“Thinking the Forbidden Concept”: Refugees as Immigrants and Exiles

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Exile denotes a place of banishment. Exile, as a place, presupposes its opposite, home. Refugees, once they have reached a, however temporary, endpoint on the flight that has taken them away from home, frequently become exiles: living in a place of banishment and identifying or being regarded as people who have lost their homes. Whereas refugees tend to have been forced out of their native country, immigrants are more likely to be pulled into their new country. To paraphrase the remark of a refugee commenting on his exile: immigrants come to the new country “in order to be here,” whereas refugees “have come here in order not to be there” (Hatvani 91). But the distinction between refugees and immigrants is easily blurred. In 1943, Hannah Arendt wrote about German-Jewish refugees in the United States, where she had emigrated two years earlier:

In the first place, we don’t like to be called “refugees.” We ourselves call each other “newcomers” or “immigrants.” ... Yes, we were “immigrants” or “newcomers” who had left our country because, one fine day, it no longer suited us to stay, or for purely economic reasons. We wanted to rebuild our lives; that was all. In order to rebuild one’s life one has to be strong and an optimist. So we are very optimistic. ... We were told to forget; and we forgot quicker than anybody ever could imagine. In a friendly way we were reminded that the new country would become a new home; and after four weeks in France or six weeks in America, we pretended to be Frenchmen or Americans. The more optimistic among us would even add that their whole former life had been passed in a kind of unconscious exile and only their new country now taught them what a home really looks like. (253–54)

The experience of having been exiled led many German-Jewish refugees to think of their native country as a place where they had always been outsiders and never been truly at home. Rather than going into exile, awaiting a regime change that would allow them to return home, they emigrated, leaving behind the old and assimilating to the new (see Arnold and Walter 489). But Arendt and her fellow refugees were also compelled to assimilate and forget their former lives because of the expectations their hosts placed upon them. Americans made the select few who after 1933 were granted a refuge in the United States believe that refugees, who were grudgingly tolerated rather than warmly embraced, could redeem themselves only as immigrants, and that in an immigrant nation, immigrants—particularly those who successfully assimilated—would eventually be counted as equals.

Australia was no more welcoming to refugees from Nazi Germany than the United States. Australia’s government as much as the majority of its people were strongly opposed to the admittance of refugees as refugees (that is, on humanitarian grounds). Australia’s admission (or non-admission) of German-Jewish refugees in the late 1930s was no exception: until the second half of the 1970s, refugees, be they displaced persons (DPs), Hungarians fleeing the suppression of the 1956 anti-communist uprising, or Asians expelled from Amin’s Uganda, were almost always admitted only if they could demonstrate that they would be deserving immigrants.

The government’s decision to admit more than 180,000 people sponsored by the International Refugee
Organization in the late 1940s and early 1950s, for example, was motivated by its desire to increase significantly Australia's population—and, more specifically, its workforce. Given that suitable British settlers were not available in sufficient numbers, Australia recruited other suitable immigrants. Suitable non-British settlers were young, educated and healthy. Ideally, they possessed certain racial features. Australia preferred blonde-haired, fair-skinned and blue-eyed young men and women from the Baltic countries who did not want to or could not return to the Soviet Union, to Jewish survivors who were ill as a result of their ordeal in German concentration camps. Australian selection criteria were stricter than those of other nations resettling DPs. Selection teams were instructed to reject “cases requiring continued medical care even for minor complaints” (Weinmann 33)—including varicose veins and rotten teeth—and handpicked suitable immigrants, who happened to be refugees.

Immigrants are expected to make their new country their home (by their new fellow citizens, not by their relatives in their native country, who may expect them to send remittances and maintain ancestral links). Refugees admitted to Australia as immigrants have been expected to make a similar commitment. Until the late 1990s, the Australian authorities usually allowed, if not expected, refugees admitted to Australia as immigrants to remain indefinitely in Australia. Even now, refugees who are admitted to Australia after having been selected by Immigration Department officials in, say, Kenyan refugee camps, are expected to become Australian citizens and make Australia their permanent home.

