

Preface

[Act I] Entering the administration. I, a human geographer, sallied forth to investigate the administrative decision-making processes in the Swiss asylum system. I approached the administration with my project and was invited to meet two seniors of the office to present it. In their eyes, the focus of the project was not clear enough, but they were sympathetic and suggested I gain some more insights into the procedure before writing the final proposal. They enrolled me in an internal training session for new caseworkers, where I was introduced to the key sensibilities and equipment for producing asylum cases. I was supposed to sharpen my research proposal after these first insights. I tried, but my proposal was still dismissed for being too much of a burden on the office with relatively little benefit. After rewriting the proposal to become relevant in non-academic terms, I was granted access – for the time being.

[Act II] Casework's flavours. In a reception centre of the asylum office, I was introduced to the craft of casework and to matters of taste, fact, and concern. I traced the different events in which cases become assembled and encountered asylum seekers and their stories in hearings. I struggled between the role of the strange outsider with a different agenda and that of the insider I slowly became. I was sympathetic with the members of the branch I was researching. Most of them opened their doors to me and shared their coffee and cigarette breaks, breakfast and lunch table with me. I was grateful and got a first impression of what mattered to the caseworkers and their superiors. While I increasingly began to embrace the worldview of the asylum officials, I also remained critical of some of the resolutions they took. I developed my own sense of casework through the growing number of cases I encountered. I started charting what the cases were about and what they exemplified to me. I met a few caseworkers I had encountered in the

basic training for new caseworkers for coffee or dinner outside the office to interview them about their experiences of their first year in the office. We pondered the convergences and divergences of our partial perspectives on asylum casework.

[Act III] Immersion and tightrope walking. Before shifting to the headquarters, I was again asked to present my work and preliminary insights to the senior officials who had rendered access possible. As they asked me to become an assistant in a section of the headquarters in which I was about to do research, I gave in. In a way I was glad for the opportunity to do something tangible in – and for – the office. I started to work in a section in the double role of intern and researcher. The new role made me feel both the burdens and thrills of doing casework. And it made me struggle with ethical quandaries of this close involvement and robbed me of my sleep. I first assessed applications for family reunification. Later, I conducted a few asylum hearings, drafted decisions, and enjoyed meticulous discussions on the legal twists and turns implicated in these practices. At some point, my own research slowly began to lose its significance to me. At times, I would have even preferred to become a full member of the administration over continuing my academic project: to embark on the rhythms of fabrication and feel the excitement related to it. I had got attracted to the power running through the capillaries of a body whose motions produce state effects and something more.

[Epilogue] Exit, connections and transmutations. Ultimately, I left the office. I had gained new friendships, filled notebooks, and took along a heap of copies of cases, institutional files and vivid memories. Distancing myself from office life and of the tentacles capturing my thinking proved difficult, much more difficult than I had expected. For a while, I mainly reflected on what I had experienced. What I had seen and experienced intensified the juxtaposition with what I read in the literature. My reflections were echoed by conversations I had conducted and still occasionally conducted with officials. I started to sketch and translate how things could be connected in non-administrative terms. Ultimately, I started to believe that administrative decision-making resembles alchemy rather than magic and works towards transmutation of everyone and everything involved. Writing about casework proved much more difficult than doing casework. Yet, I finally

managed to assemble a version of the asylum 'system' in text form. While this appears to me sometimes like a ridicule of the complex and challenging worlds I encountered and experienced, I still submitted (to) it.

A story about whom? Although this is often omitted, I openly acknowledge that this book tells as much a story about the practices of governing asylum as it tells a story about me: a researcher who collected the bits and pieces of the arrangements of governing asylum and ultimately assembled a version of it in the pages to follow.

