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Waiting at the Gates of Hong Kong:  
Russian Refugees in Hong Kong during the 1950s and 1960s

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## **Waiting at the Gates of Hong Kong: Russian Refugees in Hong Kong during the 1950s and 1960s**

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### **Abstract**

A wave of thousands of Russian refugees migrated from mainland China through Hong Kong during the 1950s and 1960s. The resettlement of these Russian migrants was fraught with difficulties. For more than two decades they were stranded in Hong Kong hoping for resettlement in Western countries such as the United States, Brazil, Argentina, Australia and New Zealand.

The Russian refugees experienced their migration through Hong Kong as a waiting period and a time of transition on their way to respective countries of resettlement. Life stories, biographical and archival documents described this waiting period as a situation of ambivalence and uncertainty, but also as a moment of agency and resistance. The migration experience of the Russian refugees provided insight into Hong Kong's refugee policy after the Second World War and highlighted the relief work of the UNHCR and various voluntary agencies such as the World Council of Churches.

### **The Old Believers in China**

*When China became communist you weren't allowed to do anything you wanted, there was no freedom. You were not allowed to pray. In the house you were not allowed to have icons on the walls. There was no freedom at all. [...] In those days my parents had a house, they [the communists] took it away from them. I remember one morning, we woke up and they were taking the stock away from the backyard and my mum came out and said: 'What's going on? What are you doing?' They said: 'Go back into the house. Don't ask any questions.' They just took it away, there was no warning, no excuse, no reason, nothing.<sup>1</sup>*

Nina banged her fist on the table when she told me how her family was treated by the Chinese authorities after the Communist Revolution in 1949. Nina was born in the north-western Chinese province of Sinkiang and lived there until 1964, when her family left for Australia. She remembered the famine years in the early 1960s when the Great Leap Forward and the collectivisation led to a widespread starvation. Hardship, hunger, cold – these were the first memories that came up in her memory talking about life in China.

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<sup>1</sup> Nina, interviewed by Stefanie Scherr, 8 July 2009, Melbourne

Nina's family moved from Russia to China after the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917. Her family belonged to a group of Russian Orthodox Christians who split from the Russian Orthodox Church in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century. The schism was caused by several reforms of the church liturgy and rituals which Patriarch Nikon (1605-1681) had introduced in order to bring the Russian Orthodox Church into line with Greek Orthodoxy. The dissenters called themselves Old Believers or Old Ritualists, thus indicating their devotion to the old rituals of Russian Orthodoxy. Refusing to accept the church reforms, during the first few decades of the schism some Old Believers fled from Russia to the neighbouring territories of today's Romania, Turkey and Poland. More Old Believers fled Russia after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917; they opposed the new regime because of its atheist politics and collectivisation plans. Several thousand Old Believers migrated to Manchuria and the province of Sinkiang in northwest China.<sup>2</sup>

### **Life Stories and Life History**

Nina told me that for several years she was living together with her mother and her siblings while her father was arrested.

*My mum had four children at that time. I had two brothers and a sister, it was four of us. My mother was struggling to bring us up, and then the two youngest, the boy and the girl, they died. They got sick and my mum didn't have money to take them to the doctor. The doctor wouldn't see them unless you would pay him. They died in my mum's arms.<sup>3</sup>*

I remembered Nina's life story in the vein of a memorandum written by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) on the situation of European refugees in China in the 1950s. The High Commissioner reported that the great majority of European refugees in China were White Russians who had fled the Soviet Union after the Communist Revolution in 1917 and settled in Manchuria or the province of Sinkiang. After the Soviet occupation of Manchuria in 1945 the situation for many White Russian settlers began to deteriorate. Several thousands were dismissed from their positions within the Chinese Eastern Railway as an influx of newly arrived Soviet officials, engineers, and workers had taken over control. The

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<sup>2</sup> Alexander B. Dolitsky and Lyudmila P. Kuz'mina, "Cultural Change vs. Persistence: A Case from Old Believer Settlements," *Artic* 39 (1985): 224–225.

<sup>3</sup> Nina, interviewed by Stefanie Scherr, 8 July 2009, Melbourne

economic and political conditions worsened for all foreign settlers in China after the communist government assumed full control in 1949. The UNHCR estimated there were six to seven thousand refugees in Manchuria who were former railway employees and by then deprived of any means of earning their livelihood.<sup>4</sup>

When deconstructing and reassembling Nina's life story, the High Commissioner's memorandum became a reflection and mediation between the multiple voices of my interviewees and archival documents.<sup>5</sup> This reflection took Nina's life story one step further, from biographical research or narrative inquiry to life history. Ivor Goodson and Pat Sikes argue that telling a lived experience and render it as a life story is one interpretive layer, but the move to life history adds a second layer and further interpretation.<sup>6</sup> This step from life story to life history puts the researcher into position to locate the life story, with all its inevitable selections, shifts, and silences.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, I hold to the need for providing historical contexts for reading life stories. Life history research is concerned with honouring the individuality and complexity of individuals' experiences. At the same time it unravels the complexities of their broader historical condition.<sup>8</sup>

Oral sources do not necessarily need to be used to reinterpret and fill gaps in official documents, argues Paul Thompson. Life history presents an account which throws light upon the historical and cultural situatedness of identities, interpretations and testimonies. I use a montage and bricolage of sources to rearrange and juxtapose, interpret and connect the voices of my interviewees, archival documents and newspaper articles. This polyphony of interviews and documentary sources acknowledges the different points of views and multiple voices which produce meaning in historical contexts. The fragmentation and recomposition of these testimonies convey a dialogic

<sup>4</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Memorandum on the Situation of the Refugees of European Origin in China*, February 1953, CO 1023/118, 1/64-2/65, Public Records Office Hong Kong.

<sup>5</sup> My research drew on life story interviews with Russian migrant families in Melbourne, Sydney and Queensland, Australia. Archival material of the UNHCR, the World Council of Churches, and the Hong Kong government contrasted and completed the remembered migration experience of my interviewees. (Michele Langfield and Pamela Maclean, "But Pineapple I'm Still a Bit Wary Of": Sensory Memories of Jewish Women who Migrated to Australia as Children, 1938-9," in *Speaking to Immigrants: Oral Testimony and the History of Australian Migration*, ed. James A. Hammerton and Eric Richards (Canberra: Australian National University, 2002), 94)

<sup>6</sup> Ivor F. Goodson and Pat Sikes, *Life History Research in Educational Settings: Learning from Lives* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2001), 17.

<sup>7</sup> Goodson and Sikes, *Life History Research*, 18; Petra Munro, *Subject to Fiction: Women Teachers' Life History Narratives and the Cultural Politics of Resistance* (Buckingham, Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1998), 11.

<sup>8</sup> Ardra L. Cole and J. Gary Knowles, *Lives in Context: The Art of Life History Research* (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2001), 20; Munro, *Women Teachers' Life History Narratives*, 9.

experience of a story told by many voices; it suggests ways of reading the multiple realities and interpretations of the Old Believers' migration history.<sup>9</sup>

The trajectories of migratory movements varied for many Old Believer families; every migration revealed its own particular cycles of departures, waiting and arrival.<sup>10</sup> Migrants occasionally stopped on their way, their journey ground to a halt or they took detours. Some Old Believers spent weeks on the road and on trains travelling through China until they reached Hong Kong. Many families waited for days, weeks or months to arrange their onward journey to respective countries of resettlement. The times when their migratory movement paused were filled with waiting, a temporality which needed to be endured and was marked by suspense.

