From a hotel in Hong Kong, Edward Snowden shocked the world in 2013 by disclosing the extent of U.S. intelligence spying. Then he vanished before fleeing to Moscow. Handelsblatt found the people who hid Snowden -- refugees with nothing, and everything to lose.

**WHY IT MATTERS**

Refugees sheltered Edward Snowden for two weeks in Hong Kong slums when he became the target of an international manhunt in June 2013 before fleeing to Moscow, Handelsblatt has learned.

**FACTS**

NSA contractor Edward Snowden went underground for two weeks in Hong Kong in 2013 after disclosing his employer’s secrets, hidden by refugees on behalf of a human rights lawyer.

Mr. Snowden remained in Kowloon and other neighborhoods at a series of safe houses until fleeing escaping to Moscow, where he remains in exile, a fugitive from U.S. justice.

Mr. Snowden and his Hong Kong lawyer are telling the story of his first two weeks on the run to highlight the plight of refugees in Hong Kong, one of Asia’s wealthiest cities which grants asylum to only 0.3 percent of applicants. “Snowden,” a film by U.S. director Oliver Stone, opens this month in Germany and around the world.

Edward Snowden doesn’t like vegetables. Nadeeka* smiled at this as she washed the dishes in her small kitchen. The guest who had slept in her room for the last three days may have been the world’s most-wanted man, but when it came to his eating habits, he strongly resembled her daughter, Sethumdi. The meat disappeared, the side dish stayed on the plate. Now, on this hot summer day in 2013, Mr. Snowden
and Sethumdi were playing in the hallway. Times like these, the American acted normal.

Nadeeka, a petite woman with jet-black hair, finished the dishes and went into the hallway. Her guest had withdrawn to his room again. She knocked on the door, opened it and found him bent over his laptop, as usual. Nadeeka told him she was going shopping. She felt sorry for the young American for having to spend so much time in the stuffy room. He looked at her for a moment, without moving. Then he said: "Nadeeka, I’m alive in this room. I’m dead outside."

The world had never seen a spy like him before. "My name is Edward Snowden. I am 29 years old. I worked for Booz Allen Hamilton as an analyst for the NSA," he said at the beginning of his interview, which was broadcast on June 9, 2013. Then he told viewers about all the things an analyst for the National Security Agency could do.

The interview sent shockwaves around the globe. People were already suspicious of intelligence agencies but Mr. Snowden’s revelations sent shivers down their spines. Here was a young man talking calmly about how the NSA was recording and storing every single email and text message sent anywhere in the world. Every telephone number in use was archived, as was every internet address visited and every online purchase. All of this was being done without court orders or political mandates. The world was outraged.

One reason Mr. Snowden’s revelations found such resonance was that he had prepared them so well. Weeks before his interview, he had traveled to Hong Kong with a collection of USB sticks in his luggage. The storage devices contained countless U.S. intelligence service documents. Then he set up a meeting with a journalist from British newspaper The Guardian and U.S. documentary filmmaker Laura Poitras.

video: Interviews with the Hong Kong Refugees Who Hid the NSA Operative En Route to Moscow.

Articles began appearing in June about PRISM, the massive eavesdropping program the NSA was using to access data from Apple, Facebook, Google, Yahoo and other tech companies. The disclosures drew outrage. For several days, the world puzzled over who the source of the revelations could be. Until Snowden outed himself in his own interview. Going public, Mr. Snowden became the face of the protest movement against U.S. surveillance activities.

Despite the care he had taken preparing his revelations, the young man had given precious little thought to what would happen afterwards. The interview with the Guardian journalist, Glenn Greenwald, took place on June 6, 2013, at Hotel Mira in downtown Hong Kong. The whistleblower was still staying at the hotel when the interview was broadcast three days later.

Now the whole world could recognize his face. Mr. Snowden could no longer set foot outside. And Mr. Greenwald, who had checked into a different hotel, no longer felt safe visiting him. Other journalists were at his heels. The whistleblower was trapped.

The attorney

The sun had just set over Lantau, the biggest of Hong Kong’s 263 islands, on Monday, June 10, 2013, when Robert Tibbo’s phone rang. The 49-year-old attorney opened his eyes and looked at the clock. Annoyed, Mr. Tibbo rolled over and closed his eyes again. The phone rang again a few minutes later. On the third try, Mr. Tibbo finally picked up.

He was sitting in his Mazda 20 minutes later. He was heading to Kowloon, where Hotel Mira is located. Mr. Tibbo felt queasy. He had been working as a lawyer in Hong Kong for eight years. In an earlier life, the Canadian had worked as a chemical engineer for Monsanto in Australia. Then he set up shop in Hong Kong as a corporate consultant, and went to law school, specializing in

“One reason Mr. Snowden’s revelations found such resonance was that he had prepared them so well. Weeks before his interview, he had traveled to Hong Kong with a collection of USB sticks in his luggage. The storage devices contained countless U.S. intelligence service documents.”
human rights. About 12,000 refugees were living in Hong Kong at the time, many under miserable conditions. There was plenty of work for Mr. Tibbo.

