

INTERVIEW

UNRWA Archives of Palestine Refugee Family Files

Interview with Dr. Valeria Cetorelli and Dr. Dorothée Klaus

On 23 February 2023, *Jerusalem Quarterly* 93 guest editors Francesca Biancani and Maria Chiara Rioli e-interviewed two officials of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) – Dr. Valeria Cetorelli, Head of Refugee Registration and Eligibility, and Dr. Dorothée Klaus, Director of UNRWA Affairs in Lebanon – to explore UNRWA’s projects and activities involving its historical archives. The editors and interviewees wish to thank Dr. Lex Takkenberg, former UNRWA Chief Ethics Officer, for his review and comments on the transcription of this interview.

When were the Palestine refugee family files created and where are they located?

UNRWA was established by UN General Assembly Resolution 302 (IV) of 8 December 1949 and began operations on 1 May 1950. Since then, the agency has maintained and updated family files of registered Palestine refugees to determine their refugee status and service eligibility. The files now span up to five generations and document life events, such as births, marriages, migrations, and deaths, from the Nakba until today. During its more than seventy years of operations, UNRWA has regularly improved and modernized its registration procedures, including moving from paper to digital records. As per international best practices, the historical documents remain in the locations where they were originally archived – in the agency’s five field offices in Beirut, Damascus, Amman,

East Jerusalem, and Gaza City. The digital records are currently stored in the agency's web-based refugee registration information system.

What is the extent of the historical archives? How many documents do they contain and what are the main typologies of documents?

The historical archives contain nearly thirty million documents that fall within two main categories: registration cards and supporting materials. The oldest registration cards are Red Cross cards from 1948–49. During these two years, the Red Cross together with the American Friends Service Committee provided emergency assistance to those affected by the hostilities. These cards listed the name, age, and sex of family members who were receiving assistance and attested to their place of residence in Palestine before displacement and their place of residence at the time of registration. In 1950, the cards were handed over to UNRWA which, based on field investigation reports, reregistered those families who were deemed to meet the agency's operational definition of Palestine refugees, having lost both home and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 conflict. UNRWA used master cards to enter information about registered families following a similar format to that previously used by the Red Cross. Updates to these master cards were made until 1957; newborns were added to the list of family members, deceased persons were crossed off, separate cards were filled for newly married couples, and place of residence was amended for those who moved to another area. From 1958, the registration procedure became more systematic with the introduction of index cards where vital events and changes of residence were recorded using a standardized coding system. Updates were based on re-investigation reports, civil certificates, and other evidentiary documents that were archived as supporting materials in the family files.

When and how did the archives experience a “digital turn”?

The computerization of the family files began in 1979 on an IBM mainframe. Copies of the index cards were regularly sent from UNRWA's field offices to the then headquarters in Vienna to be reflected in the IBM file structure. In 1996, the index cards were replaced by field registration databases on a Paradox server that maintained the same standardized coding system. Batches of updated records were regularly sent to the new headquarters in Amman to be integrated in a unified database. The electronic updates built upon documents in the family files, which continued serving as references in day-to-day operations. To halt their deterioration by wear and tear, UNRWA embarked on a project to digitize them between 2004 and 2009. In 2010, the agency launched a web-based refugee registration information system on a Microsoft server; the digitized documents were saved in a secure data storage and made retrievable for operational use through a virtual private network. However, due to funding shortages, the digitization project was halted with about one third of the documents in the family files not yet scanned and the content of scanned documents not yet systematically classified. Digital records were not created for those refugees

who died before 2010; information about them can, to this day, only be found by manually reviewing all historical registration cards and supporting materials, which is a complex and time-consuming process.

Is there an intention to complete the digitization of historical documents and ensure all refugee records are electronically stored in the current refugee registration information system?

Besides constituting the backbone of UNRWA's operations, the family files have been referred to consistently, and by very different parties, as the main source to identify the eligible population for return and compensation as per UN General Assembly Resolution 194 (III). Their preservation and accessibility are therefore an integral part of the protection of Palestine refugee rights under international law. UNRWA is committed to continuing its efforts to eventually establish a comprehensive e-archive of these files. This will not only involve scanning, reviewing, and classifying all documents in the files, but also retracing family trees and linking, through these documents, all currently registered refugees back to their ancestors who were displaced from Palestine in 1948.

What is the estimated timeline for developing this e-archive? Are the required resources available?