In the stilling, slowing and pausing modes of waiting I reflect upon the different temporalities that characterised the Old Believers' migration process. I also highlight the temporal possibilities and expectations that accompanied their migration. The particular timings of their migration relate to decisions about departure and deferral, opportunities for resettlement, administrative procedures and bureaucratic constraints. To understand the processes, dynamics and possibilities which underlie the timings of their migration this article focuses on the continuities and ruptures in the trajectories of their migratory movement.<sup>11</sup> The memories of their migration point at the time the Old Believers spent in Hong Kong because it determined the conditions of their resettlement.

### **Waiting and Hope**

Nina's grandparents had been living in Australia since 1955 and they wrote letters back saying "come to Australia, it's a good country"<sup>12</sup>. Nina's parents wanted to follow her grandparents and went to the authorities to ask for permission to leave

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<sup>9</sup> Karen Flick and Heather Goodall, "Angledool Stories. Aboriginal History in Hypermedia," in *Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (London, New York: Routledge, 1998), 425; Alessandro Portelli, "Oral History as a Genre," in: *Narrative & Genre: Contexts and Types of Communication*, ed. Mary Chamberlain and Paul Thompson (New Brunswick, London: Transaction, 2004), 36; Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 155.

<sup>10</sup> Maree Pardy, "The Shame of Waiting," in *Waiting*, ed. Ghassan Hage (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2009), 198.

<sup>11</sup> Saulo B. Cwerner, "The Times of Migration," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 27, No. 1 (2001): 115.

<sup>12</sup> Nina, interviewed by Stefanie Scherr, 8 July 2009, Melbourne

for Australia. The Chinese authorities, however, arrested Nina's father and charged him with treason because he wanted to leave China.

*They arrested him very early in the morning, even before dawn. They made him walk through the town on the main street so people could see him. They made him walk with chains on his feet and hands. And when they saw my father has been arrested everybody started running to my mum. 'What did he do? He's such a nice man, such a quiet man! What did he do wrong to deserve such a treatment?' [...] My mum explained that we wanted to go to Australia and they asked: 'What is Australia? Where is Australia?' Nobody knew about Australia. So my mum told them and gave them my grandparents' letters to read.<sup>13</sup>*

Nina waited in expectation that her father would be released from jail and hoped that her family would get permission to leave China for a better life in Australia. Giovanni Gasparini writes that the waiter's attitude in waiting may vary; someone can merely wait for something to happen, and someone can also consciously expect that an event will take place at a given time. The difference lies in the state of anticipation which gives the waiter to a certain extent control over the situation.<sup>14</sup>

I agree with Gasparini that the moment of waiting is filled with anticipation, but I doubt his distinction of a waiter who merely waits and one who consciously expects. The waiter always waits for the actualisation of what he or she are waiting for, in hope and expectation. Expectations focus on the possible actualisation of what we are waiting for, while hope relates to the changing conditions of our waiting and reaches further into the future. Martin Heidegger argues that to expect something possible is always to understand it with regard to whether and when and how it will be actually present at hand. "Expecting is not just an occasional looking-away from the possible to its possible actualization, but is essentially a *waiting for that actualization*."<sup>15</sup> Heidegger's idea of expectations resonates with Nina's life story. Her family expected and waited in anticipation for her father's release from jail; he was sentenced to eight years in prison. However, Heidegger's concept relates to Nina's retrospective account of her migration experience, she did not wait anymore for the possible actualisation of her expectations. Nina remembered the conditions of her waiting, and recalled not the possible but actual fulfilment of her expectations.

Nina's memories related to her present and lived reality. She expressed her hopes in terms of religious freedom and representations of financial and material security –

<sup>13</sup> Nina, interviewed by Stefanie Scherr, 8 July 2009, Melbourne

<sup>14</sup> Giovanni Gasparini, "On Waiting," *Time & Society* 4, No.1 (1995): 30–31.

<sup>15</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time [1962]* (Malden, Oxford, Carlton: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 306.

the Australian dream of her own home. “Just freedom”, that was what Nina hoped for. “The freedom that you don’t have to be frightened to say anything; that you don’t have to be frightened of having icons in the house or even wearing a cross.” She showed me the little silver cross hanging on a necklace around her neck. “Freedom, that was what we were looking forward to, and to have our own house.”<sup>16</sup>

Hope gave Nina’s family a temporalised sense of potential, of having a future. Hope created the capacities to wait, to defer, discipline and even transform oneself in anticipation.<sup>17</sup> Nina’s account of her migration was infused with the confidence for a better future in Australia and justified her family’s migration to Australia as a search for religious freedom and life in peace.

### **European Refugees arrive in Hong Kong**

The Old Believers identified with the particularities of their own migration and remembered it as part of an international resettlement effort for the European refugees in China. In 1953 a report to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimated there were still some ten to fifteen thousand European refugees remaining in China, mainly in the Shanghai, Tientsin and Harbin area.<sup>18</sup> The European refugees were mainly White Russians plus smaller numbers of refugees from Eastern and Southern Europe.<sup>19</sup> Many of the refugees living in the Shanghai area, more than three thousand, were registered at the Shanghai office of the International Refugee Organization (IRO).<sup>20</sup> Since July 1947 the IRO was significantly involved with worldwide refugee issues. The primary orientation of the IRO was not towards relief, rehabilitation and repatriation, as was its predecessor organisation, the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Agency (UNRRA)<sup>21</sup>, but towards resettlement.<sup>22</sup> However, many European refugees living in China had never registered with the IRO for

<sup>16</sup> Nina, interviewed by Stefanie Scherr, 8 July 2009, Melbourne

<sup>17</sup> Phillip Mar, “Unsettling Potentialities: Topographies of Hope in Transnational Migration,” *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 26, No. 4 (2005): 365.

<sup>18</sup> James M. Read, *Report to the High Commissioner on Trip to Southeast Asia*, 27 January 1953, CO 1023/117, 18/263.

<sup>19</sup> Glen Peterson, “‘To Be or Not to Be a Refugee’: The International Politics of the Hong Kong Refugee Crisis, 1949–55,” *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 36, No. 2 (2008): 181.

<sup>20</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Memorandum on the Situation of the Refugees of European Origin in China*, February 1953, CO 1023/118, 1/64.

<sup>21</sup> Iain Guest, *The UNHCR at 40: Refugee Protection at the Crossroads: A Report of the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights* (New York: The Committee, 1991), 22–23.

<sup>22</sup> Dennis Gallagher, “The Evolution of the International Refugee System,” *International Migration Review* 23, No. 3 (1989): 579.



assistance. Some considered that the communist regime would not last, some did not require assistance in these earlier days and some could not register because of the great distance that separated them from any IRO office within China.<sup>23</sup>

Their refugee status, however, did not become a critical point in the Old Believer's identification as a migrant community. The conditions for this nomination were unclear and the responsibilities of their resettlement seemed obscure. Vlas wondered, "I think they called us refugees, but how do I have to understand 'refugee'? Refugees flee secretly, don't they? We didn't leave secretly, we just left. We were kind of refugees because they [the Chinese authorities] took everything from us, we couldn't take anything"<sup>24</sup>. Vlas struggled with the determinations of his refugee status, also after his arrival in Australia it seemed unclear what made him a refugee.

