

HUMANS, NOT FILES: DEPORTATION AND KNOWLEDGE IN SWITZERLAND

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One Stateless Refugee's Story of Swiss Asylum and Deportation

In 1985, the stateless refugee Ahmed Mahal sought asylum in Switzerland. Shortly before this, he had had a falling out with his employer, the head of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) Yasser Arafat, due to his role as one of the members and founders of the “Palestinian Peace Front” since 1983. Since the organization rejected military action against Israel and civilians and cooperated with Jewish people, he was declared a *persona non grata* within the PLO. According to Ahmed Mahal’s accounts and letters, the following years were taken up with a veritable odyssey, with prison sentences in Tunisia and Syria, torture, his undocumented entry into Switzerland via Yugoslavia and Italy, a “voluntary” departure under the pressure of the Swiss government, and a renewed asylum application in Ticino, Switzerland, in 1987. Pointing to his three-year entrance ban and his categorization as a “security risk” on account of his former activities for the PLO, the Ticino police again pressured him to leave the country for Syria. Ahmed Mahal refused to follow this request on the grounds that deportation to Syria would be tantamount to a death sentence because he had delivered important information on PLO-affiliated groups to the Swiss secret police. Insufficient medical care and imprisonment in unheated prison cells in Mendrisio (Ticino) and Zurich then provoked health problems in him. Furthermore, he was restricted from contacting his lawyer. Afterwards, he wrote the following about this episode: “They didn’t even listen to me, incessantly talked at me to make me sign my consent to a voluntary departure flight to Damascus. Constantly I had to hear that I am a security risk for Switzerland, and an undesirable person.” Finally, he was forced to board a flight to Damascus. During a stopover in Cyprus, he went into hiding, destroyed his Palestinian refugee passport, and contacted the Swiss newspaper *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* and the news service Reuters, who made his case public. In Ahmed Mahal’s view, the media exposure and the burning of his passport forced the Cypriot police to return him to Switzerland. Following the advice of an acquaintance of his, he contacted the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Geneva, which issued him a

document that recognized him as a refugee. All the same, the Swiss government threatened him with renewed deportation. In the spring of 1987, he contacted the Zürcher Beratungsstelle für Asylsuchende (Zurich Helpline for Asylum Seekers), a Zurich-based pro-migrant group, which kept him in hiding until he was allowed to reapply for asylum in the summer. What followed was a tedious and lengthy conflict with various government agencies entailing several interviews, as well as the involvement of lawyers, doctors, and other actors concerning his refugee and residence status. Not accepted as an official refugee, he initially only received “tolerance status” (*Duldungsstatus*). In 1992 he married his former legal counselor from the Zürcher Beratungsstelle für Asylsuchende, through which he was finally granted a permanent residence status. Until his death in January 2019, he lived in the suburbs of Zurich, although he suffered from recurring bouts of depression according to his wife Jacqueline Hauri.¹

In what follows, I want to reflect on the “migratory knowledge” of both the Swiss migration administration and Ahmed Mahal. Anthropologist Maybritt Jill Alpes suggests that one conceive of these procedures of meaning-making as an economy, i. e., as “a system of symbolic transactions within which information is handled, created, devaluated, exchanged, transformed, and dismissed.”² The notion of an economy of migratory knowledge refers to cultural and societal factors that structure flows of information and influence constructions of meaning. Solidarity networks form one important aspect of this economy, based not on “liberal mutual tolerance” but, as Slavoj Žižek argues, on “the possibility for joining *intolerances* in emancipatory struggle.” In this context, non-migrant and migrant groups come together in a common alliance by sharing and transferring information and using it in a specific emancipatory manner for their own ends.³ In this sense, the solidarity networks, with their own economy of meaning-making, challenged the “moral economy” of Swiss society during the 1980s to a certain degree. According to Didier Fassin, this comprises the sense of values and norms by which immigration and asylum are thought about and acted on, also by administrations.⁴ The specific form of migrant knowledge that evolved in this context often countered and challenged administrative knowledge and practice in the face of a growing intolerance towards refugees and asylum seekers.

However, there are clear limitations to accessing the economy of migratory knowledge within the histories of deportation in Switzerland.

1 The name of the migrant and his wife were both changed. The summary of his (forced) mobile trajectory presented here is incomplete and severely shortened compared to the details given by him in the diverse administrative documents. I received Ahmed Mahal's comprehensive administrative file from his wife, Jacqueline Hauri, at the beginning of 2018. The file contains administrative letters and decisions made between 1985–1989, as well as newspaper articles, letters by NGOs, IGOs, writings by Ahmed Mahal, and more. Interviews with his wife complemented this information. The material is part of my ongoing project on deportations in Switzerland since World War II, which deals with the infrastructure, administrative processes, as well as the effects on and reactions of some of the migrants affected by deportations. The project includes additional case studies and will entail further interviews.