The lawyer drove quickly. Hong Kong, a special administrative zone on the southern coast of China, has a population of 7 million. But thanks to an extremely high automobile tax and excellent public transportation, Hong Kong has fewer traffic jams than most other major cities. Mr. Tibbo drove as fast as he could. What a Monday! He reached for his phone.

“Where are you now? What? Oh, no, that’s too dangerous. I’ll be right there,” he said, breathlessly to the person on the other end.

Mr. Tibbo walked into the lobby of the W Hotel, the hotel, where Glenn Greenwald, the Guardian journalist, was staying. He looked around.

Dozens of journalists were camped out in the lobby. In their frenetic search for Mr. Snowden, they had discovered Mr. Greenwald’s whereabouts. They still didn’t know the identity of the man they were looking for. But they had a simple plan: Follow Mr. Greenwald until he led them to Mr. Snowden.

Mr. Tibbo was shocked. Like millions of other people in the world, the attorney had seen Mr. Snowden’s interview on television the night before. He had marveled at the American who appeared relaxed as he chatted about the NSA. But hours later, Mr. Tibbo’s admiration had turned to consternation. Had Mr. Snowden and the journalists actually betrayed the biggest secrets of the U.S. intelligence agencies and then simply gone to bed?

Shortly after Mr. Snowden’s television bombshell, Mr. Greenwald received a call from a long-time acquaintance. The man warned the journalist the entire world would soon be looking for Mr. Snowden. The American needed a lawyer, and fast, his friend told him. Mr. Greenwald’s reader knew two of the best human rights lawyers in Hong Kong: Robert Tibbo and Jonathan Mann.

At the W Hotel, Mr. Tibbo went into action. Jonathan Mann headed to went the Mira Hotel to speak with Mr. Snowden, while Mr. Tibbo went to the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Mr. Greenwald was ordered to stay put.

Mr. Tibbo rushed out of the W Hotel straight to the head of the UNHCR. He made his case: An American was in Hong Kong urgently needed political protection. The official was reserved and perplexed by the puzzling request. Mr. Tibbo’s phone rang again.

It was Mr. Snowden.

He was nervous. Earlier, Mr. Snowden had said his testimony was more important than his freedom. But now, the consequences of his disclosures were starting to sink in, and he realized he would be arrested if he left his hotel. Where was he supposed to go?

“Don’t worry about it,” Mr. Tibbo said. He had an idea.

**Snowden shows up**

Nadeeka didn’t recognize Edward Snowden when she met him. The young man was standing in front of
her apartment door, wearing a baseball cap and carrying a blue plastic bag. Robert Tibbo stood beside him. The attorney, to whom Nadeeka owed her freedom in Hong Kong, had called a short time earlier. There was someone who needed protection, he said, and asked Nadeeka to help.

That night, Mr. Snowden slept where Nadeeka and her daughter usually sleep, on an old mattress in a 100-square-foot room with bare concrete walls. Nadeeka and her daughter Sethumi slept in the hallway.

The next morning, Mr. Snowden asked his host to buy him a newspaper. When Nadeeka opened the South China Morning Post, she was dumbfounded. The man whose photo she was looking at was sitting on her bed. Nadeeka was harboring the world’s most-wanted man.

When Handelsblatt met Nadeeka in Hong Kong, she wasn’t doing well. It was a hot summer day in 2016, with temperatures reaching 31 degrees Celsius (88 degrees Fahrenheit) and 90 percent humidity. Nadeeka was just out of hospital, and wanted to hold her three-month-old son, Dinath, in her arms. But Dinath was still in hospital, with ear problems following a kidney infection. The doctors decided to keep him there.

Her apartment is on the fourth floor of a high-rise in Kowloon. We walked up through a cluttered stairwell, passing piles of garbage and fuse boxes with cables hanging out. Looking out the windows as we climbed the stairs, we saw the illegal structures people built on top of buildings nearby.

The four members of Nadeeka’s family live in a two-room apartment. The shower is in the stairwell and the stove is next to the toilet. The walls are bare, and the only spot of color is a colorful landscape Nadeeka’s husband Supun painted onto the walls.

When Nadeeka opened the door, her daughter Sethumi jumped excitedly behind her. The five-year-old is seemingly unaffected by the poverty of her surroundings. Bright-eyed, the little girl showed her plastic toys and lost herself in a fantasy world where she is a princess. Nadeeka stroked her daughter’s head. Then she pulled out a tattered chair and a plastic stool, sat down, and told how she had ended up in Hong Kong.