In order to fall within the UNHCR mandate, a refugee had to meet two conditions: first, one had to have fled their country of citizenship owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion; and is unable or unwilling to return to their country of citizenship owing to such fear. And second, one had to be unable or unwilling to avail oneself of the protection of his or her national government because of a well-founded fear of persecution by that government.<sup>25</sup>

The Russian settlers in China fell unequivocally within the UNHCR mandate and were recognised as refugees since they possessed a well-founded fear of persecution if they returned to the Soviet Union.<sup>26</sup> However, the status of the UNHCR was doubtful in the early years after its inception in 1950. The High Commissioner was provided just a temporary authority of three years. He was allocated a small administrative budget (US\$ 300.000) and not allowed to raise additional funds.<sup>27</sup> The UNHCR Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees of 1951 established minimal rights for refugees. Although the convention made provision to refugee's right to be protected

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<sup>23</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Memorandum on the Situation of the Refugees of European Origin in China*, February 1953, CO 1023/118, 1/64.

<sup>24</sup> Vlas, interviewed by Stefanie Scherr, 11 January 2011, Gympie

<sup>25</sup> Gallagher, "Evolution of the International Refugee System," 580; Peterson, "International Politics of the Hong Kong Refugee Crisis," 174; Alex Cunliffe, "The Refugee Crisis: A Study of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees," *Political Studies* XLII (1995): 281–284.

<sup>26</sup> Gallagher, "Evolution of the International Refugee System," 580; Cunliffe, "The Refugee Crisis," 281–284.

<sup>27</sup> General Assembly Resolution 428 (V), 14 December 1950, "Statue of the Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees," accessed 16 June 2011, <http://www.unhcr.org/3b66c39e1.html>; Guest, *UNHCR at 40*, 26–27.

against forcible return, or refoulement, it reflected the hesitancy of nation states to extend efforts on their behalf.<sup>28</sup>

Nina related her own migration experience to the exodus of Russian refugees fleeing China. While Nina's family waited for her father's release, many Russians from Nina's village had already left. "Lots of people and families just packed up and fled China. They ended up in Hong Kong and from there a lot of them went to Brazil or Argentina; many went to America, New Zealand and Australia." Nina explained that "at the end the Chinese government decided that they can't do anything; [the Russians were] just fleeing and they gave up. At the end they said: 'You're all free, go!'" Nina explained that there was "no use to keep him [her father] in jail, so after seven and a half years they released him and said: 'Alright, go!'"<sup>29</sup>

Nina, who migrated as a young teenager, put the hardships of her own migration experience in context with the Russian populace fleeing China, but she did not relate it to the political and historical dimensions of the European refugee movement from China. Her scarce access to documents and historical accounts failed to recognise the involvement of international organisations, voluntary agencies and governments.

The Hong Kong Public Records Office holds archival material which documents the international resettlement efforts for the Russian populace in China. The documents include notes of a July 1952 meeting in the British Foreign Office in London. At this meeting Thomas Jamieson, who was sent from the Hong Kong Office of the UNHCR, met with officials from the British Foreign Office, the Colonial Office and the London Office of the UNHCR. He was to discuss the resettlement of the European refugees remaining in China and "the problem of getting these refugees out of China". The notes of this meeting revealed Jamieson's point of view: "At the present rate it would take 7 to 10 years to do so. To deal with them more quickly it was necessary to get more visas and to open the doors to the United States and Canada"<sup>30</sup>.

The problem of getting these refugees out of China was that the People's Republic of China (PRC) would grant exit permits to European refugees only once they were in possession of entry visas for their respective countries of resettlement. However, most of these countries did not have diplomatic relations with the PRC.

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<sup>28</sup> Gallagher, "Evolution of the International Refugee System," 579–80.

<sup>29</sup> Nina, interviewed by Stefanie Scherr, 8 July 2009, Melbourne

<sup>30</sup> *Notes of a Meeting at the Foreign Office: Refugees from China*, 23 July 1952, CO 1023/118, 1/205.

Many western countries recognised instead the Republic of China (ROC) which retreated to the island of Taiwan after being militarily defeated in 1949. Because of the absence of consular offices in the PRC, most of the refugees in China could receive visas only in Hong Kong. However, the Hong Kong authorities only allowed refugees to enter its territory if they were in possession of valid entry visas for their countries of resettlement. Therefore, in 1952 only a small number of about 880 refugees could be resettled. At this rate it was estimated that it would take another ten years to move the refugees of European origin out of China.<sup>31</sup>

In order to solve this problem Thomas Jamieson suggested that Hong Kong should allow an initial entry of 200 European refugees from China who would be accommodated in hotels and looked after by his office.

*They would do nothing in Hong Kong except act as tourists and go about seeing the sights. He would see to it that sick and undesirable characters were not sent and the first 200 would all be specially selected as being likely to be allowed into the United States. [...] He did not think that Hong Kong would be saddled with an appreciable remnant.*<sup>32</sup>

The Hong Kong government was concerned that a continuous influx of European refugees would burden the Colony with responsibilities for maintenance or social welfare assistance.<sup>33</sup> Since the establishment of the PRC in 1949, hundreds of thousands of Chinese and European refugees fled mainland China for the adjacent British colony of Hong Kong.<sup>34</sup> In May 1950 border controls were imposed for the first time between mainland China and Hong Kong. However, they proved largely ineffective with more than 700.000 refugees entered Hong Kong in the first six months of 1950.<sup>35</sup> By 1954, Hong Kong's population officially stood at 2.25 million, a fourfold increase in the space of nine years which was largely due to the influx of

<sup>31</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Memorandum on the Situation of the Refugees of European Origin in China*, February 1953, CO 1023/118, 4/67–6/69.

<sup>32</sup> *Notes of a Meeting at the Foreign Office: Refugees from China*, 23 July 1952, CO 1023/118, 2/206.

<sup>33</sup> L.J. Evans (Foreign Office), *Letter to T. Oates (Treasury)*, 1 May 1954, CO 1030/380, 2/86.

<sup>34</sup> During the Japanese occupation in the Second World War, the Colony's population had decreased from 1.6 million in 1941 to 650.000 in 1945. Following the end of the war, residents of the colony who had sought refuge in neighbouring Guangdong province returned to Hong Kong at the rate of around 100.000 every month. Refugee flows began in earnest with the outbreak of the civil war between the Chinese Communist Party and the rival Nationalist Guomindang government in 1947. (Christopher A. Airriess, "Governmentality and Power in Politically Contested Space: Refugee Farming in Hong Kong's New Territories, 1945–1970," *Journal of Historical Geography* 31 (2005): 767; Hong Kong, *A Problem of People* (Hong Kong: W. F. C. Jenner Government Printer, 1960), 3; Edvard Hambro, "Chinese Refugees in Hong Kong," *The Phylon Quarterly* 18 (1957): 69)

<sup>35</sup> Hong Kong, *A Problem of People* (Hong Kong: W. F. C. Jenner Government Printer, 1960), 5.

refugees.<sup>36</sup> The British government found this influx highly embarrassing and unwelcome, its response to the refugees was guided by two primary considerations: first, not to provoke the PRC or allow the refugee problem to damage Britain's relations with China; and, second, to preserve its own colonial authority and not allow other foreign actors – i.e. the UNHCR – to get involved in British affairs.<sup>37</sup>

In the early 1950s the situation of the Russian populace in northern China began to deteriorate under the communists' economic and social reconstruction plans. The Chinese authorities saw particularly the White Russians living in border areas, such as the province of Sinkiang, as potential security risks.<sup>38</sup> The PRC attempted to put pressure on the Russian settlers to return to Russia rather than seek resettlement in third countries.<sup>39</sup> When the Sino-Soviet relations began to worsen after 1956, China refrained from their repatriation plans to Russia and authorities issued the necessary exit permits for destinations other than the Soviet Union.<sup>40</sup>

The Old Believers' migration memories mentioned the historical context of their resettlement, but details about the decisions of political actors or the involvement of international organisation remained unspecific. Life stories did rather focus on the impact of individual decisions and circumstances, the support of welfare organisations was remembered in terms of their individual migrant experience. For example, Masha remembered the help of a Hong Kong welfare organisation which offered English lessons for refugee children. Masha's mother was thankful to the charity of St. Vincent where she picked up clothes for her family.

