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# THE AUTHORITY OF THE PUBLISHED MEMOIR: LAYING THE PATH FOR THE CREATION OF THE EXPATRIATE ARCHIVE CENTRE

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*Talking to my neighbours – in my mother tongue!! – I realized that they didn't understand and I didn't either. They heard my words but still looked astonished. They and we had lived for more than two decades in very different worlds, had had different experiences and so we had no common memories with the people around us. We had to explain: why didn't we have a normal decent life? KL; Freiburg; Germany; 2006.<sup>1</sup>*

The pursuit of employment is the least dramatic reason for migration, especially when organized as a specific assignment. This notion denotes a pre-decided temporariness, which is the main characteristic of the expatriate as a person in migration. This temporariness though, may have a span of two years, or a decade, and sometimes more, which means that a considerable part of life is involved; concerning the persons holding the assignment as much as the people close to them.

Who are these people, how do they spend their days, with whom do they connect, what do they think of their temporary home and of their home country seen from a distance, how do they feel being alienated from their habits and their culture? These are topics of interest existing in expatriate communities around the world, rarely finding common ground outside this circle. Recognizing the lack of documentation about the lives of expatriates in their own environment, a group of women living in The Hague, who identified themselves as 'Shell wives', took the initiative to document their lives and those of other expats like them. The project, exceeding their initial aspirations, led to the creation of a centre of research for the position of expatriates in global migration: The Expatriate Archive Centre.<sup>2</sup>

It all started with a publication titled *Life on the Move*: An anthology of anecdotes and memories collected from the families of Shell employees worldwide. In 1993, a group of Shell spouses residing in The Hague initiated the Shell Ladies' Project, with the scope to record 'the kind of life lived "on the move"'.<sup>3</sup> The publication had a historical perspective with material covering more than 65 years. It was produced with a grant by Shell, and was distributed among the Shell expatriates community. Any generated profit was meant to go to a charity.<sup>4</sup> With material in their hands exceeding the capacity of one volume, and obviously sensing the importance of this first book, the editors foresaw the continuation of the project.<sup>5</sup> Three years later, in 1996, the second book was published, with the title *Life now*. It focused on expat life in the nineties.

After the completion of the project, the material collected for the publications was filed away and remained unused for a few years, until the creation of the Outpost Family Archive, in 2003. This archive was originally part of the Shell support organisation Outpost in The Hague, but it was eventually separated and reshaped into an autonomous archive, with the sole purpose of dealing with the preservation and expansion of the growing collection of expatriate

documents.<sup>6</sup> In 2007, the archive found a home in the historic Archipel district of The Hague,<sup>7</sup> in premises donated by one of its founding members, Judy Moody-Stuart and her husband.<sup>8</sup> Becoming totally independent from Shell in 2008, the archive attained its legal status as a foundation under Dutch law and was renamed Expatriate Archive Centre (EAC).

A new anthology comprising excerpts from the archive's collection was published soon after, in 2008, with the title *The Source Book, An Expatriate Social History, 1927-2007 Shell Lives Unshelved*. This book expanded its sources from the traditional writings, diaries, letters, memoirs, and photographs to more present-day sources, like videos, and oral history recordings.

Over time, the EAC has expanded the type of mediums that it collects. They now include emails, websites, blogs, and any possible source that modern media technology supports. With the aim of having all the material in digital form, every newly acquired paper archive is being digitized, thanks to the help of skilled volunteers. However, to protect the privacy of the contributors and persons mentioned or portrayed in the documents, the material is not searchable online; it is made available for research only within the archive's premises and by registered request.

The Expatriate Archive Centre has as its goal to preserve, document and create a centre of excellence for research on the subject of the position of expatriates in global migration. To communicate this concept, it organizes activities that aim to make the expats community visible and build a bridge between expats and the local community. In the autumn of 2015, EAC, in collaboration with The Hague Municipal Archives and the non-profit organization ACCESS,<sup>9</sup> presented the exhibition *Expatriate Impressions of The Hague* in The Hague City Hall.<sup>10</sup> Further, information mornings are held in the centre's premises a few times a year, while conferences and fairs are some of the other events that the centre participates in.