2 Maybritt Jill Alpes, “Bushfalling at All Cost: The Economy of Migratory Knowledge in Anglophone Cameroon,” *African Diaspora* 5, no. 1 (2012): 90–115.

3 Slavoj Žižek, *Violence* (London, 2008), 129.

4 Didier Fassin, “Compassion and Repression: The Moral Economy of Immigration Policies in France,” *Cultural Anthropology* 20, no. 3 (2005): 362–87, here 365. More broadly speaking, “moral economy” defines the scope of contemporary biopolitics as the politics that deals with the lives of human beings (e.g., undocumented immigrants or the undeserving poor).

Research is limited by strict restriction periods for relevant sources in archives, on the one hand, and by restricted access to contemporary witnesses, on the other hand. Receiving Ahmed Mahal's extensive administrative file from his wife, therefore, presented a rare occasion for a close reading of the work of the migration administration during the 1980s. At the same time, it gives an idea of Ahmed Mahal's migrant trajectory, his radius of action and contestation. The administrative files, including correspondence between Ahmed Mahal and several administrators and NGOs, together with the interview I conducted with his wife,⁵ Jacqueline Hauri, bear witness to the turbulence of migration practices, the often contingent "existence strategies" migrants mobilize in specific contexts, the varied social geographies of migrant experiences, and the process of becoming a migrant and/or being labeled as such.⁶

I will address two interrelated aspects of migration in this article: *First*, against the backdrop of sweeping historical national and global shifts during the 1970s and 1980s, migration governance in Switzerland (and Western Europe in general) was marked by far-reaching reforms in the administrative field. The administrative making of migrants experienced a palpable transformation during this time. Administrations perform a wide range of migration-related activities. In the case of deportations, administrations are not the only decision makers but rather part of a dynamic field often involving numerous actors such as politicians, administrative officials, doctors, lawyers, NGOs, private persons, solidarity networks, media, and others. As scholars have shown in recent years, administrations can play an influential role, for example, by producing or applying knowledge deemed relevant to better managing migration, or by providing "scientific," "technical," or "managerial" expertise to states. *Second*, in understanding the responses of migrants to these changes, it is important to understand how they struggled with uncertainties, contingencies, imponderables, and chances during their multiple moves across continents and in the face of active deportation policies in Europe. A careful look at Ahmed Mahal's time in Switzerland makes it clear that these strategies were never completely self-contained and depended to a large degree on the "migrant solidarity" of NGOs, private persons, and others. In this context, emotions are also crucial for understanding what knowledge is produced in a particular context.⁷ It is precisely the question of bringing *administrative knowledge* into conversation with *migrant knowledge* that bears closer scrutiny. How did migrants deal with the often complex administrative

5 Interview with Jacqueline Hauri, Wallisellen, April 11, 2019.

6 Maribel Casas-Cortes, Sebastian Cobarrubias, Nicholas De Genova, Glenda Garelli, Giorgio Grappi, and Charles Heller, eds., "New Keywords: Migration and Borders" *Cultural Studies* 29, no. 1 (2015): 55-87.

7 Simone Lässig, "The History of Knowledge and the Expansion of the Historical Research Agenda," *Bulletin of the GHI* 59 (2016): 29-58.

8 For a critical assessment of the concept of *Eigensinn* in the context of migration, see Ulrike Jureit, "Hoffnung auf Erfolg: Akteurszentrierte Handlungskonzept in der Migrations- und Fluchtfor-schung," *Zeithistorische Forschungen/Studies in Contemporary History* 15, no. 3 (2018): 509–22.

9 Nicholas De Genova and Natalie Peutz, eds., *The Deportation Regime: Sovereignty, Space and the Freedom of Move-ment* (Durham, 2010); Daniel Kanstroom and M. Brinton Lykes, eds., *The New Deportation Delirium: Interdisciplinary Responses* (New York, 2015).

10 There is still very little litera-ture in the field of deportation studies in Switzerland. For a historical perspective, see Matthias Fässler, "Mit oder ohne Federlesens: Die Konsti-tuierung des schweizerischen Ausschaffungsregimes in den 1980er Jahren," Master's thesis, University of Zurich, 2017. For a contemporary analysis, see Sieglinde Rosen-berger, Verena Stern, and Nina Merhaut, eds., *Protest Move-ments in Asylum and Deportation* (New York, 2018); Hans-Rudolf Wicker, "Deportation at the Limits of 'Tolerance': The Juridical, Institutional, and Social Construction of 'Illegality' in Switzerland," in *The Deportation Regime*, ed. De Genova and Peutz, 224–44.