**The seamstress**

Nadeeka was born in Colombo, the capital of Sri Lanka, in 1983. Her father was a bus driver and her mother a housewife. When Nadeeka turned 18, she started working as a seamstress in a factory, where she made baby clothing for Nike and Marks & Spencer. She worked 10 hours a day, six days a week, and overtime was standard. Workers had to ask the foreman for permission to use the bathroom. If Nadeeka did not complete the required number of garments, she had to continue sewing without pay until she fulfilled her quota. When there were urgent orders to finish, the 600 female employees had to work all night long.

But hard work wasn’t the reason Nadeeka left her country. The reason was Nuwan. He was the man Nadeeka saw every day on her way to work. Nuwan was from a politically influential family. He spoke to Nadeeka, a shy young woman, for the first time in March 2003. He asked to go on a date with him, but she turned him down.

For six months, Nuwan followed Nadeeka from the factory where she worked to her parents’ house, begging her to be his girlfriend. Nadeeka relented - at least a little - in October, telling Nuwan he should speak to her parents. They took a look at the young man and told him to come back with his parents. Finally, they gave him permission to go out with their daughter.

Four months later, they were sleeping together. Nadeeka, whose upbringing forbade premarital sex, was against it at first. But Nuwan was persistent, and because Nadeeka was certain that she would marry this man, she finally gave in.
Nuwan went abroad in late 2004. Soon there were rumors that he was living a very loose life. When he returned to Sri Lanka in mid-2006, Nadeeka's parents told him that his relationship with their daughter was over. That was when the torture began.

Under a false pretext, Nuwan lured Nadeeka to a friend's apartment, where he raped her. From then on, he demanded sex several times a week. If Nadeeka refused, Nuwan beat her and raped her. Fearing she would be stigmatized, Nadeeka didn’t go to the police or the hospital. When she threatened to press charges against Nuwan, he showed her a video he had secretly made when they were having sex. He told Nadeeka that he would publish the video if she resisted. At the same time, Nadeeka discovered that Nuwan was married and that his wife was expecting a child. Nadeeka felt dishonored and feared that she would never find a husband. She tried to commit suicide by swallowing insecticide.

After doctors saved her life, Nadeeka hid at a relative's house. But Nuwan found her and threatened to kill Nadeeka, her parents and anyone who helped her. Because his family was closely aligned politically with the governing party, he had political protection. The police wouldn't touch his family. In December 2007, Nadeeka fled to Hong Kong, where she met the man she wanted to marry.

**Romeo and Juliet in Colombo**

Supun* was once a proud man. As a teenager in his native Sri Lanka, he was a promising cricket player, the country’s national sport. He was popular and a heartthrob in school and dreamed of being famous. Today, he

*Source: Jayne Russell*
sits next to Nadeeka in their rundown apartment, with bloodshot eyes, and is ashamed.

Supun has been stuck in Hong Kong for 11 years. All that time, he has been dependent on his father, who sold his house to help his son. Supun would like to provide for his family, but he can't. As an asylum seeker, he is not permitted to work in Hong Kong, and because his legal status is unclear, he is not allowed to leave. He is a prisoner in a system that makes no sense.

War drove him away. Supun was nine when he heard the first bomb, on May Day in 1993, as he was fixing his bicycle. He suddenly heard a huge explosion that shook the ground. A suicide bomber had blown himself up at a rally, killing then President Ranasinghe Premadasa and many bystanders.

A civil war had been raging in Sri Lanka for years. The government and rebels were ruthless in their combat and recruiting methods. It was almost impossible not to take sides and anyone who supported one side immediately became a target for the other. Supun regularly saw charred corpses on his way to school, the bodies of people insurgents had killed by placing tires soaked in gasoline around their necks and setting them on fire. As a deterrent, the police often hung in front of the school the bodies of beheaded students who had opposed the government.

Supun started playing cricket when he was six. His talent and love of the game helped him get chosen for all-star teams. Sri Lanka won the World Cup when Supun was 12. No one in Sri Lanka earned more respect than someone who knew how to hold a cricket bat. Supun hoped to become a professional cricket player, and later an actor or a singer.

Supun fell in love at 17. It was a problem. His girlfriend Inoko was from a family that actively supported the opposition, while his parents and relatives supported the governing party, the UNP. It was a Romeo and Juliet scenario.

Inoko's family threatened to kill Supun when they realized their daughter was seeing someone from the opposition. The family wanted to marry Inoko off to a man she didn't know, but who fit the family's plans. Supun and Inoko married secretly in October 2003.

In Sri Lanka the political situation worsened dramatically in 2004 when the UNP lost an election. Soon after, Supun received a call from his wife, who told him to go into hiding. She had overheard a conversation between her brothers, who had found Supun's new address in Colombo and were going to hunt him down.