Exceptions include the non-Europeans among the so-called wartime refugees, whose settlement in Australia would have contravened the White Australia policy, and non-European evacuees from Vietnam and East Timor. In 1999, the government offered a temporary safe haven to 4,000 Kosovars who had fled to Macedonia. Also in 1999, the Australian government began granting three-year so-called TPVs (temporary protection visas), rather than permanent residence permits, to on-shore asylum seekers whose claims to be refugees according to the criteria of the 1951 Refugees Convention it had recognized.

TPV holders are disadvantaged in terms of access to education and other government services, cannot leave the country without forfeiting their visas and cannot sponsor their spouses, children or parents for migration to Australia. After three years, the visa is reviewed. If the Department of Immigration deems it safe for the refugee now to return to his or her country of origin, then the visa may not be extended. Off-shore asylum seekers have been treated differently from refugees recruited by Australian immigration officials overseas because they circumvented Australia's process for selecting immigrants—which is sometimes erroneously referred to as the “queue”—and because the Australian government wants to discourage others from following their example.

Unlike TPV holders, who are not supposed to regard Australia their permanent home, refugees accepted as immigrants do not need to fear a forcible return to their homelands. But they are not supposed to long for a return either and are expected to assimilate and forget as much as Arendt and her fellow refugees were. It is worth pondering the impact of such expectations on the identity of people who leave their native country in search of a place of refuge only to find themselves in a country that obliges them to regard it as their new and only home. Were refugees arriving in Australia before the institution of the TPV regime ever able to successfully defy the expectation that they would enter Australia with their slates clean, as it were? Were they ever able to make a new home and at the same time actively remember their old homes, reserving a room in the new home for what they had lost?

A look at how the concept of exile has featured in Australian public and literary discourses may provide a first answer to some of those questions. Exile has been a prominent theme in Australian literature and, more broadly, in the collective Australian imagination. Until at least the 1960s, many settlers of Anglo-Celtic descent thought of themselves as living where they did not belong and conceived of the British Isles as their true home. In the nineteenth century, those most commonly associated with exile were convicts who were not allowed to return to Great Britain. Contemporary Australian writers such as Randolph Stow have also identified, or have been identified, as exiles, even while living and writing in Australia. Indigenous Australians sometimes consider themselves, or are considered, to be living in exile in their own country. But until at least the 1980s, exile as experienced by refugees barely featured in Australian public and literary discourses, although by then several hundred thousand first generation refugees were living in Australia. It seems that settler Australians, who themselves felt exiled from the mother country and insecure because they squatted on somebody else's land, were unable to offer a place of exile to refugees.

A more specific look at the literary output of refugees—and former refugees, if that is not a contradiction in terms—living in Australia could also help us to understand the predicament of refugees who, by default, arrived in Australia as immigrants. Until about 20 years ago, poems, stories, plays and novels of authors who came to Australia because they were driven out of their native countries, and dealing with flight, exile, the loss suffered by becoming a refugee and the circumstances that drove people out of their native country were rarely published and made little impact.

This lack of attention makes the few who have written about issues to do with forced displacement and exile from their personal experience the more noteworthy. Perhaps the most important of them, if only because of the volume of his work that is concerned with the refugee experience, is Judah Waten, the son of Russian Jews who emigrated to Australia in 1914. The novels Paul Zulelling (1974) by Josef Vendra, and Where a Man Belongs (1969) by David Martin,
are also important reflections on the themes of dislocation and exile, although Vondra and Martin may be more aptly described as immigrants rather than as refugees-turned-immigrants.