11 Uriel Gast, *Von der Kontrolle zur Abwehr: Die eidgenössische Fremdenpolizei im Spannungsfeld von Politik und Wirtschaft 1915–1933* (Zurich, 1997); Hans Mahnig and Etienne Piguet, "Die Immigrations-politik der Schweiz von 1948 bis 1998: Entwicklungen und Auswirkungen," in *Migration und die Schweiz: Ergebnisse des Nationalen Forschungspro-gramms 'Migration und inter-kulturelle Beziehungen'*, 2nd ed., ed. Hans-Rudolf Wicker, Rosita Fibbi, and Werner Haug, 65–108 (Zurich, 2004).

requirements? Is there anything specific that differentiates "migrant knowledge" from "administrative knowledge" and sheds light on their relationship to one another?

Migrants develop survival skills based on their own and other people's knowledge reservoir. This article seeks to show that migra-tion choices and strategies, especially in the cramped situation of deportation procedures, are developed under circumstances more complex than can be grasped by the simplistic alternative between being informed or not about migratory chances and risks — or, be-tween administrative requirements and migrants' *Eigensinn*.⁸ I argue that what matters is whether or not migrants can retrieve and act upon necessary information, and whether they find support through institutions and/or other individuals. But as revealed in manifold stories on deportation and internment, the agency of (prospective) deportees with a precarious status is most often severely limited.⁹

The Changing Moral Economy of Swiss Asylum since World War II

The development of a deportation regime in Switzerland can only be understood against the backdrop of changes on the legal and discurs-ive level in the immigration and asylum policies during the first half of the twentieth century and the asylum politics in the second half thereof.¹⁰ Whereas Switzerland had a relatively liberal immigration system before World War I, the state became the key actor in shap-ing the migration regime and determining the political, legal, and institutional settings that regulated the arrival, settlement, and accom-modation of migrants during and after the war. Several state agencies were created, establishing a powerful administrative apparatus that coordinated and enforced public policies and institutional practices in order to control and limit migration. Most notably, the "Federal Foreigners' Police" founded in 1917 became a centralized institutional facility through which to register, monitor, and select migrants. The federal authorities were able to rely on a legal framework that was sig-nificantly expanded throughout the twentieth century. In Switzerland, as elsewhere, migration laws developed into a refined, regulatory system with increasingly restrictive classifications, wherein distinct groups of migrants were categorized and specific rights, constraints, and obligations were imposed on them.¹¹ The most prominent results of such work were the Federal Act on the Residence and Permanent Settlement of Foreign Nationals (ANAG) of 1931, which remained largely in force in that form until it was completely revised in 2006,

and the first Asylum Law, which came into force in 1981 and has been repeatedly revised in a very restrictive manner ever since. Among other things, the Asylum Law included the consistent enforcement of removal, faster processing of asylum applications, the deterrent of potential asylum seekers in order to prevent “asylum abuse,” the introduction of the safe country doctrine (1990), which prohibits people from applying for asylum if they are from countries where there is supposedly no risk of persecution, and the so-called coercive measures (*Zwangsmassnahmen*), which included the tightening of coercive detention. The rapid legal changes that began in the 1980s have not only given the federal authorities and its administrative apparatus enormous powers but have also systematized and radicalized deportation logistics and practice in Switzerland up to the present.

These changes took place against the backdrop of several interdependent economic and sociopolitical changes in Switzerland:¹² First, following the global economic crisis in 1973, Switzerland’s liberal laissez-faire policies shifted towards more restrictive quota policies. Second, this process was fostered mainly by xenophobic movements, to which most parties reacted proactively by introducing restrictive asylum laws. Third, these changes were linked to an increase in asylum seekers and their increasingly diversified national, ethnic, and religious backgrounds. The arrival of asylum seekers from the Global South led to a change in the “moral economy” — that is, the ways in which something is regarded, construed, and circulated as a social “problem” at a certain moment in time — in this case, asylum and immigration policy. Before the 1970s, Switzerland had received and regarded communist refugees who had been arriving since World War II (e.g., Hungarians and Czechoslovakians) with “respect.” Their arrival correlated with Switzerland’s ideological commitment to the democratic West during the Cold War and coincided with the country’s demand for labor. The climate rapidly changed when refugees from the Global South arrived, fleeing poverty, drought, and war. The change in moral politics was fueled by a narrative of racial and cultural “incompatibility,” or, as one of the politicians of the “Nationale Aktion” and a member of the Swiss National Council, Valentin Oehen, bluntly put it: “We are of the opinion that only refugees coming from the Occidental cultural region should receive definitive admission. This implies the notion that this can only include people with white skin color. One does not have to be a racist in order to understand that all racially mixed societies up to the present have not been capable of organizing a peaceful co-existence.