Supun moved from one hiding place to the next, but his wife's brothers were on his trail. They beat him with metal bars and sticks and demanded he leave their sister alone. But the couple kept meeting nevertheless.

The situation got worse when Inoko's family found out the couple had married. Inoko's brothers beat Supun severely and placed their sister under house arrest. They forced Inoko to file for divorce, threatening to kill her husband if she refused to comply. Inoko obeyed her brothers, but Supun refused to accept a divorce. Again, Inoko's brothers beat him with sticks in broad daylight, this time before his wife's eyes.

Supun finally went to the police, but it was no use. The party Inoko's family supported was now in power. The police didn't lift a finger. Instead, Supun was beaten again after filing charges. He fled to Hong Kong in March 2005. There was only one reason he chose Hong Kong: It had no visa requirement - all he needed was a ticket. Supun left Sri Lanka with one suitcase to start his new life.

Misery in paradise

At first, Hong Kong seems like the land of milk and honey. With its picturesque location on the South China Sea, the city has a magnificent skyline. The world's major banks all have skyscrapers there and the streets are lined with fancy cars. The Ritz Carl-

“The Mira Hotel in Hong Kong is one of the city's most stylish hotels. Dressed in jeans and a faded T-shirt, holding a Rubik's cube to identify himself, Mr. Snowden met journalists Laura Poitras and Glenn Greenwald on June 1, 2013.”
ton in the International Commerce Center is the tallest hotel in the world. Hong Kong has a budget surplus of €1.7 billion ($1.9 billion). Tiny apartments with 20 square meters (215 square feet) of space cost close to €1 million. An luxurious apartment recently sold for €69 million.

This is the side of Hong Kong that Edward Snowden experienced when he arrived in May 2013. The Mira on Nathan Road is one of the city's most stylish hotels. Limos line up in front of the entrance and visitors enter a lobby with curved white walls and designer furniture. Here, dressed in jeans and a faded T-shirt, and holding a Rubik's cube to identify himself, Mr. Snowden met journalists Laura Poitras and Glenn Greenwald on June 1, 2013.

Ten days later, on the run from U.S. intelligence agents, Mr. Snowden became acquainted with the other side of Hong Kong.

The apartment where Nadeeka and Supun live, and where Mr. Snowden first took refuge, is managed by International Social Services, a company headquartered in Switzerland. Officially a non-governmental organization, ISS has a lucrative contract with Hong Kong to manage housing for asylum seekers. In 2015, major protests forced city administrators to shut down more than 60 slums: ISS employees had reportedly sent refugees to slumlords, who were housing asylum seekers in pigsties and pigeon sheds, for which they were paid millions from the city's welfare coffers. Party members, ISS directors and slumlords are still linked today.

ISS has denied the reports, defending the status of its properties in Hong Kong.

Hong Kong's welfare support for refugees has also come in for criticism. Refugees receive food vouchers that are only valid in the ParknShop supermarkets, a chain owned by Li Ka-Shing, one of Asia’s richest men. And no matter how many times people like Nadeeka and Supun complain that prices at ParknShop are higher than at other stores, and that the vouchers don’t last until the end of the month, nothing changes.

The first refuge

This was the world Mr. Snowden discovered in June 2013. His interview with The Guardian made him an enemy of the state. The United States issued a warrant for his arrest, and U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder pressured Hong Kong to find and extradite Mr. Snowden. The Americans also conducted their own search, in what intelligence insiders called the biggest intelligence manhunt in history. U.S. Senator Lindsey Graham at the time said: “I hope we'll chase him to the ends of the earth, [and] bring him to justice.”

For Mr. Snowden, the end of the world was Nadeeka and Supun's apartment. Neither hesitated to take him in. When they first saw the American, Robert Tibbo was standing next to him. They would have done anything for Mr. Tibbo. The human rights lawyer was the reason the two asylum seekers hadn't been deported. Both had been arrested several times, and Mr. Tibbo secured their release each time. In the special administrative zone, where only 0.3 percent of applicants gain asylum, Mr. Tibbo's voice is one of the few on behalf of refugees. It was no surprise Nadeeka and Supun welcomed
“This man needs a place to hide,” Robert Tibbo told her on a summer evening in 2013. That was good enough for Vanessa. She led the stranger into her apartment, gave him a pillow and a blanket, and asked him if he was hungry. “I like muffins,” Mr. Snowden said. Vanessa reached for her wallet. As he was leaving, her attorney took her aside and said: “Speak with no one. When you open a newspaper tomorrow, you’ll know who he is.”

When Vanessa, 42, went out the next morning to buy muffins and fresh underwear for her guest, she got a shock. The face of the man she had let into her apartment the day before was everywhere – in newspapers, on TV and on websites. “I was shaking with fear,” she recalled. “The world’s most-wanted man was sleeping in my apartment. If anyone had found out, my daughter and I would have been in a lot of trouble.”

