerg (Ludwig Maximilian University), Elissa Mailänder (Sciences Po Paris), Tori Martinez (Linköping University), Christopher Neumaier (Leibniz Centre for Contemporary History), Phi Nguyen (Ecole Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne), Andrea Orzoff (New Mexico State University), William Pimlott (Holocaust Research Institute, Royal Holloway, University of London).

This workshop featuring new scholarship on archives in/of transit was temporally, geographically, and disciplinarily wide-ranging. In the welcome, Jennifer Rodgers and Simone Lässig described the conceptualization of the workshop.

Lässig explained its context in a series of workshops convened by the GHI that focus on global transit and approach issues of migration and objects of transit from various angles and using numerous methodologies. Rodgers emphasized the organizers' interest in exploring the relationship between archives and historical processes, particularly in relation to the experiences of refugees and displaced persons and the development of knowledge networks around these experiences. The organizers adopted a broad understanding of the term "archive" and aspired to move beyond textual documents to grapple with often immaterial and intangible archives of loss.

In the first panel, "Silence and Experience," Phi Nguyen and Atina Grossmann addressed camps as places of transit through deeply personal histories. Nguyen spoke about how Vietnamese repatriated asylum-seekers from Hong Kong negotiate their memories and identities, asking what happens to migrants in transit who are neither here (place of arrival) nor there (place of departure), but rather are *in-between*? Her research, which relies largely on oral and digital archives, such as social media conversations, demonstrates how migrant communities practice homemaking and place-making and create senses of belonging and new identity in new places by conceiving of both "here" and "there" as one. Grossmann's paper considered the trauma and privilege of Jewish refugees who departed Nazi Germany and traveled to Iran and India. She argued that bourgeois Jewish refugees who went to those countries arrived with both connections and cultural knowledge from, for example, the Weimar cultural imaginary of films, illustrated magazines, and feuilletons, and often informed by post-World War I imperial intellectualism. Grossmann pointed out that transit can mean many things, from a one-day stopover to a several-month or even multi-year-long stay, and argued that transit begins before the actual travel takes place and never ends. In the discussion, both Nguyen and Grossman expressed

interest in the objects refugees carried with them when they left the homeland and when they left the transit place. Both also addressed questions regarding the problems of conducting scholarship that intersects with personal histories and often is reliant on one's own family's oral histories and material archives. The discussion delved into who and what gets silenced in histories of displaced persons. Finally, both scholars considered definitions of nostalgia and memory, which term is appropriate in which contexts, and how refugees themselves conceive of and use these terms.

After lunch, an archives session was held at the Feuchtwanger Memorial Library at the University of Southern California, hosted by Michaela Ullmann, Exile Studies Librarian, and Taylor Dwyer, Curator of the Feuchtwanger Library. Participants saw a variety of objects amassed and cared for by Marta and Lion Feuchtwanger—the third library collection of their lives together—after they fled Europe in 1940 and settled in a house in the Pacific Palisades now known as Villa Aurora.

In the second panel, "Knowledge and Networks," Eliyana Adler and William Pimlott thought through the international circulation of archival materials and knowledge, particularly within Jewish networks. Adler considered some 1000 Polish Jewish Holocaust memorial books written collectively in the decades following World War II by Jews from towns and communities that no longer existed. She argued that these collaborative books, which constitute a genre of their own, are archives in/of transit through which dispersed communities tried to write their own history of what they were and were not. Pimlott focused on the foreign branches of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research and explored how Yiddish communities built transnational immigrant histories in the wake of the Holocaust. Comparing the robust branch in Buenos Aires with the more marginalized branch in Great Britain, and considering the politics of the New York

branch's claim to be the center of YIVO, Pimlott's presentation explored what Yiddish archives across the world say about Jewish politics in different regions. Pimlott argued that conceiving of a global YIVO allows for the consideration of archives that circulate through institutional networks and for reckoning with the extraction of Jewish archives to the Americas, especially New York. Topics that came up during discussion included the emotional effects and the participatory dimension of archival distribution and collection, and the relationship between Jewish histories produced in Israel and those produced elsewhere.

In the third panel, "Music and Fashion," Svenja Bethke and Andrea Orzoff discussed histories of culture and cultural transfer through fashion and music, respectively. Bethke's paper argued for the central role of making clothes and designing fashion in the circulation of Jewish migrant knowledge between Nazi-occupied Europe and British Mandate Palestine. She addressed how visual materials such as photographs can be used as archives, despite the frequent absence of contextual information. Orzoff considered music as a migrant archive for European refugees in Buenos Aires in the years 1935 to 1945. Orzoff called musical performances in salons, afterschool children's music programs, and other manifestations of musical engagement "experiential archives" in which refugee musicians often created new sonic forms that merged European with Latin American and Andean folk music. Considering how refugees entered an already-vibrant musical environment in Buenos Aires, Orzoff argued that a multidirectional knowledge transfer occurred as European musicians worked alongside Argentinian ones in both formal and informal settings. The evening concluded with a reception at the Thomas Mann House.