Since last year, UNRWA has been able to use small project funding to design and pilot a rigorous process to scan, review, and classify documents, identify all family members across generations and reconstruct family trees in the refugee registration information system. The pilot has focused on ten villages in northern Palestine that were destroyed in 1948 and whose inhabitants fled, nearly all to Lebanon. A total of about fifty thousand registered refugees originating from these villages have been linked, through their digitized family files, back to their ancestors who were displaced in 1948. Building on the experience of the pilot, UNRWA is now fundraising to scale up the project. If the required funds are raised, it is estimated that it will take around two years to complete the digitization of historical documents and an additional six years to retrace family trees of all 5.9 million currently registered refugees.

How is the project managed?

In the coming months, the pilot team, including registration assistants and officers, data analytics and quality assurance specialists, and senior supervisors under the technical leadership of the UNRWA head of refugee registration and eligibility division, will continue working on the files village by village and later move to towns and cities. Given the importance of this project in relation to Palestine refugee status and associated rights, a special steering committee comprising representatives of host countries and interested donor countries will be regularly briefed on key activities and outcomes for review and discussion. This committee shall also support in finding an adequate implementation format that allows UNRWA to proceed within an acceptable timeframe and resource envelope to complete the planned undertakings.

Have any refugees been given the opportunity to view their family tree and documents attesting to their family history?

The pilot team consists of twenty-five young Palestine refugees in Lebanon who, due to restrictions on their social and economic rights in the country, have little chance to find a meaningful occupation despite possessing high academic qualifications and skills. For them, the project means much more than just employment. They have all used the opportunity to retrace their own family tree through their files; they have been able to reconnect with dispersed family members and learned about family history that they did not know of. They have urged that the project be scaled up to offer many Palestine refugees the gift of their family trees and digitized historical documents as a contribution to better understanding their origins and identity through their ancestry. However, UNRWA is aware that the exposure to documents reflecting the trauma and hardship experienced in 1948 may need to occur in a managed setting to meet ethical considerations. The format within which this may occur will have to be yet further explored through participatory studies and advised by academic specialists. Information security and data privacy are further considerations to be taken into account.

Will the family files continue to be updated once the e-archive project is completed?

Regular registration operations will continue without interruption. An e-UNRWA mobile platform was launched this month to further promote the right to register for all Palestine refugees and facilitate reporting of life events both within and beyond UNRWA's fields of operation. By creating an e-UNRWA account, refugees can now view their registration records, request any updates and submit evidentiary documents in digital format through their smartphones. The e-UNRWA mobile platform is fully integrated with UNRWA's refugee registration information system. This means that, once the e-archive project is completed, any newly registered refugees will be automatically linked to their 1948 ancestors and their digital documentation added to the family files.

Will it be possible to use the family files for research purposes? What content will be displayed to the public on the e-archive?

The research community has long showed interest in inventorying and analyzing the richness of information that is contained in the family files. In preparation for scaling up the e-archive project, UNRWA is establishing a research advisory board of renowned Palestinian, Arab, and international academics to support the production of consolidated multidisciplinary research on the Nakba and Palestine refugee history as evidenced in these files. Again, access to files is currently difficult in the absence of a tailored data protection and privacy support structure to accompany any researchers. A respective framework needs to be created in the near future to make the richness of information available for research purposes. It is envisioned that the e-archive will have a public interface displaying an aggregate overview of the places of origin, numbers, and life trajectories of those who were displaced in 1948 and their descendants, now unto their fifth generation, for whom a just and durable solution is still outstanding.



Figure 1. “Jerusalem Old City: area near Wailing Wall, after demolition,” 1967 (?). Photographer unknown. Verso of photo: “UNRWA was authorized by the General Assembly after the June 1967 hostilities in the Middle East, by Resolution 2252 (E.S.V.), ‘to provide humanitarian assistance, as far as practicable, on an emergency basis and as a temporary measure, to other persons in the area who are at present displaced and are in serious need of immediate assistance as a result of the recent hostilities.’ Arab families who were living in this area qualified for this assistance, as their homes were demolished, following the hostilities.” UNRWA Collection, Institute for Palestine Studies, Beirut.



Figure 2. "One of the older Arab refugees at UNRWA Shu'fat camp," June 1968. Photographer unknown. Verso of photo: "Some 3,300 Arab refugees, who fled from the fighting in Palestine, in 1948, lived in Mu-askar camp, within the walls of the old city of Jerusalem. It was a camp in name only consisting of insanitary, improvised shelters, squeezed in under arches, in dark cellars and in corners of crumbling ruins, even some on rooftops. Just a month before the outbreak of the June 1967 hostilities, these refugees were rehoused in a new UNRWA camp in Shu'fat, three miles to the North of the Holy City of Jerusalem. Although these concrete UNRWA shelters, built at an average cost of \$150.00 each, provide little more than a roof and four walls, the living conditions are a decided improvement on what they had before. The population today (June, 1968, statistics) is 2,800 – a number of the refugees having left in the face of the June 1967 hostilities." UNRWA Collection, Institute for Palestine Studies, Beirut.