But Vanessa didn’t send Mr. Snowden away. “I couldn’t do that,” she said. “Hiding Edward was an important task, and Robert Tibbo asked me to do it. I didn’t want to let him down, and I was proud that he had asked me for help.”

There is hardly anything Vanessa wouldn’t do for her attorney. Mr. Tibbo is her anchor in a city that doesn’t want her. She hid from the authorities for years, and it was only through Mr. Tibbo that she learned she had a right to stay in Hong Kong.

She was 24 when she arrived in Hong Kong. She thought her entry visa for a job as a maid was a ticket to a happier future. She grew up in a village in the northern Philippines, in a province where rebels with the New People’s Army, the military arm of the Communist Party, were entrenched. Battles with government forces were common. As a child, Vanessa could tell how far away the fighting was from the sound of the explosions.

The world seemed better in Hong Kong, a city that would grind to a halt without foreign domestic help. More than 300,000 people, mostly from the Philippines and Indonesia, work in Hong Kong as domestic servants. Vanessa was pleased in the first few years. But then a wedding sealed her fate.

In the summer of 2000, Vanessa attended a friend’s wedding while home in the Philippines. One of the guests wanted more from Vanessa than she felt comfortable with. It wasn’t a big problem at first. She was already looking for her next job in Hong Kong, but then realized she didn’t have enough money to pay the employment agency. The longer she stayed, the more Vanessa was harassed by the man, who she realized was a well-connected member of the NPA rebels. He raped Vanessa in December 2001, and then he abducted her.

Vanessa said she tried to escape three times, and each time the rebel caught her and beat her. Then she gave birth to a son. The rebel allowed her to visit her parents. With their help, she eventually secured a con-
tract for a job in Hong Kong. She hid her son with her parents and planned to return for him later.

But her plan failed. A few weeks after fleeing the Philippines, Vanessa received a call from the man who had made her life a living hell. He had taken her son and threatened to kill Vanessa if she returned to the Philippines. To this day, she doesn’t know how her son is or whether he is even alive.

Unable to return home to the Philippines, her life in Hong Kong became harder overnight. Domestic servants live under difficult circumstances in Hong Kong.

**Modern-day slavery**

In Hong Kong, maids are required by law to live in their employers’ homes. The young women are usually housed in children’s rooms. When children cry at night or wake up at 5 a.m. and refuse to go back to sleep, the maids get up.

Many of these women see themselves as modern-day slaves. Vanessa’s employers often sent her to their parents to clean there as well. But her pay, like that of all domestic help, was below the legal minimum wage. And if she were fired, Vanessa would have just two weeks to find a new job - or face deportation.

Domestic servants in Hong Kong only have Sundays off, when anyone strolling through the city can witness a strange spectacle – thousands and thousands of young women having picnics, sitting on flattened cardboard boxes on bridges and streets, and in overcrowded parks. The women are too poor to eat in restaurants. The groups of young Filipino and Indonesian woman look like protesters, but they are not. They are simply poor and living on subsistence wages.

Those who do not conform are weeded out. Vanessa lost her last job as a maid in 2010. Unable to return to the Philippines, she scraped by, staying with friends. But she was caught in a police raid, and unable to produce valid papers, was arrested. For more than two months, she was held in a jail cell with 12 women, sleeping on metal beds without mattresses.

Robert Tibbo found Vanessa and told her she had rights. She became a founding member of the Refugee Union, which has registered more than 2,500 of Hong Kong’s 12,000 asylum seekers. The group draws attention to people who are all but forced into crime by Hong Kong’s bureaucracy.

The money refugees earn in Hong Kong isn’t enough to survive. But they are banned from working and those who work illegally risk 22 months in jail. The penalty for robbery is two to three months, while drug dealers usually spend less than a year in prison. More refugees are arrested in Hong Kong for working illegally than for dealing drugs, which is far more lucrative.

**Ed has to go**

The refugee sitting in Vanessa’s apartment in summer 2013 had other problems. He had been accused of treason by Dianne Feinstein, the chairwoman of the U.S. Senate Intelligence Committee. The Americans were determined to catch Edward Snowden at any price.

Besides hosting Mr. Snowden in her apartment, Vanessa was his messenger, shuttling documents to his attorney. She wore a different baseball cap each time, to avoid being identified on security cameras. Mr. Snowden’s passport was now in her refrigerator. For his 30th birthday, Vanessa bought him a chocolate cake. “Ed liked anything sweet. My daughter and I sang Happy Birthday to him. Then Ed blew out the candles. It was nice.”

The happy moment was brief. “One morning, Ed suddenly said that he had to go,” says Vanessa. Mr. Snowden seemed very anxious, she said. “He told me he was afraid to die. But I said to him: Don’t worry, Robert Tibbo will take care of you.”