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<sup>36</sup> Edvard Hambro, *The Problem of Chinese Refugees in Hong Kong: Report Submitted to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees* (Leyden: Sijthoff, 1955), 148.

<sup>37</sup> Peterson, "International Politics of the Hong Kong Refugee Crisis," 175.

<sup>38</sup> Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration, *Twelfth Session of the Sub-Committee on Budget and Finance. Joint ICEM/UNHCR Hong Kong Programme*, 28 July 1965, CO 1030/1688, 3/69, 5/71.

<sup>39</sup> Under pressure from the Chinese authorities the Soviet consular offices in China conducted several repatriation schemes. The UNHCR estimated that more than five thousand Russians returned to the Soviet Union between 1955 and 1965 (Glen Peterson, "'To Be or Not to Be a Refugee': The International Politics of the Hong Kong Refugee Crisis, 1949–55," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 36, No. 2 (2008): 181; Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration, *Twelfth Session of the Sub-Committee on Budget and Finance. Joint ICEM/UNHCR Hong Kong Programme*, 28 July 1965, CO 1030/1688, 3/69; British Consulate (Shanghai), *Letter to the Chancery (British Embassy in Peking)*, 1 December 1953, CO 1030/380, 1/119)

<sup>40</sup> Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration, *Twelfth Session of the Sub-Committee on Budget and Finance. Joint ICEM/UNHCR Hong Kong Programme*, 28 July 1965, CO 1030/1688, 3/69, 5/71.

*Not that we were supposed to wear other than Russian traditional clothes, but we still ended up wearing them because we wanted to. Mum picked up such beautiful dresses for us. I remember one pink dress, it was so beautiful: short puffy sleeves, all tight up bodies, my first non-traditional dress. I wore that in Hong Kong, it was like heaven!*<sup>41</sup>

The omission of historical context adds to an understanding how the Old Believers remembered their liminal status as refugees in Hong Kong. Migration policies and their administrative constraints were not remembered because they appeared obscure and distant, they excluded the Old Believers from negotiations and decisions about their resettlement.

### **European and Chinese Refugees in Hong Kong**

Tim remembered the living conditions of the Chinese population in Hong Kong at the time, he explained that “to me it felt overcrowded, compared to where we came from”. “The wealthier Chinese obviously lived in houses, but all the poor ones stayed in their junks, the boats on the harbour. That was their existence and living there.”<sup>42</sup>

When James M. Read, Deputy Commissioner of the UNHCR, toured through Hong Kong in 1952 he found more drastic word to describe the situation of the Chinese refugees in the Colony.

*All over the city one sees clusters of squatters and “refugees” in the most primitive of circumstances. Quite aside from the obvious crowding in the more permanent buildings of Hong Kong itself, one finds throughout the city a host of jerry-built communities housing anywhere from 5,000 to 60,000 people. It is useless to try to describe the living conditions of the inhabitants of these “squatter areas”. Their houses are shacks and lean-tos, put together from a few pieces of wood and a corrugated iron. [...] Sanitary arrangements are simply non-existent.*<sup>43</sup>

The massive influx of Chinese and European refugees after the establishment of the PRC in 1949 threatened to overwhelm Hong Kong’s infrastructure.<sup>44</sup> During the early 1950s the overcrowded living situation in Hong Kong drew intense attention of the United Nations on the Chinese refugee situation. In 1954 the UNHCR Advisory

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<sup>41</sup> Masha, interviewed by Stefanie Scherr, 18 July 2010, Melbourne

<sup>42</sup> Tim, interviewed by Stefanie Scherr, 10 July 2010, Melbourne

<sup>43</sup> James M. Read, *Report to the High Commissioner on Trip to Southeast Asia*, 27 January 1953, CO 1023/117, 20/265.

<sup>44</sup> Peterson, “International Politics of the Hong Kong Refugee Crisis,” 171.

Committee announced the Hong Kong Refugees Survey Mission. The Mission was sent to ascertain the number and composition of mainly the Chinese refugee population in Hong Kong, to investigate all possible solutions for their living situation and to ascertain if these refugees fell within the mandate of the UNHCR.<sup>45</sup> The Mission was to be headed by Edvard Hambro, Norway's representative to the United Nations.<sup>46</sup> Hambro's final report estimated that in 1954 of the Colony's total population of 2.25 million 750.000 people were pre-war and 900.000 post-war immigrants.<sup>47</sup>

When it came to the Chinese refugee-seekers in Hong Kong the PRC adamantly refused to acknowledge UNHCR authority, whereas the High Commissioner refused to take the Chinese refugees under his mandate. The problem centred on the duality of the two rival Chinese national governments: the People's Republic of China (PRC) which occupied the Chinese mainland and the Republic of China (ROC) retreated to the island of Taiwan since 1949. For those states that recognised the PRC, the refugees could be considered to fall within the UNHCR mandate since they were unwilling to return or avail themselves of the national government of China. However, for states that recognised the ROC the refugees fell outside the UNHCR mandate because they could, in theory, avail themselves of the protection of the ROC government.<sup>48</sup>

Moreover, Britain which signed the United Nations Refugee Convention did not extend its provisions to Britain's overseas possessions. Therefore it could argue on legal grounds that Chinese refugees in the Colony were not entitled to claim any rights in respect of the convention.<sup>49</sup> The Hong Kong government steadfastly referred to the Chinese refugees as 'squatters'<sup>50</sup>. It refused to assign a particular immigrant group of the Colony's Chinese population with the privileged refugee status as the great majority experienced similarly desperate circumstances.<sup>51</sup> The British UN delegate Sir Douglas Glover explained:

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<sup>45</sup> Hambro, *Problem of Chinese Refugees in Hong Kong*, 2–3.

<sup>46</sup> Peterson, "International Politics of the Hong Kong Refugee Crisis," 173.

<sup>47</sup> Hambro, *Problem of Chinese Refugees in Hong Kong*, 27–29, 150.

<sup>48</sup> Hambro, *Problem of Chinese Refugees in Hong Kong*, 33.

<sup>49</sup> Hambro, *Problem of Chinese Refugees in Hong Kong*, 38.

<sup>50</sup> Alexander William George Herder Grantham, *Via Ports: From Hong Kong to Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1965), 154.

<sup>51</sup> Peterson, "International Politics of the Hong Kong Refugee Crisis," 182.