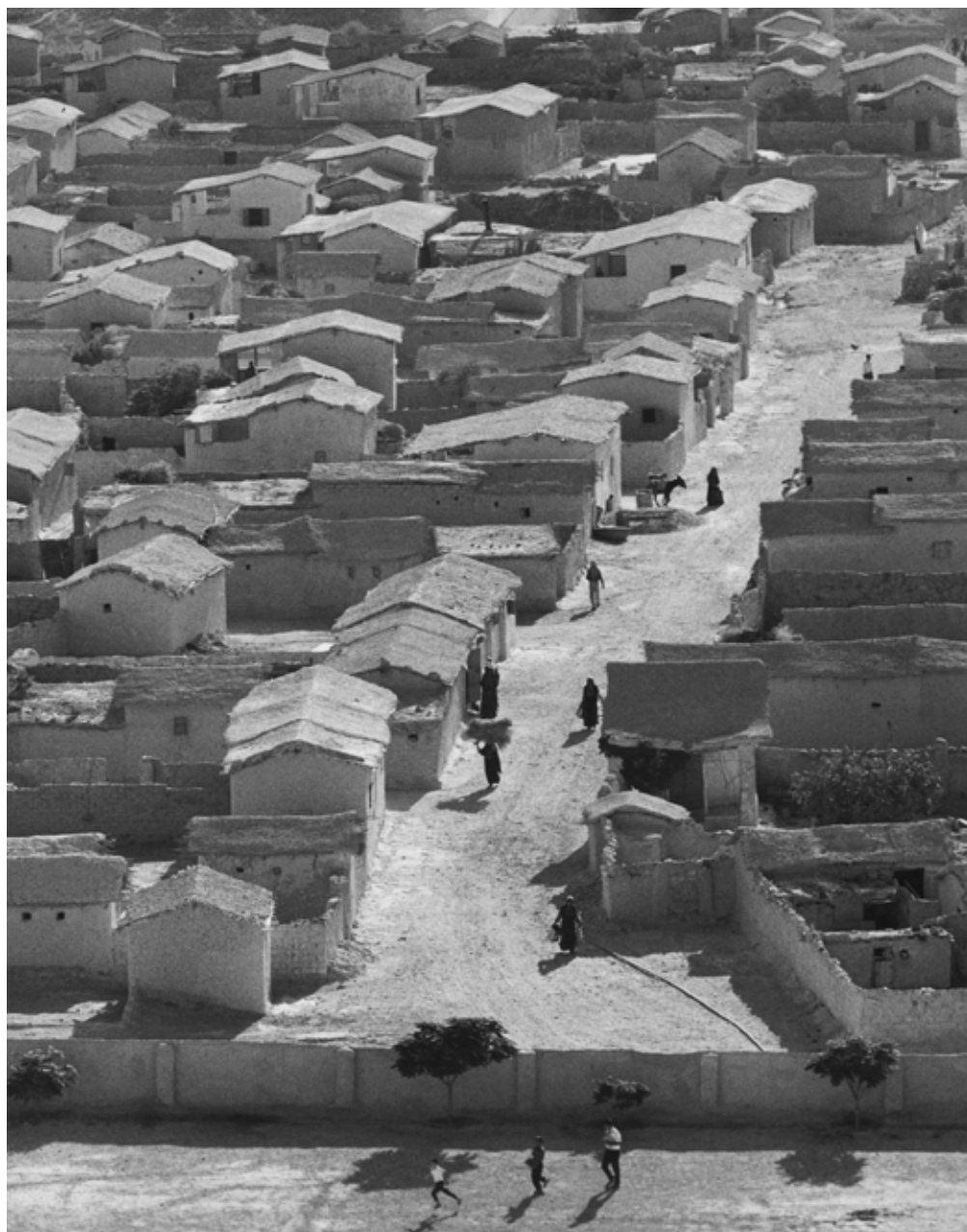


Figure 3. “Nuweimeh Refugee Camp, Jordan.” Photographer unknown. UNRWA Collection, Institute for Palestine Studies, Beirut.



Figure 4. "Continuing Exodus: Jordan Valley." Verso of photo: "A new temporary bridge to replace the destroyed Allenby Bridge enables Arab families to continue crossing the Jordan River to the East Bank." UNRWA Collection, Institute for Palestine Studies, Beirut.