12 Barbara Lüthi and Damir Skenderovic, eds., *Switzerland and Migration: Historical and Current Landscapes on a Changing Field* (Cham, 2019).

Why should we impose such a problem on ourselves voluntarily? Why should we also take on the problems that are preoccupying the USA, South Africa and England?”¹³ The arrival of asylum seekers from the Global South was thus rendered synonymous with the Swiss nation-state’s purported “loss of control” of its borders and administrative capacity.

Taken together, these factors led to rapidly more restrictive asylum policies, based on a discursive distinction between “true” and “false” refugees, and replaced the former distinction of “guest workers” versus “citizens.” Furthermore, some asylum seekers were regarded as a “security risk” — a narrative foreshadowing present-day discursive strategies. Among other things, Switzerland’s slow transformation into a migration society during the twentieth century was characterized by the fact that migration and migrants represented a political and discursive field in which different political actors and interest groups mobilized their constituencies by presenting migration mainly as a conflict-ridden and problematic issue, thereby using a variety of stereotypes, negative arguments, and imaginaries. In this context, “migration” was recognized as a field of its own, and such a discourse also created categories of thought and action. With time, it not only separated “true” from “false” refugees but also led to a myriad of distinctions regarding status and permits for asylum seekers.¹⁴ In this sense, the migration discourse in Switzerland was also performative. It described and analyzed reality, yet it also aimed to shape the way migration should be perceived by some of the actors in charge of managing it.¹⁵

Navigating Deportation Worlds

In a letter from November 1987 addressed to Peter Arbenz, Commissioner for Refugees (*Delegierter für das Flüchtlingswesen*) in Switzerland between 1986–1990 and later director of the newly founded Federal Office for Migration, Ahmed Mahal made the following vehement argument: “Mr. Arbenz, you know perfectly well that I am a refugee. Refugee since birth, refugee as a victim of history, as a member of a people that has to pay for the consequences of Europe’s guilty conscience. ... You know quite well that I am a political refugee.”¹⁶ Two days later Peter Arbenz offered him this reply: “I would just like to specify that you do not have a right to asylum but only a *right to apply* for asylum and the right that this will be handled in accordance with the rule of law.”¹⁷ Over several years, the correspondence swayed between Ahmed Mahal’s insistence on his right to be treated as a

13 “Asylpolitik — wohin? Podiumsdiskussion,” in *Asylpolitik in der Bewährungsprobe. SAD-Arbeitstagung, Samstag 4. Mai 1985 im Hotel “Zürich,”* ed. Schweizerische Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Demokratie (Zurich, 1985), 30–70; 25. Translation by the author.

14 For an overview of these categories, see Dina Bader, “Who Ought to Stay? Asylum Policy and Protest Culture in Switzerland,” in *Protest Movements*, ed. Rosenberger et al., 69–86, 72.

15 Martin Geiger and Antoine Pécoud, eds., *The Politics of International Migration Management* (Basingstoke, 2010).

16 Here he refers to the founding of the State of Israel, which, from his perspective, the League of Nations created over the heads of the Palestinians, who thereby became refugees just like the Jews before them.

17 Letter Ahmed Mahal to Peter Arbenz, *Delegierter für das Flüchtlingswesen*, Nov. 23, 1987. Emphasis by the author.

“true” refugee and Arbenz’s reference to the “rule of law” and Swiss administrative integrity. But Mahal’s militancy did not recede over time. Over a year and many files later, he wrote Arbenz again with a reproach: “Dear Mr. Arbenz, I will not indicate the number of my file; maybe then you will finally realize that we are humans and not files. Your office increasingly lacks this insight.”¹⁸

On the one hand, these brief excerpts from the correspondence between Ahmed Mahal and the Swiss migration administration during the 1980s point to the powerful institutional contexts involved and the discourses through which the category of “refugee” was construed and public policy was shaped.¹⁹ On the other hand, it reveals subtle forms of contestation on the part of Ahmed Mahal. The powerful labels differentiating “true” from “false” asylum seekers, or classifying migrants as “security risks,” affected nearly all asylum cases during the 1980s.²⁰ Such labels allowed the migration administration to make a clear distinction between “eligible” and “bogus” asylum seekers and manage the single applications accordingly.