The second day, hosted by the Villa Aurora, began with a panel on "Solidarity, Gender, and Activism," in which Christopher Neumaier and Tori Martinez addressed

gendered experiences of transit. Neumaier presented his research on the impact of immigrant background on work and housekeeping in West Germany from the 1970s to the 1990s. Interviews with Volkswagen employees, which Neumaier called “interstitial archives” that provide information beyond formal documents, reveal gendered roles on the shop floor, despite West Germany’s self-perception as a beacon of social progress for egalitarian roles in contrast to migrants’ family practices. Neumaier’s research shows migrant families were affected by both the receiving and the home country in ways discernible only through consideration of primary sources alongside official state reports and social scientists’ research. Martinez presented on the valuable knowledge contained in the hidden archive of Ludwika Broel-Plater, a non-Jewish Pole active in resistance efforts in Soviet-controlled Poland. Martinez argued that Broel-Plater maintained her agency and activism as a forced migrant in Sweden, and explored the activist’s ability to take on multiple identities and to play the various systems in which she was embedded to her advantage. In this way, Broel-Plater found freedom in exile. The ensuing discussion touched on how much we can really learn about subjects from archives over-determined by their makers, the use of metadata, and reading archives against the grain.

The participants received a tour of the Villa Aurora, formerly the home of Marta and Lion Feuchtwanger, from program officer Friedel Schmoranzer, after which the fifth panel took place. This panel, titled “Collections and Agency,” included presentations by Charlotte A. Lerg and Miriam Chorley-Schulz, both of whom thought through the politics and practicalities of creating archives. Asking whether libraries can really “take flight,” Lerg probed the intersection of material and immaterial knowledge circulation, especially in the digital era. Her paper primarily focused on the migration and re-assembly of destroyed archives of cultural knowledge in times of war. Chorley-Schulz reflected on the

making of the *We Refugees Archive*, which she co-founded. This digital humanities project, whose content was created over four years (2019–2022) and involved work in eight cities, focused on microhistories and new beginnings. Topics of discussion included the inherent incompleteness of the archive; the challenges of working against nation-state ideologies, especially for projects funded by nations or the EU, as the *We Refugees Archive* was; and how archives might be activated as a method of social justice, particularly using non-Western conceptions of history, memory, temporality, and the archive. The tendency of transit and exile studies to fall into moral typologies, and the frequent association between intellectualism and morality, were raised and challenged.

In the sixth panel, “War and Violence,” Elissa Mailänder and Jadzia Biskupska presented on photographs of naked Aryan bodies and the removal of ethnic Poles in Zamość, respectively. Mailänder asked what photographs capturing Nazi ideals of masculinity did to the people who made them and to contemporaneous viewers as well as viewers today. She expressed particular interest in the current location of such archives in private collections, and in the Nazi regime’s encouragement of amateur photography. The images, Mailänder argued, convey immediate meaning but also carry multiple meanings and subjectivities. Biskupska emphasized that the forested Zamość made the region “prime insurgency territory.” As a result, 80 percent of the population of the region was removed through some kind of violence during the Second World War. The removal of ethnic Poles to establish a German settler community is documented in a few extant archives, but these archives are problematic. Specifically, their failure to mention the settler Germans who were not expelled from the East overlooks the multiple, intersectional experiences and positionalities of individuals who were both victims and perpetrators. The following discussion focused on the issue of power and the

archive, particularly regarding archives that are the result of nation- or state-building projects, and on who decides what goes to an archive and what is made accessible.

In the final session, led by Jennifer Rodgers, Simone Lässig, and Swen Steinberg, the organizers offered a series of questions in conclusion: firstly, how can we write the history of people who are in transit—people in-between? How can we assign agency to them? What kind of sources do we have to write their histories, especially since state and other institutional archives often do not give migrants a voice? Secondly, what makes an archive of transit? What about the experiences of these people and how are they shaped by the relationship between the individual and the collective? Archives and other institutions of social memory in spaces that are not necessarily state-sponsored, such as NGO (non-governmental organization) collections, often reveal different stories. Furthermore, what is not in the archive, what is not visible, and what perhaps does not even exist anymore must be considered. One participant suggested that the postcolonial legacy hanging over these histories could be taken further, and another noted that transness, which is often described as never-ending, might be another way of understanding transit and bodies in transit. Involving more archivists and practitioners to address questions of sustainability, obsolescence, and related themes would be valuable for future research gatherings. Participants reflected on the many different types of “transit” and “archive” discussed over the course of the workshop, encompassing not only people and objects but also movement from one dimension to another, such as through the imagination and dreams. Finally, one participant urged that we consider our own biographies, our own transits, archives, and agencies or privileges within each, as well as the communities that we have formed or with which we have come into contact through various archives.

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