Of the refugees who came to Australia in the late 1930s and early 1940s, three have published literary writings that engage with issues of exile and the refugee experience. The German-Jewish refugee Walter Kaufmann (born in 1924), who arrived in Australia in 1940 on the infamous Dunera as an internee from England, published Voices in the Storm, a novel with strong autobiographical content about the anti-fascist struggle and the experiences of a Jewish boy in Nazi Germany, in 1953. Soon afterwards, Kaufmann left Australia to settle in the German Democratic Republic. Only then did he add a second part to his novel, in which he dealt with his experiences as a refugee in Australia; he published this amended version in 1957 in Germany as Wohn der Mensch gehört. Paul Hatvani (1892-1975) was a well-established writer and literary critic in Vienna when he emigrated to Australia in 1939. He never wrote in English, and did not publish again in German until the mid-1960s. In 1973, he wrote an essay in which he reflects on his decision to leave his homeland and on his Australian exile. This essay remains one of the most incisive, and least recognized, comments on the Australian refugee experience.

Walter Adamson (born in 1911) is the only of the three who has written about exile and the refugee experience in English and while living in Australia. He began writing from a young age, but worked in commerce before escaping from Germany in 1938, first to Italy and from there to Australia, where he arrived six weeks before the outbreak of World War II. Although living in Bolivia from 1949 to 1953, Adamson settled permanently in Australia. He has been widely published as a poet, novelist and writer of short fiction from the 1960s, both in German and in English. He is best known for his novel The Institution, which was first published in Germany in 1974. But like Hatvani’s and Kaufmann’s, Adamson’s work as a postwar Australian author has attracted comparatively little attention from critics and the reading public.

In order to reflect on the changing identities of refugees in Australia, I explore three texts written by Adamson: “The Immigrant,” a poem he first published in 1963 in Australian Women's Weekly, and then republished ten years later, together with a German translation, in Das australische Emmaleins; Australia of All Places, a text published in English in 1984 (and based in part on Das australische Emmaleins); and Matilda Stops Waltzing, a novel written in English and published in 1996.

To this, my land, I’ve come too late, although your vast and empty space
I can embrace
in awe. (Das australische Emmaleins 34)

Thus begins the 1963 poem. On the one hand, it is an immigrant’s declaration of love for his adopted country. On the other, it is an expression of regret that the immigrant can never be a native. The specific reasons that made the narrator come to Australia, and the exact location of his native country are not spelled out:

I came a stranger seeking refuge from my own.
Driven by fear to this new world unknown. (34)

His people drive the author to his land. The first person possessive pronoun is employed both to refer to the new country (but not to the old country), and to the people of the old country (but not to the people of the new country). While adopting Australia as his homeland, the poem’s first person protagonist lays no claim to becoming Australian. In Australia, their patriotism has not entitled immigrants to be considered compatriots by other Australians. The poem’s lament, to have come too late, also draws attention to the immigrants’ dilemma that the people they could most readily identify with are those from their own native country.

Australia of All Places, which, unlike Das australische Emmaleins, does not include the 1963 poem, is semi-autobiographical. “My name is Anders. It is a German name and it means ‘different,’” the book opens (1). Difference is always relational. To an unsuspecting reader, the other side of this relation suggests itself: (the people of) the narrator’s adopted country. According to such an interpretation, the difference is the result of the narrator’s emigration. But a translation of the first sentences of the book’s earlier, German version reads: “My name is Anders. But that does not matter” (Das australische Emmaleins 1), suggesting that in this case, the author may have wanted to discourage readers from confusing his fiction with a memoir, and that the name as such was of no import (as long as it was anders from Adamson).

In his 1989 collection, The Man with the Suitcase, Adamson further complicates matters by making a reference to his own name in a preface titled “to Whom It May Concern.” Adamson writes that upon his arrival in Australia:

I was always asked “What was your name in your country?”, I had to explain that I was born with the name Adamson, which had been my father’s name and my paternal ancestors’ name for generations... and that it meant “son of Adam” in many languages, including my mother tongue... All the questioning got on my nerves and I decided to have my name changed by deed poll to something more Germanic, like Schultz or Müller. (v)

