

# Hostel Stories: Toward a Richer Narrative of the Lived Experiences of Migrants

Rachel A. Ankeny and Karen Agutter

The ‘Hostel Stories’ project was funded by a Linkage Grant from the Australian Research Council (LP120100553) to the University of Adelaide in partnership with community partners including the Migration Museum (SA), the cities of Charles Sturt and Port Adelaide Enfield, State Archives of South Australia, and the Vietnamese Community in Australia (South Australia Chapter) (see <https://arts.adelaide.edu.au/history/hostel-stories/>). The research project grew out of ongoing interests – both among former hostel residents and our community partners – in documenting day-to-day lives in the migrant hostels, reception centres, and camps (henceforth all called ‘hostels’) in South Australia. The project findings made considerable contributions to a Hostel Stories-focused exhibition at the Migration Museum, a new memorial at the site of the former Finsbury/Pennington hostel (built by the City of Charles Sturt), major exhibits at the National Archives and the Victoria Museum, and extensive engagement with stakeholders. These stakeholders included former hostel workers and residents and their families. Numerous events were held at community locations, many of which occurred during the South Australian History Festival.

From the 1940s until the 1990s, thousands of migrants passed through South Australia’s migrant hostels. They came from locales ranging from various countries in Europe and South America to southeast Asia and the Middle East. The hostels were temporary homes to a wide range of migrants, from Displaced Persons and refugees to economic migrants and so-called ‘ten pound poms.’ When the project began, there was very little easily accessible information on the hostels, with limited existing research on available official records and no comprehensive or comparative work exploring all of the South Australian hostels. The project’s researchers and partners recognised that the opportunity to gather first-hand accounts of day-to-day life in the hostels was diminishing as the years passed. Hence the project sought to remedy the gaps in our historical record about the hostels by bringing together the memories of former residents and workers with extensive archival research to compile the most comprehensive information to date on temporary migrant accommodation in South Australia.

There were at least fourteen government-operated hostels in South Australia between 1949 and the mid-



Young migrant Gareth Gray is pictured on his tricycle at the Pennington Hostel in 1973. In front of the photo, displayed during the Hostel Stories Exhibition (Migration Museum, Adelaide, 2013–14) is Gareth’s own son. Photo courtesy of Gareth Gray (2014).

1990s, and a large number of additional migrant work camps or other forms of employer-associated migrant accommodation. Over time, the researchers on the team identified a range of archival sources, many of which had never been previously viewed or accessed, which allowed us to look in great detail at life in the hostels from institutional and policy points of view, and to track broader patterns and trends. These source materials have now been cleared and many were made publicly accessible in digital form (with digitisation sponsored by the project) to anyone who might want to pursue additional research. The project also made significant contributions via the creation of oral history interviews with numerous former hostel residents and workers. These interviews will be made publicly available through the State Library of South Australia. A guide for those researching their families and seeking information about migrant hostels has been produced for the State Archives (SA).

Oral testimonies were an essential part of our project, as through them we were able to access the memories of migrants about their actual experiences – both during their times within the hostels and in the community after their residence was completed. Based on research completed elsewhere in the country and anecdotal information, we expected to hear about the poor levels of accommodation (particularly in the earliest years) and complaints about the food. However, the oral histories also gave us invaluable access to a range of emotional experiences common amongst many migrants and refugees. Even with regard to food, oral histories allowed us to develop richer accounts, for instance about how certain ingredients provoked strong emotional responses, with many describing the smell and taste of pumpkin as well as mutton in very strong and negative terms.<sup>1</sup>

Many residents described the separation of families, especially when men were sent away to work and women and children remained at the hostels. The associated concerns and fears connected closely to more general feelings of alienation from not only others in the Australian community, but also from the landscape and the country itself. One resident, who was at Woodside Hostel during the 1955 Black Sunday bushfires, commented on her memories of her physical experiences as the fire burned in the area for several days. She recalled that she did not understand what was happening, and noted that her mother thought that returning to post-war Germany would be better than this sort of life. Other migrants recounted their experiences of what life was like after leaving the hostel. They frequently mentioned discrimination and fears of being attacked or beaten up because they were not Australian-born, using vivid and evocative language. Others expressed strong emotions and views about other migrants and refugees, often making stereotyped, prejudicial and even racist comments, particularly about recent arrivals.<sup>2</sup>

This project has made significant contributions by developing critical narrative accounts of the lived experiences of migrants and refugees who came through the hostel system, and by developing material that is relevant to historical and policy debates about migrant and refugee experiences and how they shaped contemporary Australia. The project also supported its local partners by documenting the heritage of their diverse and vibrant communities, recording the stories and experiences of important subpopulations of residents and former residents, and supporting preservation and promotion of critical local heritage sites. This, in turn, will contribute to shaping resilient and vibrant multicultural communities into the future.

## Endnotes

- 1 Karen Agutter and Rachel Ankeny, 'Food and the Disempowerment of Post-War Refugee Women in Australia,' *Journal of the History of the Family*, vol. 22 (2017), pp. 531–53; Karen Agutter and Rachel A. Ankeny, 'Food Memories in the Liminal Space of Australian Migrant Hostels,' in Emily Falconer (ed.), *Space, Taste and Affect*, London, Routledge, 2019 (forthcoming).
- 2 Karen Agutter and Rachel Ankeny, 'Unsettling Narratives: Overcoming Prejudices in the Hostel Stories Project,' *Journal of Australian Studies*, vol. 40 (2016), pp. 464–77.