Mr. Tibbo’s office doesn’t look like the office of a man capable of taking on the U.S. intelligence community. It...
has no marble floors, no lobby, not even a reception desk. He works in a single room on the 14th floor of a high-rise in Tsim Sha Tsui, a building in a neighborhood located next to a Thai massage business.

His office is full of desks and cardboard boxes. Files are stacked high on shelves, on tables and on the floor. Each file contains one person’s story. People constantly stop by to thank him for his work. Ajith*, who served as Mr. Snowden’s bodyguard during his two weeks underground in Hong Kong, was in the office when Handelsblatt interviewed Mr. Tibbo.

Ajith’s job began the afternoon Mr. Tibbo asked him to go to the UNHCR office in Hong Kong. “He wanted me to see if white men were standing outside the door,” Ajith said. Then Mr. Tibbo left the building with a stranger: “I know you,” Ajith said right away. “You’re the one on TV.”

Snowden’s bodyguard

Ajith was 18 when he joined the military in Sri Lanka. He had dropped out of school three years earlier when his parents were no longer able to pay the tuition. Ajith was unable to find a real job. His parents were confident that if he joined the army, at least he would have something to eat. The reality turned out to be different.

Ajith enlisted for 22 years. He had hardly arrived at the Ambepussa Army Camp in southwestern Sri Lanka when the nightmare began. The young recruits were sexually molested and often raped daily by their supervising officers. Those who complained were brutally punished. Ajith ran away after two weeks. He spent the next three years hiding from the military policy and surviving on occasional jobs.

Ajith returned to the army in 1993, because he felt he had no alternative. He enlisted under a false name. In the new camp, the recruits were also sexually assaulted by supervising officers, but this time Ajith did his best to avoid the assaults. He was sent to the front after three months, serving as a soldier with government forces fighting Tamil Tiger rebels. When he was injured in fighting and received no medical care, he ran away again.

For the authorities, Ajith was a two-time deserter. He spent six years on the run. During that time he worked as a fisherman and in the mines, hid in the jungle and once in a Buddhist temple. He was seized by the military police in 2002 and put in prison. That was when the torture began. Ajith was beaten with sticks, helmets and chains. Some days, his tormenters poured gasoline on his open wounds. On others they almost drowned him. Then they threw him into a garbage pit.

Ajith had given up on life when he was suddenly released. His family took him in and tried to nurse their severely abused son back to health. A few months later, the military police returned with more questions. They had discovered that Ajith had been in the military not once but twice, and both times left without permission. The family panicked, knowing Ajith would not survive a second round of torture.

The family decided Ajith had to leave the country. They found a man who said he could obtain forged documents so that Ajith could flee to Canada. Ajith’s father mortgaged their house and the family gave the
stranger all their money and some passport photos.

In October 2003, the broker and Ajith flew to Hong Kong - a stopover, the man said. From the airport, he took Ajith to Chunking Mansions, a hostel operation of 2,000 rooms. The stranger got out of the taxi and told Ajith to wait for him. Ajith never saw the man again. He was stranded in Hong Kong.

Ajith’s only stroke of luck was that there were tens of thousands of Sri Lankans in Hong Kong. A few took him in under their wing, and Ajith lived underground for three years. He only found out in 2006 that as a torture victim, he could apply for asylum. His status is still unresolved.

But in 2013 he had a guest: Edward Snowden.

Ajith spoke hesitantly about his time with the American. Sitting in Robert Tibbo’s office, the heavily tattooed man had trouble concentrating. He experienced things in Sri Lanka that people don’t recover from. It seems unlikely that Ajith had the strength to protect Mr. Snowden. But when asked by Handelsblatt why he did it, Ajith said: “He was like me. Ed was a refugee, and I was a refugee. Of course I helped him.”

The two didn’t talk much. Sometimes Ajith would pick up food for his American guest. Snowden liked McDonald’s. Otherwise, Ajith accompanied his charge whenever he moved from one hiding place to another. “I simply felt more comfortable when

Ajith was there during the transfers,” said Robert Tibbo, adding: “Ajith was the only one with experience on the front.”

Like in free fall

Nadeeka and Supun, the couple from Sri Lanka. Vanessa, the maid from the Philippines. Ajith, the former soldier. Robert Tibbo called upon an odd group in summer 2013 to protect Mr. Snowden but nobody else was there.

Handelsblatt asked the fugitive’s videographer, Laura Poitras, how she came to film her famous interview with Mr. Snowden on June 6, 2013, which was broadcast on June 9. Why hadn’t the journalists taken Mr. Snowden to a safe place long ago?

“We had no time to make plans,” Ms. Poitras said. “Things were just moving faster than we could think. We were in free fall.”