But recent scholarly research has shown that several factors could impact the final outcome of deportations cases during the asylum procedure and lead to what Matthew Gibney describes as a “deportation gap” — that is, the gap between mandated deportations and their actual implementation. First, scholars like James Hollifield have pointed to the “liberal paradox” of states, in which they shift between openness in the face of economic forces and new legal spaces of rights (e.g., the Geneva Convention of 1951) since World War II and security concerns and powerful political forces demanding closure and deportation of bogus asylum seekers. Second, concerning the implementation of deportations, the scope and power of “street-level bureaucrats,” in Antje Ellermann’s words, has been mentioned as impacting the effectiveness of deportation policies.²¹ As Switzerland was a signatory of the Geneva Convention and a division of labor between the federal state and the cantons ensued, both the liberal paradox and the street-level bureaucrats were able to play important roles in changing the course of the country’s deportation cases.²²

18 Letter Ahmed Mahal to Peter Arbenz, Delegierter für das Flüchtlingswesen, Feb. 20, 1989.

19 See Roger Zetter, “More Labels, Fewer Refugees:

Remaking the Refugee Label in an Era of Globalization,” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 20, no. 2 (2007): 172–92; Heaven Crawley and Dimitris Skleparis, “Refugees, Migrants, Nei-

ther, Both: Categorical Fetishism and the Politics of Bounding in Europe’s ‘Migration Crisis,’” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 44, no. 1 (2018): 48–64.

20 A second extensive file from the National Archive in Bern with the administrative name “Action Black Autumn” (Aktion Schwarzer Herbst) concerning the deportation of 59 Zaireans testifies to the power of these categories. See National Archives, Bern: E4280A#1998/296#338*: Aktion “Schwarzer Herbst” (1985–1988). See also Fässler, “Mit oder ohne Federlesens,” 78–86.

21 Matthew J. Gibney, “Asylum and the Expansion of Deportation in the United Kingdom,” *Government and Opposition* 43, no. 2 (2008): 146–67; James F. Hollifield, “The Emerging Migration State,” *International Migration Review* 3, no. 38 (2004): 885–912; Antje Ellerman, *State against Migrants: Deportation in Germany and the United States* (New York, 2009). For an overview, see Carla Küffner, “Auseinandersetzungen über Abschiebungen: Handlungsoptionen in einem umkämpften Feld,” in *Asyl verwalten: zur bürokratischen Bearbeitung eines gesellschaftlichen Problems*, ed. Christian Lahusen and Stephanie Schneider, 223–52 (Bielefeld, 2017).

But in the field of migration and deportation studies, there has also been an increasing tendency to pay tribute to the resistances and resilience of migrants themselves. The debates concerning the concept of the autonomy of migration, as well as approaches coming out of Critical Border Studies and Critical Citizenship Studies, have heralded the migrant as a new political subject, often critically. These approaches also have helped de-center the idea of migration control and management within the scholarship so that it has moved away from examining national borders and frameworks towards analyzing a plurality of actors and contentious spaces, including the migrants themselves.²³ Nevertheless, the migrants' perspective so far has found too little attention, especially in a micro-historical view.²⁴ Furthermore, the role of knowledge in these specific migration contexts often has not been addressed. To understand deportation history from a migrant's perspective, one must take the following factors into account: First, the social and cultural capital of migrants, which allows them to access important information and knowledge and, secondly and related to this, their ties to solidarity and support networks. Both were decisive in determining what knowledge migrants were able to draw and act upon to evade (or not) the lingering deportation practice and laws.

In this context, it is helpful to draw on Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the social capital of human beings. Among other things, it emphasizes the function of power — that is, social relations that increase an actor's ability to advance her or his interest.²⁵ Concerning deportations, Bourdieu's concept raises the question of how potential deportees were connected to other people and were able to build up networks to gain information and further their cause (of being accepted as "real" refugees, of not being deported, and so on). As a highly qualified journalist, Ahmed Mahal not only had extensive personal networks but also was able to use these networks to his own advantage in manifold ways that were closed to many other asylum seekers. One important factor was his contact to newspapers and media. While in hiding in Cyprus, he contacted Victor Kocher, a longtime acquaintance and Middle Eastern correspondent for the largest Swiss newspaper, the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*. Furthermore, he reached out to the news agency Reuters and the *Middle East Times*. Victor Kocher wrote a short article in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* on his case titled "Odyssey of a Palestinian," in which he outlined Mahal's trials and tribulations and asked under which circumstances his deportation was reasonable. At the same time, Reuters went public

22 Even though the national state and the cantons are still the main actors and decision makers concerning deportations, their transnational dimensions increased when Switzerland signed the Dublin Regulations in 2008 despite not being official member of the European Union. Increasingly, literature on the present applies a transnational perspective to the "deportation corridor," covering different places, actors, and institutions. See Heike Drotbohm and Ines Hasselberg, "Deportation, Anxiety, Justice: New Ethnographic Perspectives," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 41, no. 4 (2015): 551–62.