On the way to the registry office in Melbourne, Adamson found out that Australia had declared war on Germany, “and so I changed my mind instead of my name and have remained an Adamson ever since” (v). But
Adamson does not tell the reader that when he arrived on 24 July 1939 on the Orama from Naples, he did so as Walter Adamson. (In fact, his passport gave his name as Walter Israel Adamson, courtesy of an amendment made in January 1939 by the German embassy in Rome.) Those who kept asking him about his name would have done so because he had already altered it, if not when writing it (which he did only some ten years later), then at least when pronouncing it. It is tempting to think of Anders as a substitute for the Adamson that Adamson jettisoned upon his arrival in Melbourne. But taken individually or considered as an ensemble, these references do not allow us to be certain about Anders's/Adamson's identity. "Perhaps is a key-word in his language," the literary critic Manfred Jürgensen observed about Adamson. "The author knows that he (we) know(s) nothing, or very little, and that it is this absence of certainty which we share, which identifies us, and unites us, to a point" (372).

In the first part of *Australia of All Places*, Adamson describes Anders's arrival in Australia as a refugee shortly before the beginning of World War II. Once again, the reasons that made the narrator leave his native country (and go into exile) are not mentioned. His arrival in Australia happens by accident rather than by design: "I was only an insignificant mote of dust in that gigantic cloud which, once whirled up to the sky, spread over the whole world, to subside slowly and with faint tremors on distant continents" (5). Once again, Anders uses the first person possessive pronoun to refer to Australia, "my true homeland" (37).

But unlike in the poem, in *Australia of All Places* the narrator's native country is mentioned by name, even visited by Anders who, in the second part of the book (which is not part of *Das Australische Einmaleins*), becomes a protagonist whose exploits are described by another first-person narrator:

So now we were breathing German air again. I asked how long it was since he had been here. He stopped and thought.

"That cannot be expressed in years. A lifetime." He took a deep breath. He looked as though he were missing something. Perhaps the scent of gumtrees. Perhaps something else. Something, which cannot be described and which yet exists, was missing. A lifetime. For the first time I felt sorry for him. He, who always talked as though his life were one long joymore, more of a pastime than a subject for serious reflection, had for the first time grown very thoughtful. This Germany! I looked around. So this was it. (60)

In *Australia of All Places*, Adamson addresses the question of what happens to the refugee when the reasons for his flight arguably no longer exist. He lets Anders say:

The war was over. The reason why I had once left my homeland and had been stranded by the flood of events on these foreign shores had ceased to exist. Did I then want to return to where I came from ...? No, certainly not. My home is now here, where so much is different, and yet is good. (30)

Here Anders emphasizes that he emigrated, rather than went into exile in the hope or expectation to be able to return.

If the poem is about the impossibility of the immigrant's truly being at home in Australia, *Australia of All Places* suggests that immigrants are able to make Australia their home. It is from the perspective of the New Australian—the term used by the Australian government in the late 1940s to avoid referring to the DP immigrants as refugees—that Adamson/Anders talks about the difficulties encountered by the newly arrived immigrant and about Australian idiosyncrasies, one of them being that Australians always ask "How do you like Australia?" and expecting admiration in return. Anders does not mind that question, for he likes Australia. In a poem published in 1990, another Australian author writing in English and German, Hanski Eek, inverts the question:

Now let me ask in different vein,
About the New Australian:
D you still object to accent, face
When not of Anglo-Saxon race?
Forty years on, now let us see—
["Australia, how do you like me?" (55)]

But Anders does not pose that question. And in *Australia of All Places*, Adamson does not attempt to provide an answer: his book does not reveal whether or not Australia or Australians welcome somebody who is anders, different.

Anders embraces the difference—the Anderssehen—that Australia offers. According to the second first-person narrator, however, he has become an Australian. As an Australian, he talks to Germans living in Germany. And as an Australian he returns home, to Melbourne. His admiration and his sense of being at home are not problematic. Neither are, at that stage in his life, his creator's: "I think I have assimilated well," Adamson told an interviewer in 1986 (Delander 5). But the experience of being back in Germany offers a glimpse of a different Anders, one who is remembering his native country and the reasons that caused the gigantic cloud of dust to be whirled up into the sky.