Robert Tibbo rescued Mr. Snowden. “He was the one who really knew what he was doing,” she said. “Rob immediately had a plan for how to get Ed out of the hotel. And what to do after that. We would never have made it without him.”

Mr. Snowden, in an internet interview, spoke highly of Mr. Tibbo. “Robert was a man who carried the weight of human lives on his shoulders every day,” the American wrote to Handelsblatt through an encrypted channel from Moscow. “Every day, he fought against a system that is designed to ensure that you can never win. And as far I’m concerned, his plan was brilliant.”

How come Mr. Tibbo was the only one with the overview of what was happening with Snowden the summer of 2013? He shrugged. “As a human rights attorney, you often find yourself in extreme situations,” Mr. Tibbo said. Of course, none of his other charges was ever as famous. Still, matters of life and death - winning residency for his clients, preventing deportations that could lead to their deaths - is the core of his work. “I was just doing my job,” Mr. Tibbo said.

The two weeks with Mr. Snowden left their mark. Sleep was rare during those summer days. Aside from taking naps here and there, he worked around the clock to find ways to get Mr. Snowden out of Hong Kong. In the end, the American chose Moscow. On June 23, 2013, Mr. Tibbo drove Mr. Snowden to the airport.

But that wasn’t the end of the attorney’s adventure. Mr. Tibbo said he was followed for a year after Mr. Snowden’s departure. He communicates almost exclusively through encrypted channels, concerned anything could be intercepted by intelligence agencies. Smartphones are banned in Mr. Tibbo’s office - visitors must place their phones in his refrigerator.

Mr. Tibbo said he is still Mr. Snowden’s attorney. He visited him in Moscow a few weeks ago, but was unwilling to say what the two men discussed. He said that Mr. Snowden
it was pouring. Supun huddled under a plastic tarp with Dinath, their three-month-old son, leaning against the building wall in rage and despair.

The landlord had shut off their power. It’s 10 p.m. and outside it’s 28 degrees Celsius (82 degrees Fahrenheit). The apartment is pitch-dark. Without power, there is no ventilation from fans. Supun’s son had a kidney infection and his medicine needed to be refrigerated. Supun had bought a bag of ice.

The children, sweaty and squashed on a small bed and mattress with their parents, cried through that terrible night. Their parents didn’t get any sleep and the next day, the family was exhausted. They went to the office of the building administrator, ISS, where a clerk said he had no idea why the electricity was shut off. Eventually, he said it was likely a billing error. It took half the day before the apartment had power again.

This is also part of Edward Snowden’s story. The refugees who harbored him three years ago still live in miserable conditions in a wealthy city that doesn’t want them. Their asylum applications are still being processed for 10 years or even longer. Their children don’t have passports— they were stateless when they were born.

Others have done better from their contact with Edward Snowden. Journalist Glenn Greenwald turned his experiences into a bestseller. Laura Poitras became world-famous for her documentary “Citizen Four,” and

seemed exhausted. But it was important to him to meet his client in person.

**Oliver Stone wasn’t interested**

The refugees who hid him would also like to see Mr. Snowden again, but the chances of that happening are close to zero. Vanessa, the single mom from the Philippines, can’t afford schoolbooks for her daughter Keana. Ajith continues to suffer from the torture he endured and needs psychiatric care. Nadeeka’s and Suduka’s tenuous existence is still day-to-day.

When Handelsblatt met Nadeeka and Suduka again in July, their situation had deteriorated. In Kowloon
won an Oscar. Together, they launched a new journalism project with $250 million from EBay billionaire Pierre Omidyar. Hollywood director Oliver Stone’s $50 million film about Mr. Snowden, called “Snowden,” is to debut this month.

Mr. Stone didn’t talk with the refugees who saved Edward Snowden’s life, the Hong Kong lawyer said. “The subject didn’t seem to interest him,” Mr. Tibbo said. Would he watch the film? “No. I know what happened.”

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Read the full Q&A interview with Edward Snowden here.
Over an encrypted internet channel, Handelsblatt recently interviewed the former U.S. NSA contractor about his two weeks on the run in the slums of Hong Kong, where refugees took him in, and fed and watched over him, until he fled to Moscow.

**WHY IT MATTERS**

Handelsblatt’s exclusive interview with Edward Snowden reveals new details about the NSA contractor’s escape from Hong Kong in 2013, and his current state of mind in Russia.

**FACTS**

Edward Snowden went underground in Hong Kong in June 2013 after disclosing the global internet surveillance techniques used by the U.S. NSA intelligence agency.

Mr. Snowden spent two weeks living undetected with the refugee clients of a Hong Kong human rights lawyer, Robert Tibbo, before fleeing to Moscow.

Mr. Snowden continues to be a fugitive from U.S. justice, although some voices in the U.S. and elsewhere have called for him to be pardoned.