23 See, for example, Maurice Stierl, *Migrant Resistance in Contemporary Europe* (Oxon, 2019); Engin F. Isin and Greg M. Nielsen, eds., *Acts of Citizenship* (New York, 2008); Ilker Atac, Kim Rygiel, and Maurice Stierl, "The Contentious Politics of Refugee and Migrant Protest and Solidarity Movements: Remaking Citizenship from the Margins," *Citizenship Studies* 20, no. 5 (2016): 527–44; Chiara Bramilla, Jussi Laine, James Scott, and Gianluca Bocchi, eds., *Borderscaping: Imaginations and Practices of Border Making* (Aldershot, 2015).

24 One of the early exceptions is Natalie Peutz, "Embarking on an Anthropology of Removal," *Current Anthropology* 47, no. 2 (2006): 217–41.

25 Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John G. Richardson, 241–58 (New York, 1986).

with a story titled “Dissident PLO Man Jumps Flight, Deported From Cyprus,” which described Mahal’s ordeal and his manifold attempts to receive asylum in Switzerland as well as his successive deportations from the country.²⁶ After Mahal’s return to Switzerland, these newspaper articles also came to the notice of the Commissioner for Refugees, who obviously was informed about Ahmed Mahal’s attempt to make a case for asylum based on his precarious situation. In other instances, as well, Mahal tried to reach a more global public by sending his letters and complaints not only to the Swiss migration administration but also to media outlets such as Reuters and the Swiss TV or international organizations such as Amnesty International, the UNHCR, and the International Red Cross. In what can be described as “strategic knowledge” to further his case, he used his writing skills and networks to disseminate information about his situation and find legal support. Moreover, his insistence on being a “real refugee” reflects his rejection of the Swiss administration’s skepticism towards his refugee status. By insisting on being accepted as a human being and a “true” refugee, he was aware of the important distinction between rejected and accepted refugees: Potential deportees did not receive any support from the state and lost all protection. They were, so to speak, “remnants” for whom the state was not accountable. In other words, Ahmed Mahal repeatedly appealed to human rights in his letters — namely, to a right to state protection and physical integrity in the face of past tortures in Syria by PLO forces and maltreatment in prisons by the Swiss police. In this sense, he directly addressed the fact of the vulnerability of his body and being as constituting a “precarious life” — that is, a life reduced to the minimal sustenance of existence — and he showed how “the inclusion and exclusion of some lives from the domain of humanity play a part in a normative — many times oppressive — construction of lives.”²⁷ Several times in his letters, he threatened to commit suicide if deported. Even if these strategies may only have represented small disruptions of the administrative procedures, his persistent demands and threats clearly challenged the notion of who was entitled to a political voice with the authorities and who was not. Understood as “acts of citizenship,” to borrow Engin Isin’s phrase, both subtle and open acts of resistance could take different shapes in the context of deportations: Ranging from bodily self-harm and destroying personal documents to going into hiding or openly revolting in deportation camps, these acts are all ways of at least deferring or interrupting a pending deportation.

26 Victor Kocher, “Odyssee eines Palästinensers: Misslungene Abschiebung von Zürich nach Damaskus,” *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, Mar. 31, 1987; Thomas O’Dwyer, “Dissident PLO Man Jumps Flight, Deported From Cyprus,” Reuters, date not specified.

27 Hagar Kotef and Merav Amir, “(En)Gendering Checkpoints: Checkpoint Watch and the Repercussions of Intervention,” *Signs* 32, no. 4 (2007): 973–96, here 979n10; Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London, 2004); Didier Fassin, *Life: A Critical User’s Manual* (Cambridge, 2018).



Protest against asylum policies, University of Bern, Switzerland, Feb. 13, 1987, Gertrud Vogler. Demonstration with slogan "Xenophobia and deportations — without the Bernese students" (Sozialarchiv Zürich, Schweiz; Bestand: F_5107, Vogler, Gertrud).

In addition to the social and cultural capital of migrants allowing for individual resilience and resistance to the state's attempts to exclude them from their territory, solidarity networks were often just as important. Though this aspect still needs further investigation in the scholarship, we can already discern that different forms of political resistance in the 1980s were often based on close-knit solidarity groups between Swiss citizens, potential deportees, and at times also international supporters. These acts of resistance entailed demonstrations, sit-ins, and the well-known church asylums, with their origins in the US asylum movement of the 1980s. Among the Swiss citizens in such groups was a whole range of actors, including housewives, politicians, priests, artists, writers, and lawyers. The breadth of actors engaged in acts of solidarity also points to the fact that the "moral economy," even in times of restrictive measures against asylum seekers, was not homogeneous. The pictures reproduced here exemplify the publicity that such radical actions could garner.