The Shell Ladies' Project publishing action created an area of authority on which new projects could be based. The Shell wives, acting as publishers, identified a problem: That of a specific kind of migration and its effects on the people involved, and set off to tell the story. Their publishing operation, being of temporary character itself, employed all the regular means of the business: collecting, selecting, filtering, editing, securing permissions and translations, as well as composing the material, designing the book and having it printed. The audience was identified, largely overlapping with the authors or contributors of the material. Last but not least, a sponsor was secured, the Shell Company, whose interest in assuring a good sojourn to its employees, including all nuances of this idea, was reason enough for funding the project.

The books are professionally articulated, with front and back matter, including a preface, content page, glossary, index, contributors list, and illustrations. Of great significance is the care shown in preserving the privacy of the persons involved; while the contributors are listed at the back of the book, names are not linked to a specific text. In the first book only places and years are mentioned next to each text; in the second and third book, initials are added; the third book also states the archival record number, thus justifying its title as *The Source Book*. The selection of contributors also evolved along with the project. In the beginning, the stories came from women only, the Shell spouses, while eventually there were stories from men, working or in pension, as well as short contributions by children. The pensioners and the children are both special categories, as the first are repatriated to 'foreign homelands' and the second grow up as foreigners in temporary homelands (often referred to as Third Culture Kids or TCKs). Their stories talk almost exclusively about their search for cultural identity.

The Expatriate Archive Centre is the long-term outcome of a publishing action, which in its turn stretched the gained authority towards a wider objective. It became a hub for the collection and preservation – as much as making it available for research – of primary source material that documents the social history of expatriate life. The list of projects of academic and private research done on this material is growing. Researchers are examining expatriate life from different perspectives: historical, psychological, and sociological, or relating to work and cultural issues, genealogy, and other. Moreover, through the centre and its expanding collection, expatriates worldwide have found a connecting point that explicitly addresses their shared sense of rootlessness. The discussion about this special form of migration has opened and, through consistent documentation and research, it is taking its place in global migration history.

#### Notes.

- 1 Outpost Archive Centre. *The Source Book, An Expatriate Social History, 1927-2007, Shell Lives Unshelved*. The Hague: Summertime Publishing and Outpost Archive Centre, 2008. Print. 171.
- 2 The Expatriate Archive Center (EAC) is an organisation created with the mission to collect and preserve the life stories of expatriates worldwide for future research (<http://www.xpatarchive.com/>).
- 3 'Foreword of the editor'. *Life on the move: Shell Ladies' Project*. The Hague: Shell Ladies, 1993. Print. 7.
- 4 Ibid. The book was never sold however, the charitable status of the project is mentioned explicitly in the end matter of the publication: 'The financial status of the project has been charitable throughout, and any money made from sales will go to an international, secular, family charity'.
- 5 The editors proclaimed in the first book: 'There may be a sequel to this volume'. See *Life on the move*, 193.
- 6 The Outpost provides professional information and support on living abroad to Shell employees and their families.
- 7 In Dutch 'Archipelbuurt', a nineteenth century neighbourhood where most of the streets are named after islands of the Indonesian archipelago. The Peace Palace is also situated in this district.
- 8 The other two creators of the archive were Glenda Lewin and the American professor of social history Dewey White; the latter recognised the unique value of the collection as primary source material for research, and came up with the idea of the Outpost Family Archive Centre.
- 9 ACCESS is a not-for-profit organization supporting the international community in the Netherlands. It is run by a team of volunteers who have experienced living as expatriates in the Netherlands. ACCESS provides practical information, advice, support, and services to assist with all aspects of moving to, or living in the Netherlands for short or long-term.
- 10 The exhibition was curated by the artist Natalie McIlroy, an expat Scottish artist based in The Hague.