Edward Snowden has never spoken about the two weeks he spent hiding in the poorest neighborhoods of Hong Kong before getting on a plane in June 2013 for Moscow. Now, for the first time, he speaks with Handelsblatt about how he escaped and the bravery of refugees he says saved his life.

Sönke Iwersen, the head of Handelsblatt’s investigative reporting team, traveled to Hong Kong to meet Mr. Snowden’s human rights lawyer, Robert Tibbo, who three years ago hid the U.S. fugitive in safe apartments used by his refugee clients.

Mr. Tibbo and Mr. Snowden agreed to speak about details of the escape to highlight the plight
of Hong Kong’s refugees, who are trapped in a netherworld of legal uncertainty and poverty. Their comments came in the runup to “Snowden,” a film about the former NSA contractor by U.S. director Oliver Stone that will open this month. Mr. Iwersen recently conducted a written interview with Mr. Snowden over an encrypted internet channel. This a transcript of their conversation.

Handelsblatt: Mr. Snowden, you met your lawyer, Robert Tibbo, just minutes before you put your life in his hands. How did that feel?

Edward Snowden: Robert was always thinking. I realized that this was a man who walked around each day with the weight of his client’s lives on his shoulders. We weren’t just names to him. He fought every day against a system designed to make sure you never win, but somehow, some way he found a way to beat the odds.

How big was his role in your escape?

I probably wouldn’t have made it out of Hong Kong without him.

At the beginning, what did you think of his plan to hide you amongst refugees in Hong Kong?

I thought it was brilliant, given the circumstances. It was incredibly risky for everyone involved. I was nervous as hell, but who wouldn’t be? Robert was nervous as well, even though he tried admirably to hide that from me.

Did you worry that you would put the refugees in harm’s way?

Everyone worried about this. Except, surprisingly, the refugees themselves. They never hesitated and never broke my confidence.

How was the first hour with the first refugee family?

Even from the first minute, it was a relief. That probably sounds hard to believe, given that you’re talking about someone who has been living a rich life on a high salary in Hawaii suddenly living amongst families of strangers in an apartment smaller than the entry way of many homes, and with a hole in the floor rather than a toilet.

All that while you were sure you were doing the right thing.

Set aside all the politics and imagine yourself in my shoes for just a moment. Right or wrong, you’re the surveillance expert that revealed the secret truth about crimes carried out by the most powerful government on earth. Suddenly, you’re the most wanted man in the world and every journalist in the city is hunting for you, alongside people with less savory intentions. Every TV you pass has your face on it, every newspaper has your name and photo on the front page, and a cab driver is listening to a report about you without realizing you’re his passenger. You’ve got few friends, nothing more than you can carry, and no plan.

And then you find refuge with complete strangers.

In one beautiful instant, a door closes behind you and all that noise, all that danger, is on the other side of that door. I’ll never forget that feeling.

What are your best memories with the refugees?

Sometimes the children would watch as I’d use a special antenna to hack wireless points in distant buildings to create safe channels by which I could contact the journalists without being discovered. The kids had no idea what was going on in the big picture, but they were still curious. Those little smiles gave me something to fight for in the midst of those hopeless, no-win days.

What are your most intense memories of that time?

The sirens. No matter how careful you are, you can’t help but say a prayer when you hear the police screaming past your building in that kind of situation. Your mind is nothing but a list of everything that could have gone wrong. Did I make a mistake? Did they locate my signal? Was someone followed?

What did you do in those moments?

All you can do is get ready to move. But deep down, you know that if the sirens are for you, by the time you hear them, it’s already too late.
But that didn't happen to you.

Those sirens always moved on. But those feelings remained. We got lucky.

Are there any bad memories?

I felt bad about the lengths the refugees went to make me comfortable. They'd try to get me special food, different from what they ate, no matter how much I protested. Given how grateful I was just to be behind that door, I couldn't help but feel guilty. And since they wouldn't accept money from me even in the midst of their desperate circumstances, I had to hide it so they'd discover it after I had departed, when they couldn't give it back.

How did you feel about leaving your hosts?

It was like leaving my family. It was hard, but I knew that the more distance I put between us, the safer they were.

How would you describe these people?

Listen, these people have gotten up every morning in the face of tragedy and persecution, and go to sleep each night with whole families in a single bed. And though they have nothing, they risked everything to do what is right.

Is that unusual in your experience?

People talk a lot about courage in politics, courage in war, standing up in the face of great odds. These things are fabulous, wonderful, but I'll tell you right now that I would trade them all for a world of these everyday heroes. What I thought I knew about bravery was nothing compared to what I saw in Hong Kong.

What do you think would have happened to you without them?

My story might have been a lot sadder if not for them.

Read the full story of Mr. Snowden’s two-week stay in Hong Kong’s underground in Handelsblatt Global.