*The fundamental policy of the Government of Hong Kong is not to distinguish in any way between the immigrant population and the population which has its roots in the territory. [...] The Government maintains that refugee status brings the humiliation of the zoo and that the relief mentality is insidious and breeds a special form of economic servitude. They have therefore banished the word 'refugee' and cannot accept any assistance which would require that a class of people be designed as refugees.*<sup>52</sup>

It was not up to Hambro to determine whether the Chinese refugees fell within the UNHCR mandate. However, Hambro made clear that the refugees deserved international assistance.<sup>53</sup> “From a strictly legal point of view”, wrote Hambro, “the Chinese refugees may fall outside the High Commissioner’s mandate, but from a broader and humanitarian point of view [...] they are de facto refugees. They would thus seem to be in a worse situation now than they would be even if they had no Government at all to protect them”<sup>54</sup>. Not until 1958 did the United Nations call the problem of Hong Kong's Chinese refugees truly a matter of international concern. It was during the World Refugee Year (1959–1960) that Hong Kong's Chinese refugees firstly obtained financial help from the United Nations with contributions to various social welfare projects.<sup>55</sup>

At the same time the Colony received more and more refugees of European origin and became used to the appearance of the White Russians on the streets of Hong Kong. “To many residents in the Colony,” wrote the *South China Morning Post* in July 1965, “these refugees have become quite a familiar sight as they stroll in the streets dressed in their quaint 19th Century Russian peasant costumes. But tourists still stop and stare in wonderment at the billowing trousers and high laced boots of the men and the ankle-skirted kerchiefed women”<sup>56</sup>.

The PRC did not question the UNHCR’s claim to assist European refugees in China and continued to cooperate indirectly with the UNHCR through the British consulate in Shanghai and the Hong Kong government.<sup>57</sup> Since 1952 the UNHCR and the Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration (ICEM) shared the

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<sup>52</sup> Press Files: *Ending the Refugee Problem*, 21 November 1962, HKMS 70-3-438, 1, Public Records Office, Hong Kong.

<sup>53</sup> Peterson, “International Politics of the Hong Kong Refugee Crisis,” 175.

<sup>54</sup> Hambro, *Problem of Chinese Refugees in Hong Kong*, 36–38.

<sup>55</sup> Guest, *UNHCR at 40*, 41; Hu Yueh, “The Problem of the Hong Kong Refugees,” *Asian Survey* 2, No. 1 (1962): 34–35.

<sup>56</sup> “White Russians Await Repatriation in Hong Kong,” *South China Morning Post*, 17 July 1965, 7.

<sup>57</sup> Peterson, “International Politics of the Hong Kong Refugee Crisis,” 181; Thomas Jamieson, *Letter to Snider*, 16 February 1961, CO 1030/1316, 1/163.

responsibilities for the resettlement of the European refugees from China.<sup>58</sup> The High Commissioner provided funds for emergency aid to the refugees in China, met the costs of care and maintenance for refugees in transit in Hong Kong, and gave grants to voluntary agencies to assist the integration of refugees after their arrival in their resettlement countries.<sup>59</sup> The ICEM was responsible for the arrangement and financing of travel to resettlement countries.<sup>60</sup> Additional funding for transportation and welfare was provided by the World Council of Churches and the Red Cross.

Vlas explained that a lot of Russians who arrived in Hong Kong lodged in different hotels around the city. “We lived in the Hotel Maxim,” he said, “it was a good hotel, the best! They fed us and payed everything for us”<sup>61</sup>. Vlas could not remember who paid for their accommodation and food, he just remembered a church organisation which helped them during their stay in the Colony. Nina Bieger from the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Hong Kong explained that the Russian refugees “were all billeted here in hotels, which expenses were shared by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and the World Council of Churches. [Also] if they had a long waiting period we had to give them pocket money, for their basic expenses, even though they lived in a hotel. Their meals were provided for them, but things like soap, or if they needed clothing”<sup>62</sup>. Other charitable organisations like the National Catholic Welfare Conference, the Lutheran World Refugee Service and the Jewish Council did commendable relief work for Hong Kong’s refugees.<sup>63</sup>

In December 1952 the Chinese delegate at the Third Committee of the United Nations General Assembly highlighted the different situations of European and

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<sup>58</sup> After the Shanghai office of the IRO closed in January 1952, the remaining IRO funds of US\$235,000 were allocated to the High Commissioner for Refugees to provide continuous emergency assistance for the European refugees in China. These limited funds were exhausted by the end of 1952 and the lack of funds delayed the resettlement efforts. The High Commissioner made urgent pleas to the American and British government as well as to the General Assembly of the UNHCR to appeal for emergency funds to help the neediest groups of refugees within his mandate. (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Memorandum on the Situation of the Refugees of European Origin in China*, February 1953, CO 1023/118, 4/67; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Report on Emergency Aid to Refugees with Special Reference to Problems of Co-ordination and the Situation of Refugees in China*, 28 July 1952, CO 1023/118, 3/147)

<sup>59</sup> Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration, *Twelfth Session of the Sub-Committee on Budget and Finance. Joint ICEM/UNHCR Hong Kong Programme*, 28 July 1965, CO 1030/1688, 1/67.

<sup>60</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Report on Emergency Aid to Refugees with Special Reference to Problems of Co-ordination and the Situation of Refugees in China*, 28 July 1952, CO 1023/118, 4/148.

<sup>61</sup> Vlas, interviewed by Stefanie Scherr, 11 January 2011, Gympie

<sup>62</sup> Nina Bieger, interviewed by Amelia Allsop (The Hong Kong Heritage Project), 17 August 2009, Hong Kong

<sup>63</sup> Yueh, “Problem of the Hong Kong Refugees,” 33–35.



Chinese refugees in Hong Kong. He voiced the plight of about 140,000 Chinese refugees in the Colony and argued that the Chinese refugees fulfilled all qualifications to fall under the High Commissioner's mandate. He pointed at "the 'paradoxical situation' in Hong Kong where United Nations funds were being spent to help European refugees and Chinese refugees across the street were ignored"<sup>64</sup>.

### **Time in Waiting**

The migration and transition from China to Australia started for Tim's family in their hometown Kulja in the province of Sinkiang. Tim's parents were very excited when they finally received notice that they were granted a resettlement visa for Australia.

*It was early May and we just finished putting all the garden in. Everyone was excited. We were selling up all the equipment and belongings and everything else. We knew we were going to leave, and Australia was this ... Shangri-La!*<sup>65</sup>

Shangri-La – a Tibetan utopia of eternal peace hidden behind snowcapped mountains. For decades the Old Believers were searching for this earthly paradise of idyllic tranquillity found in the Himalayan mountains which they also called 'Belovodia' or 'Kitezh'. Tim's metaphor of the mystic utopian land Shangri-La showed how waiting can be infused with desire and longing. Vincent Capranzano writes that "Waiting's desire is magical since there is nothing in pure waiting that we can do but wait, have faith, hope for the best".<sup>66</sup> Capranzano's pure waiting might imply an inactive waste of time, but while Tim's family waited for their permit to leave China they prepared for their journey and continued their daily routines. Tim's hope for a life in Australia was not waiting for a miracle, his family prepared to leave for their desired destination. It took them about three to four weeks until they left Kulja. They sold their house and animals, some new clothes were made and the whole family was fitted with new shoes. Tim's family spent about three months in the British Colony, and Tim explained that "it was a matter of formality that we had to spend so

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<sup>64</sup> P.M. Crosthwaite, *Letter to John M. Addis (Foreign Office)*, 15 December 1952, CO 1023/117, 1/235.