Adamson's most recent book, *Matilda Stops Waltzing*, which has again much autobiographical content, suggests another level of being at home in Australia. Here he questions the relationship between the refugee immigrant and his adopted country. "Come what may, he wanted to belong," the narrator remembers his arrival in Melbourne in 1939 (8). He refused to read books in German, for "inner and outer pressure had led us to believe that it was not only possible but also necessary to 'become' an Australian." From the perspective of the present the narrator comments: "The fallacy of this assumption has long been obvious" (52).

The poem's first person and Anders in *Australia of All Places* are both lone immigrants surrounded by native Australians. In *Matilda Stops Waltzing*, the narrator, himself
a German refugee, interacts with another refugee from Germany. These interactions allow him to conjure up Germany. Not all that he remembers relates to his banishment: he recalls the intellectual atmosphere of the Bauhaus, expressionist artists, and writers such as Kafka. He remembers growing up near the Baltic Sea (Adamson was born and grew up in Königsberg, now Kaliningrad): “The beaches there, the endless dunes, the shifting sand between what was then the far-north-east border of Germany with Lithuania, bore indelible memories of youth and friendship and love, memories far removed from the stark reality of age and exile” (121).

But the narrator is also specific about Nazi Germany. He recalls that his father died in a concentration camp, and that this was not something he had wanted to remember earlier in his life.

There had been so much in my past which I knew I ought never to forget but had pushed down into oblivion. But then, how could I have gone on living with the memories? Europe, Germany, my father, my people. Dead, killed, murdered, in gas chambers, in the holocaust of the thirties and forties . . . . What did we know of each other, if we even managed not to know our own past any more? Pretending. It was all one great pretence. (172–73)

And he ponders the consequences of this and other murders for his identity: “What happened between ’33 and ’45 destroyed my ability to belong” (114)—not to belong to Germany, but to belong generally. In Matilda Stops Waltzing, the narrator distances himself from Germany. In response to the question, “Would you rather you were back in Germany?,” he replies:

Heaven forbid! As a tourist, yes, any time. Then I could hide behind my Australian identity, at least for a while. But they’d quickly find out. It happened, on my first trip in the sixties, and then again on my recent visit. I was glad to come back to Australia. “You are one of us,” they say over there. The trouble is we don’t feel flattered. (61)

But for the narrator of Matilda Stops Waltzing, there is no reason to embrace Australia and its culture warts and all. He finds it “unhygienic . . . crude, uncivilised” to drink beer out of a can (53), and has never been to the Melbourne Cricket Ground, that holy grail of native Melburnians.

Immediately on his arrival . . . he had been told by a well-meaning stranger that to know the Australians he would have to go inside the stadium and watch a football match. There he would meet his new countrymen undisguised, uninhibited, beer cans and all—in the raw, so to speak. That settled it. He had no intention of following it up. (10)

Now he remembers the despair he felt when arriving in Australia:

I had soon realised, in those days following my arrival in dreary, dismal Port Melbourne, that I had not arrived but had been expelled from the world, had landed in the backblocks of civilization. (108)

Elsewhere, Adamson describes how he survived “the end of his world at the end of the world” (Jurgensen 376). In his later writings, he makes no attempt to gloss over the implications of having ended up at what Paul Keating once famously termed “the arse end of the world,” or to use humor, as he does in Australia of All Places, to distance himself from the despair he felt upon arriving in Melbourne. In one of his stories, he lets the narrator say:

The southern hemisphere, the empty bottom of the world, that dismal outpost of human habitation, allowed us and cut us off from the wicked splendour, the goddess that bears the greatest name in human history still: EUROPA. (The Man with the Suitcase 77)

Matilda Stops Waltzing is foremost a love story. But it is also a reflection on the theme of exile and on the author’s coming-to-terms with the concept of exile. “Exile! I caught myself thinking the forbidden concept. It had never been applicable to my Odyssey; should it become so now, so much closer to its end?” (121) In his review of Australia of All Places, Manfred Jurgensen notes the “evasion of a creative and imaginatively intelligent articulation of the experience of migration” not just in Adamson’s book but in German-Australian literature generally (360). With Matilda Stops Waltzing, I contend, Adamson went a long way towards formulating the vision Jurgensen misses, albeit specifically for the refugee experience rather than for the migrant experience generally.