Alongside the public acts of resistance, networks of anti-deportation activists reaching beyond the Swiss borders into safe third countries helped individual potential deportees go into hiding.²⁸ Various organizations, such as the "Freiplatz Aktion," "Aktion for

28 Jonathan Pärli, "Ungehorsam im Namen des Rechtsstaats. Wie die Asylbewegung der 1980er-Jahre zur Renaissance des Kirchenasyls beitrug," *Neue Wege: Beiträge zu Sozialismus und Religion* 110, no. 11 (2016): 33-35; Anni Lanz and Manfred Züfle, *Die Fremdmacher: Widerstand gegen die schweizerische Asyl- und Migrationspolitik* (Zurich, 2006).

carrying out many other tasks. Gender clearly played a salient role in this instance.

In the field of migration studies, gender has long been acknowledged as a relevant and structuring aspect of migration policies, public representations, as well as migrants' experiences.³¹ In Ahmed Mahal's case, gender factored in in divergent ways. One must consider the gendered experiences and motivations within the solidarity movements that supported him.³² In his wife's case, according to her own account during the interview, she claims that she slowly slipped into political activism through her involvement in various organizations, whereby her feminist activism had a strong intersection with her engagement in the asylum movement. She gained experience and accumulated knowledge during the 1970s and 1980s in several organizations such as Amnesty International, was co-founder of the "Bewegung für eine Offene und Demokratische Schweiz" (BODS) and the "Asylkoordination Schweiz," as well as being engaged in different feminist contexts without being an active member of the women's movement.³³ These activities, as she stated, originated from her experience of feeling discriminated against as a young woman:

In the mid 1980s, I began to become interested in refugee work. During that time, asylum decisions became politicized for the first time. The way that refugees were treated, this being excluded, I knew from my own experience. I was convinced that, as a woman, I would never have the same possibilities that were open to men. Inside of me I have a deep feeling that I constantly have to fight in order to achieve my goals and to gain recognition. I already felt this discrimination as a girl.³⁴

Also in the interview I conducted with her, she stated that she clearly understood the degradation reflecting in the hatred of foreigners in Switzerland because she had lived through similar feelings of degradation as a woman, already as a girl.³⁵ Biographical elements obviously spurred her motivation to oppose discrimination in other fields such as the asylum movement. From the interview, it also becomes apparent that some activist women transferred their knowledge, particularly the notions of solidarity and strategies of civil disobedience they had developed and experienced within the feminist movement, to their activities in the asylum movement. Therefore, these women

31 Patricia R. Pessar and Sarah J. Mahler, "Transnational Migration: Bringing Gender In," *International Migration Review* 37, no. 3 (2003): 812-46; Nancy L. Green, "Changing Paradigms in Migration Studies: From Men to Women to Gender," *Gender and History* 24, no. 3 (2012): 782-98; Sabine Hess, Johanna Neuhäuser, and Tanja Thomas, "Einleitung: Gender und Politiken der Migration," *Feministische Studien* 34, no. 2 (2016): 177-88.

32 Another important gender aspect touches on the question of marginalized masculinities as "the other" of hegemonic masculinity, according to Raewyn W. Connell. See R. W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept," *Gender & Society* 19, no. 6 (2005): 829-59. This makes it possible to identify and render visible male-specific vulnerabilities, so as to avoid disregarding the heterogeneity of experiences among men. In studies on migrants with precarious legal status, this has rarely been applied. According to his wife, Ahmed Mahal often struggled with his role as a man in Swiss society.

33 Interview with Jacqueline Hauri, Wallisellen, Apr. 11, 2019. For example, in 1984 she co-authored the pamphlet "Die Sprache ist kein Mann, Madame: Anregungen für einen nicht-sexistischen Sprachgebrauch," published by the Schweizerische Journalisten Union (SJU). She was also a one-time candidate for the party "Frauen macht Politik!" (FraP), although she was never an official party member.

34 Cristina Karrer, *Liebesgeschichten? Schweizerinnen und Asylbewerber* (Zurich, 1992), 21-34.

35 Interview with Jacqueline Hauri, 25:00-25:50.

positioned themselves within a tradition of social struggles. Hauri’s solidarity apparently grew from experiences of discrimination against women and refugees that she and others regarded as similar.