<sup>65</sup> Tim, interviewed by Stefanie Scherr, 10 July 2010, Melbourne

<sup>66</sup> Vincent Crapanzano, *Waiting: The Whites of South Africa* (New York: Random House, 1985), 45–46.

much time in Hong Kong, for medical checks and other reasons”<sup>67</sup>. Tim remembered that the waiting time for refugees in the Colony became a phenomenon of bureaucratic procedure and a shortage of administrative resources.<sup>68</sup>

Many Russians spent their time in Hong Kong waiting for visas to arrive, for the results of medical tests, or an answer from sponsors overseas. Some families even stayed in the Colony for several years as plans changed and their processing time protracted. Nina Bieger, who worked for the WCC in cooperation with the UNHCR for the resettlement of the Old Believers, remembered:

*[S]ome came here and then we found out that they had tuberculosis or something like that. Then they were stuck here. [...] we had a lot of very tragic cases of course. And a lot of them had nowhere to go; the older they were the more difficult it was.*<sup>69</sup>

The time spent in Hong Kong was not under the control of the refugees. Bureaucratic procedures like medical checks, visa applications and security checks, determined how long they had to stay and wait. The UNHCR, the Hong Kong and British governments, international organisations like the WCC and the countries of resettlement struggled with timelines for their resettlement. Nina Bieger explained, “if they wanted to go to America the minimum processing period was three months, whether you were eighty or ninety or eight. America was the strictest of the countries, but we just had to move them fast”<sup>70</sup>.

Some families stayed in Hong Kong for several days, a few months, a couple of years. The time the Old Believers spent could be defined in measurable terms. When we are concerned with the measurement of time we try to capture a temporality which is measurable and abstract, a quantifiable time. Henri-Louis Bergson explains that there is more than one temporality and that abstract mathematical thinking does not capture the concrete reality of time-as-experienced, of *duration*.<sup>71</sup> As Harald Schweizer argues waiting time is not to be solely understood as length, not is it solely experienced as length.<sup>72</sup> To reduce waiting to purely quantifiable terms means to

<sup>67</sup> Tim, interviewed by Stefanie Scherr, 10 July 2010, Melbourne

<sup>68</sup> Paul E. Corcoran, “Godot Is Waiting Too: Endings in Thought and History.” *Theory & Society* 18, No. 4 (1989): 516.

<sup>69</sup> Nina Bieger, interviewed by Amelia Allsop (The Hong Kong Heritage Project), 17 August 2009, Hong Kong

<sup>70</sup> Nina Bieger, interviewed by Amelia Allsop (The Hong Kong Heritage Project), 17 August 2009, Hong Kong

<sup>71</sup> Henri-Louis Bergson, *The Creative Mind* [1903] (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968), 11–12.

<sup>72</sup> Harold Schweizer, *On Waiting* (London, New York: Routledge, 2008), 22.

suppress its qualitative temporal consciousness and to reduce waiting to nothing but a certain amount of time.<sup>73</sup> So far the refugees' experience of time was linked to processing time, the passing of weeks and months in waiting for documents and decisions. However, time can also be seen from a stricter subjective side. From this perspective the focus is not the chronological sequential time, but rather how the Old Believers experienced their time in migration and related it to their own past, present and future.<sup>74</sup>

Henri-Louis Bergson called the temporality different from measurable time and associated with consciousness 'duration'. Bergson explained that one can distinguish duration from the measurement of time by throwing a lump of sugar in a glass of water.

*If I want to mix a glass of sugar and water, I must, willy-nilly, wait until the sugar melts. This little fact is big with meaning. For here the time I have to wait is not that mathematical time which would apply equally well to the entire history of the material world... It coincides with my impatience, that is to say, with a certain portion of my own duration, which I cannot protract or contract as I like. It is no longer something thought, it is something lived.*<sup>75</sup>

Waiting means not just physically remaining close to the sugar, but remaining internally attentive to what happened with the sugar in the glass of water. The impatience that one will perceive while waiting reveals something about the duration of the piece of sugar. It is the sugar's specific temporality unfolding over time.<sup>76</sup> The observer's impatience retains the sense of a wholly different time progressing. The waiting observer experiences – in discomfort and disharmony – both temporalities, time and duration.<sup>77</sup>

### **Waiting in Transit**

The processing time for refugees in Hong Kong was determined by the immigration regulations of the countries of resettlement<sup>78</sup>, and the results of medical

<sup>73</sup> Harold Schweizer, "On Waiting," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 74, No. 3 (2005): 781.

<sup>74</sup> Jan Paul Brekke, "Life on Hold: The Impact of Time on Young Asylum Seekers Waiting for a Decision," *Diskurs Kindheits- und Jugendforschung* 5, No. 2 (2010): 163.

<sup>75</sup> Henri-Louis Bergson, *Key Writings* (New York, London: Continuum, 2002), 176.

<sup>76</sup> Julia Mahler, *Lived Temporalities: Exploring Duration in Guatemala: Empirical and Theoretical Studies* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2008), 46–47.

<sup>77</sup> Schweizer, "On Waiting," 781.

<sup>78</sup> In 1952 there was a group of up to one thousand European refugees who had good chances to be accepted for resettlement in the United States. These refugees had either affidavits of support from relatives and friends in the United States or received assurances under the Displaced Persons Act of 1948. Yet they could not move out of China. The Hong Kong authorities asked for assurance that these

tests or security checks. Archival material documents the delay of decisions<sup>79</sup>, procedures of quicker clearance and checking of visas, and the successful acceleration of the resettlement effort for the Russian refugees in Hong Kong.<sup>80</sup> However, the migration experience of the Old Believers is not fully revealed in terms of bureaucratic procedures; it does not reflect the conditions of their migration and their ambivalent refugee status. Some families were constantly in the state ‘of making up their minds’ and deciding where to go.

When Nina’s grandparents arrived in Hong Kong their initial plan was to leave for America. “So they ended up in Hong Kong”, said Nina, “and went to the authorities to ask: ‘Can we have a permission to go to America?’” However, when Nina’s grandparents went to see the authorities to apply for a resettlement visa, “they met another Russian couple who said: ‘Why do you want go to America? Go to Australia! Australia is a better place than America.’ So they took their advice and they asked for permission to leave for Australia”<sup>81</sup>.

For their own bewilderment and for the despair of those left behind, the decisions and actions taken during the migration of Nina’s family showed no temporal consistency. The conditions of migration were suffused with liminality and reflected their ambivalent status as refugees.<sup>82</sup> Nina’s own experience of transition encountered in Hong Kong was similar to the experience in a waiting room.<sup>83</sup> Nina

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refugees would be granted visas and moved out of the Colony. However, neither the Special Representative of the Hong Kong Joint Office could give such assurances, nor could the American Consul make any commitment until the refugees had been interviewed and subsequently screened. (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Memorandum on the Situation of the Refugees of European Origin in China*, February 1953, CO 1023/118, 6/69)

<sup>79</sup> In the early 1950s the United States hesitated to offer resettlement opportunities to the Russian refugees from China. They had been saddled with many tubercular and otherwise undesirable Russian refugees from China who were stranded in the Philippines after their escape from China in 1949. (*Notes of a Meeting at the Foreign Office: Refugees from China*, 23 July 1952, CO 1023/118, 1/205)

<sup>80</sup> In 1953 Australia, Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland agreed on a system to issue 50 “alternate” visas to permit refugees entry into Hong Kong for processing to a country of immigration, such as the United States or Canada. As soon as a refugee was accepted by an admitting country, the alternate visa became available for another refugee and thereby permitted entry to the Colony. (*Scheme to Aid Refugees from China. Alternate Visas for Hong Kong*, *South China Morning Post*, 20 June 1953, CO 1023/119, 1/52)

<sup>81</sup> Nina, interviewed by Stefanie Scherr, 8 July 2009, Melbourne

<sup>82</sup> Cwerner, “Times of Migration,” 127; Kerstin Samarasinghe and Barbro Arvidsson, “‘It is a Different War to Fight here in Sweden’: The Impact of Involuntary Migration on the Health of Refugee Families in Transition,” *Scandinavian Journal of Caring Sciences* 16, No. 3 (2002): 292.