It is instructive to compare the literary output of the present generation of on-shore asylum seekers—those who are at best allowed a precarious existence in Australia—with that of refugees who arrived as immigrants in the 1930s, 1940s or 1950s. Comparatively many of those who went through Woomera, Port Hedland and other detention centers have already written about their experiences as refugees and exiles. At least four Iranian asylum seekers for example—Mohsen Soltan-Yazdi, Shahin Shafaei, Rahim Shiri and Narsi Mahoutchi—have published literary texts that reflect on the refugee experience. The German-Jewish refugees of the late 1930s and early 1940s and the DP migrants of the 1940s and 1950s began publicly remembering their pre-Australian past and their exiled selves usually only many years after their arrival in Australia.

Adamson is exceptional in that he made Australia his home and found a voice as a German exile writing in English, but the search for this voice took him almost a lifetime. His writing career—from the 1963 poem via Das australische Einmaleins and Australia of All Places to the 1996 novel—illuminates the problems refugees have had in Australia when attempting to make a new home for themselves without willfully forgetting their past. These prob-
problems have to do with Australia’s response to refugees: their admittance has been little informed by humanitarian considerations or by the recognition that refugees have the right to a place of exile; instead refugees were recruited as suitable immigrants. The TPV regime constitutes no radical departure from previous refugee policies: asylum seekers arriving by boat after 1999, however well founded their fear of persecution in their homelands, have been summarily classed as unsuitable immigrants. Recent adjustments to the TPV regime, which give TPV holders the chance to apply for permanent residence status, merely aim to provide for the exceptional case of asylum seekers whose usefulness for the Australian economy weighs more than their method of arrival, and who thus become deserving immigrants.

Why, then, did Adamson at last successfully negotiate, perhaps even reconcile, his identities as immigrant and exile, albeit 57 years after his arrival in dreary Port Melbourne? In Matilda Stops Waltzing, he lets the novel’s main protagonist muse:

There is the political exile from one’s own country, one’s natural background. There can be substitutes; there usually are, more or less satisfactory. But there is the other exile that goes with it: the exile from one’s own self. The self that is almost a geographical term, a place where a person is born, lives, dies. The self, not the country. (67)

With Matilda Stops Waltzing, Walter Adamson suggests that it is possible to go into exile but retain a connection to that place where a person is born, lives, dies. He also suggests that this connection is dependent on the acknowledgment of a rift between a pre-exile self and a self in exile, and that it hinges on the exile’s ability to distinguish between home and homeland. To be able to retain this connection requires that the exile embrace his or her adopted country less optimistically than Hannah Arendt’s German-Jewish refugees, less unconditionally than Adamson’s protagonist Anders, and less emphatically than Australians who overcompensate their own sense of homelessness by subscribing to a settler-colonial jingoism. “I’m very anti-nationalistic,” Adamson once said in an interview when asked how he felt about the Germany of his past and the Australia of the present. “I feel I stand between at least two worlds if not more” (Vondra 199).

Asylum seekers in Australian detention centers and refugees on three year temporary protection visas have not been offered a new homeland and are discouraged from making a new home for themselves. They are forced to stand between two worlds, and write about being exiles and refugees, dreaming, perhaps, of being ordinary immigrants. □

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Note
The information about Walter Adamson’s German name and his arrival in Australia is gleaned from his naturalization file held at the National Archives of Australia (A439, 1951/11/5257).

Works Cited

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