Beyond Hauri’s and other Swiss women’s experience of discrimination fostering their solidarity with refugees, there was also gender bias between Swiss men and women within the movement. Swiss women were mainly active at the grassroots level, whereas men focused on public policy. As Hauri noted in her interview, it was mostly women who kept the refugees in hiding or did individual case work, whereas “men were those — this is how it always is — who appeared in public, who gave great speeches and so on, but they never really bothered about the single cases.”³⁶ Asymmetrical power relations that obtained not only between the migrants and the state or administrations but also between these solidarity groups and the potential deportees were just as important as these manifold expressions of solidarity, however. As Jacqueline Hauri put it in another interview: The relationship between the helpers and the helped constituted a “positive paternalism.” This entailed, among other things, as Hauri stated, a knowledge gap of cultural and institutional specificities in Switzerland, as well as the command of language and other important information to navigate the administrative requirements and regulations.³⁷

Conclusion

There is plenty of evidence corroborating the idea that the frequency or intensity of protest about refugees is not always associated with the number of enforced deportations, although more extensive research beyond the present situation of “deportation nations” evolving in many parts of the world is needed to confirm this.³⁸ In the context of Switzerland against the backdrop of rapid legal changes and more radicalized deportation logistics during the 1980s, knowledge about migrants and potential deportees, as well as knowledge from them, varied and often revealed the interdependencies of the multiple actors and producers of forms of “migratory knowledge,” who ranged from administrations and media to solidarity movements and the migrants themselves. Deportations were a vital instrument of state control and migration management, yet thinking about them outside of an exclusively top-down state perspective and incorporating the less acknowledged perspective of the migrants and solidarity movements shows that “migratory knowledge” was social and was often shared and circulated among several actors, despite their unequal legal and

36 Ibid.; 30:30–31:25.

37 Interview with Jacqueline Hauri.

38 Daniel Kanstroom, *Deportation Nation: Outsiders in American History* (Cambridge, MA, 2007); De Genova and Peutz, eds., *The Deportation Regime*.

social status. Even so, access to knowledge about how to straddle the administration's handling of migrants and the lingering deportation practice and laws was dependent on the social and cultural capital of the individual migrants. Yet, the above-mentioned example of Ahmed Mahal shows another important dimension: To the extent that it is possible to make generalizations, such a bottom-up perspective unveils that one emphasis lay on emotions as a motivational force for challenging the deportation regime, both on the part of the migrants as well as of those who supported them. As scholarship on contemporary anti-deportation protest has shown, strong relations between refugees and supporters (through friendships and/or romantic relationships) sometimes trigger mobilization.³⁹ When emotions such as anger, indignation, or love are directed against discrimination and inequality, they can be understood as a mobilizing force for challenging pending deportations. Ahmed Mahal and Jacqueline Hauri were a living example of this, not only through their anger and indignation, propelled by the perceived injustice of the Swiss migration regime. Their affectionate relationship also guaranteed a certain degree of safety for Ahmed Mahal, not least because he achieved citizenship through marriage, thereby preventing his deportation.

When analyzing migration, one should also focus attention on different forms of capital. Instead of understanding them as static entities, we need to acknowledge how one form of capital can be converted into another or can compensate for the others.⁴⁰ For migrants, who often lack economic means and support, social and cultural capital in the form of education, social networks, and so on could possibly be life-saving strategies. However, the "migratory knowledge" that circulates among migrants and solidarity movements, which is transformed and used to prevent deportations, is hardly ever symmetrical. Most migrants have access to certain information and knowledge reservoirs (law, medicine, administration, language, etc.) *via* these groups or individuals. Still, we should acknowledge the small and subtle "acts of citizenship" of the mostly precariously situated migrants as potential deportees, when those who are regarded as not counting make a claim to be counted.⁴¹

Furthermore, in the field of migration studies, scholars should also shed light on different forms of solidarity that exist between social groups and individuals. Solidarity networks make it possible for individuals to think beyond national sovereignty and bound up states and, instead, think of relationality and difference together.⁴²

39 Gianni D'Amato and Helen Schwenken, "Protests Revisited: Political Configurations, Political Culture and Protest Impact," in *Protest Movements*, ed. Rosenberger et al., 273-91.

40 Simone Lässig and Swen Steinberg, "Knowledge on the Move: New Approaches Toward a History of Migrant Knowledge," *Geschichte & Gesellschaft* 43 (2017): 313-46, here 338-40.

41 Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis, 1999); Peter Nyers, "No One Is Illegal: Between City and Nation," *Studies in Social Justice* 4, no. 2 (2010): 127-43.

42 Rosine Kelz, "Political Theory and Migration: Concepts of Non-Sovereignty and Solidarity," *movements. Journal für kritische Migrations- und Grenzregimeforschung* 1, no. 2 (2015): 1-17, here 15.

This also applies to the knowledge and information that is shared among solidarity groups. Such solidarities and claims may seem to be momentary acts, short interruptions of the established order of how to speak and act, as was true in the case of Ahmed Mahal, who refused to allow himself to be labeled a “file” but rather struggled to be regarded as human in the face of dehumanizing deportations.

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