<sup>83</sup> Scholars writing about the migration of European Jews to Shanghai during the Second World War also referred to the refugees’ experience in a waiting room. (Suzanne D. Rutland, “‘Waiting Room Shanghai’: Australian Reactions to the Plight of the Jews in Shanghai after the Second World War,” *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook* 32, No. 1 (1987): 407–433; Amnon Barzel, ed., *Leben im Wartesaal. Exil in Shanghai 1938–1947 [Life in the Waiting Room. Exile in Shanghai, 1938–1947]* (Berlin: Jüdisches Museum im Stadtmuseum Berlin, 1997))

remembered that her family had to wait in Hong Kong before her family could proceed on their journey.

*When we left China, the four of us, we travelled about three days and three nights on a train. My brother got really sick, he got pneumonia. When we came to Hong Kong he was in a hospital for a whole month. We were supposed to be in Hong Kong for maybe two weeks, but we stayed about six or eight weeks because he was in the hospital.*<sup>84</sup>

A waiting room functions as a place we pass through, argues Laura Tanner, on our way to somewhere else, a temporary stop rather than a destination.<sup>85</sup> Waiting rooms have an iconic significance in the cultural imaginary as places of desperation and impotence; they are places suffused with anxiety where one can exercise very little agency.<sup>86</sup> The uncertainty about how long one has to wait for results of one's case adds to the lack of certainty about its actual outcome.<sup>87</sup>

I asked Tim how he experienced his time in waiting until he arrived in Australia, and he said, "we were excited, but anxious not knowing what to expect"<sup>88</sup>. Jean-François Lyotard associates waiting with such contradictory feelings. He explains that the possibility of nothing happening is often associated with a feeling of anxiety which gives to waiting a predominantly negative value. Lyotard also argues that the suspense in times of waiting could be accompanied by pleasure, for instance the pleasure to anticipate and to welcome the unknown.<sup>89</sup> I agree with Lyotard that the negative value that encompasses waiting needs to be challenged because it overshadows the benign possibilities and choices in the modality of waiting. I want to discuss in the remainder the expectations and decisive action offered by time in waiting rather than Lyotard's attitude to welcome the unknown which still comprises anxiety and uncertainty.

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<sup>84</sup> Nina, interviewed by Stefanie Scherr, 8 July 2009, Melbourne

<sup>85</sup> Laura E. Tanner, "Bodies in Waiting: Representations of Medical Waiting Rooms in Contemporary American Fiction," *American Literary History* 14, No. 1 (2002): 116.

<sup>86</sup> Cynthia Miki Strathmann and Cameron M. Hay, "Working the Waiting Room: Managing Fear, Hope, and Rage at the Clinic Gate," *Medical Anthropology* 28, No. 3 (2009): 214–215.

<sup>87</sup> Brekke, "Impact of Time on Young Asylum Seekers Waiting," 162.

<sup>88</sup> Tim, interviewed by Stefanie Scherr, 10 July 2010, Melbourne

<sup>89</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 92.

## The Decision to Wait

When applying for resettlement visas many refugees did not know whether they would be granted permission to leave or if they would have to stay in Hong Kong for much longer. I asked Vlas how the Russian refugees passed their time while they had to wait and he explained that “they just lived, that’s all. They didn’t work, they lived and waited for their visas to arrive. When their visas arrived, they went there”<sup>90</sup>. Hong Kong became a waiting room, remembered as a place where seemingly nothing happened.<sup>91</sup> However, when refugee families stayed for longer than a few days or weeks in the Colony they slowly adjusted to life in Hong Kong. While waiting many Russians blended in and engaged with the local spaces they moved through. Some refugee children started schooling, and a few families decided to pick up jobs to supplement their allowances from the United Nations. The South China Morning Post reported:

*Whilst waiting for repatriation, the white Russians have adjusted themselves to the Hongkong way of life. Many of them have found full-time or part time jobs to supplement their allowances from the United Nations. Employed mainly by Indians, some of these refugees work as delivery boys and messengers while others take up jobs as children’s nannies and wash amahs. Still others have found jobs at construction sites earning about \$14 per day.*<sup>92</sup>

Matrona recalled the pleasure and excitement of starting school just at the very end of her stay in Hong Kong. “We probably just started school when we would pack up and come to Australia,” she said. “I think we were supposed to learn Chinese, but have I learnt Chinese in those two months I was there?” She laughed: “No, no”. She could not remember that she learnt writing or reading. “I remember we used to go to school and do a lot of exercises, the Chinese gym thing, but I don’t actually remember writing or reading, just more exercises.”<sup>93</sup>

The time in waiting did not simply imply a repression of will, suppression of action and postponement of gratification. Waiting comprised a use of time, the recognition of social constraints, and a practical consideration of interests and

<sup>90</sup> Vlas, interviewed by Stefanie Scherr, 11 January 2011, Gympie

<sup>91</sup> Tanner, “Representations of Medical Waiting Rooms,” 116.

<sup>92</sup> “White Russians Await Repatriation in HongKong,” 7.

<sup>93</sup> Matrona, interviewed by Stefanie Scherr, 12 July 2009, Melbourne

outcomes.<sup>94</sup> Matrona's family used their time waiting to deliberate over the question of their resettlement destination. Matrona's father had relatives in America, but his family was refused entry to the United States.

*When we got to Hong Kong we were not allowed entry [to the United States] because there were nine of us in the family. His brother couldn't become a guarantor for all of us. How would he feed nine people? So we were not accepted in America.<sup>95</sup>*

After their first choice of resettlement was refused Matrona's family had to decide where to go. "There was also New Zealand," said Matrona, "and there was Australia, but then somebody told my mum there were a lot of erupting volcanoes [in New Zealand]. We didn't even have any relatives in Australia. It was either the choice of going to Australia or maybe back to Russia. I think Australia was the only choice."<sup>96</sup> Matrona's life story highlighted that the waiting time in Hong Kong offered her family the possibility to decide over their final destination of resettlement. She told me that her family stayed in Hong Kong longer than they were supposed to, even after their decision was made. Matrona's mother was pregnant and refused to go on a plane or a boat.

*She didn't want to go either way because she didn't want to be pregnant and dying somewhere, so we had to wait. The first year they were trying to decide where to go and then the second year she was pregnant. We had to wait until she had the baby.<sup>97</sup>*

Matrona turned her time in waiting into a resource which allowed her family to procrastinate and postpone their decision in order to gain time. In this sense, waiting was linked to control over uncertainty and the ambivalent status of being a refugee.<sup>98</sup> Matrona's memories did not reflect on the constraints of administrative and bureaucratic procedures, they focused on her family pondering on their resettlement options and making a deliberate decision for their migration to Australia.

The refugees' time in waiting suggested even stronger notions of purposive action and resistance as documented by archival sources. *China Mail* covered the story of an Old Believers family which arrived in Hong Kong in early 1964. Farmer Fona Chernissoff, his wife and ten children entered the Colony together with more

<sup>94</sup> Corcoran, "Endings in Thought and History," 517.

<sup>95</sup> Matrona, interviewed by Stefanie Scherr, 12 July 2009, Melbourne

<sup>96</sup> Matrona, interviewed by Stefanie Scherr, 12 July 2009, Melbourne

<sup>97</sup> Matrona, interviewed by Stefanie Scherr, 12 July 2009, Melbourne

<sup>98</sup> Gasparini, *On Waiting*, 41–42.

than 360 Old Believers from Sinkiang Province.<sup>99</sup> The article explained why the Chernissoff family stayed longer in Hong Kong than they were supposed to:

*The others have migrated to Australia and other lands of promise months ago, but the Old Believers have a special trait that makes them a problem: togetherness. The group is an old Russian religious sect, the most orthodox of the Russian Orthodox Church. Their ancient tradition as a cohesive communal group has been their strength and their burden.*<sup>100</sup>

The report explained that the “resistant and stubborn religious Russian Christian group”<sup>101</sup> of Old Believers were determined to settle together in Canada, where other Russian religious dissidents had found sanctuary from Soviet communism in the past. However, the Canadian Government was loth to take them as it would not agree to resettle “a sect so clearly unabsorbable for the Old Believers traditionally insulate themselves from the secular modern world”<sup>102</sup>. The report commented that Canada may also have refused them entry because of trouble it had with other Russian sects in the past. About 3.000 *Doukabours*, Sons of Freedom, had caused considerable trouble including dynamiting railway lines, burning houses and blowing up road bridges.<sup>103</sup>

As Canada’s immigration laws forbid mass immigration, the Old Believers were offered that individual immigration applications would be accepted instead. ”However, for several months”, wrote China Mail Reporter Edward Wu, ”the Old Believers stayed put, rebuffing any alternative but Canada, refusing to budge if a single member was to be left behind”<sup>104</sup>. The Old Believers stayed in Hong Kong supported by the United Nations High Commissioner who found himself in a peculiar situation. The care and maintenance for the stranded Old Believers costed the High Commissioner \$171.300 per month. A commission composed of representatives of UNHCR and WCC was sent to Hong Kong in an effort to break the deadlock and to intensively counsel the refugees to agree for resettlement openings in Argentina, Australia, Brazil and New Zealand. The hesitant refugees were informed that all means had been exhausted and that international funds could no longer be spent for their continued maintenance in Hong Kong. After a considerable counselling effort most of the 300

<sup>99</sup> “Russians without Country,” *China Mail*, 11 March 1965, 10; Thomas Jamieson, *The Problem of White Russians in China*, 21 October 1965, CO 1030/1688, 2/33–3/34.

<sup>100</sup> Edward Wu, “Compromise found for Russian Refugees,” *China Mail*, 20 March 1965, 16.

<sup>101</sup> “Russians without Country”, 10.

<sup>102</sup> Wu, “Compromise found for Russian Refugees,” 16.

<sup>103</sup> “Russians without Country,” 10.

<sup>104</sup> Wu, “Compromise found for Russian Refugees,” 16.



hesitant Old Believers agreed to be resettled in Australia and Latin America.<sup>105</sup> Nevertheless, the High Commissioner feared that “in spite of all his efforts [...] all of the awkward group of 39 White Russian Old Believers”<sup>106</sup> remaining in Hong Kong at the end of 1965 would be impossible to resettle elsewhere. This case attracted much public attention when the UNHCR increased its pressure upon the resistant refugees and stopped its payment for further hotel charges in March 1965. While some Old Believers continued to live in the hotels without paying for their accommodation, others were forced out and evicted with police intervention.<sup>107</sup> Finally, everyone of the stranded Old Believers group from Sinkiang was resettled and the Chernissoff family sailed to Australia.<sup>108</sup>

### The End of Waiting

In 1964 the largest part of the Old Believers from China was resettled by the joint UNHCR/ICEM operation: 1.075 Old Believers went to colonies in Brazil and Argentina, 357 Old Believers moved from Hong Kong to Australia.<sup>109</sup> In 1967 the United Nation High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) announced the successful end of the Old Believers’ resettlement:

*One of the most colourful refugee problems to face UNHCR since its inception – that of the Old Believers – has now been virtually solved. In all, over the past fifteen years, [hundreds of] Old Believers have made the 3,500 mile trek from remote Sinkiang or from Harbin in North-East China down to Hong Kong, and from there they have fanned out across the seas to lands where they could resume their strict and industrious way of life in peace.*<sup>110</sup>

How did the Old Believers endure the predicament of waiting during their migration? Their migration experience resembled waiting in the sense that it evoked a feeling of not being in the right place or right relation to time. The experience of waiting is about the duration of time, but also about the refugee enduring this time.

<sup>105</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *The Problem of Old Believers from China*, 21 October 1965, CO 1030/1687, 1/18; Wu, “Compromise found for Russian Refugees,” 16.

<sup>106</sup> C. Peter Scott, *Letter to K.R.C. Pridham (Foreign Office)*, 15 November 1965, CO 1030/1687, 1/16.

<sup>107</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *The Problem of Old Believers from China*, 21 October 1965, CO 1030/1687, 2/19; Robert M. Gray, *Telegram to United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees*, 23 March 1965, CO 1030/1687, 1/31.

<sup>108</sup> Wu, “Compromise found for Russian Refugees,” 16.

<sup>109</sup> Thomas Jamieson, *The Problem of White Russians in China*, 21 October 1965, CO 1030/1688, 1/18.

<sup>110</sup> United Nations High Commissioner, “The Old Believers. A Story of Faith and Perseverance,” *UNHCR Reports, Monthly Newsletter* 45 (1967), 1.

For those who do not wait, time thought and time lived co-exist harmoniously. However, those who wait are outside of the economic community of those whose time is productive and synchronised. Waiting like migration is about being out of step and not-belonging or not being ‘in-time’ with others.<sup>111</sup>

Waiting as a relation to time gained significance in the process of migration when it comprised a use of time. The Old Believers’ migration through Hong Kong was not remembered as a movement solely regulated by bureaucratic procedures, but as a time to reflect upon individual decisions. Waiting implied anticipation; it presupposed an arrival or non-arrival, an end, a denouement, however uncertain or obscure. “Waiting is filled with suspense”, writes Vincent Capranzano. “It is an anticipation of something to come – something that is not on hand but will, perhaps, be on hand in the future”<sup>112</sup>. In this sense I understand waiting not purely as a submissive inaction or waste of time. Then waiting can be seen as a rational and purposeful activity during the process of migration which is filled with expectations, temporal possibilities and choices.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Schweizer, *On Waiting*, 8; Pardy, “Shame of Waiting,” 206–207.

<sup>112</sup> Crapanzano, *The Whites of South Africa*, 44.

<sup>113</sup> Corcoran, “Endings in Thought and History,” 518.

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