

Oral Historian Extraordinaire – Robin de Crespigny author of *The People Smuggler*

Robin de Crespigny is a Sydney filmmaker, producer, director, writer and a former lecturer at the Australian Film, Television and Radio School.

Her book, The People Smuggler, is the true story of Ali Al Jenabi, an Iraqi refugee who survived Saddam Hussein's infamous prison Abu Ghraib, joined the resistance and became a people smuggler to save his family. It has been a controversial success in Australia, where he is regarded as a criminal and was imprisoned. Published in 2012, it is based on hundreds of hours of interviews and painstaking transcribing.

Marolyn Hamilton, honorary life member of OHAA WA, wrote this review:

When Robin de Crespigny began writing a film script on the life of Ali Al Jenabi she said:

‘The epic breadth of his story is so great, with its cast of thousands, military conflicts, desperate mountain treks, boats on high seas and a journey across two continents and at least six countries, each with its own unique culture and language, that I somewhat gratefully took the suggestion of screenwriter John Collee to tell the story in book form first.’¹

Ali Al Jenabi was born in Iraq in 1971. With an adoring and loving father his childhood was a happy one until he turned ten. In 1979 Saddam Hussein ousted al-Bakr in a bloodless coup and made himself president of the Baathist Party and became one of the worst tyrants of his time. Ali unintentionally betrayed his father when in the playground at school he echoed his father's words: ‘Saddam Hussein is a bastard.’ That night his father disappeared and the lives of his family changed forever. He went with his mother and siblings to every police station in Diwaniyah but learnt nothing of his disappearance. Without their father they often went hungry, depending on the charity of their extended family. After nine months of horrific torture in prison his father was released. A broken and changed man he was taken to a mental asylum and released seven months later. For the next seven years he was in the army fighting the Iranians, a war he profoundly disagreed with.

Ali, as the eldest son, became the head of the house at the age of ten and, because of his father's absence in the army, he continued to hold that role and became provider for his mother and siblings.

¹ Robin de Crespigny, *The People Smuggler: The true story of Ali Al Jenabi, The ‘Oskar Schindler of Asia’*, Penguin Group (Australia), Victoria, 2012 p. viii.

Paul Barclay who interviewed Robin on ABC National Radio asked her why she wrote in the first person.² She said that she wanted readers to be inside his mind and to travel on the journey with him. She explained:

It was a unique task for me because in a sense I had to become him and

tell the story as he had lived it. The way we did it was really HUNDREDS of hours over a period of three years when we would talk for long periods. I would tape everything. We would do several hours of interview type discussion and then after interviewing we would usually have lunch ... and I'd keep my tape recorder going. It was interesting because often I would get the details that were GOLD and I would think 'Ah, I'll explore that,' and when I was at home transcribing I would make notes of the questions that I could ask about that to go deeper and deeper when I met him again. So every session created more questions. So we could just go deeper and deeper and cover things from so many different angles. ...

The thing that I think was most useful to me was the thing that I hated most and that was after a day of working with Ali, which we did probably every week, two weeks, sometimes three weeks but very regularly, I would have hours of transcribing. But I learnt so much about him because so much of what we say is that nuance and intonation and when you laugh and where there is irony.

That was why she transcribed it herself.

'I think that I discovered in his language – and this sounds very superficial but obviously it was the crux for me – it was this kind of rhythm that he had that I started to make my own and I could always tell when I was losing his voice because I'd know something was wrong and I would read it to myself and read it aloud and I'd realise the rhythm was all gone. Once I got the rhythm back in I could find him again and I could feel myself speaking him again.'³

In 1991 Ali Al Jenabi, along with his father and brother Ahmad, were imprisoned in Iraq's infamous Abu Ghraib. They were all tortured. Ahmad died and after a number of years Ali was freed, not knowing the fate of his father. When he was released he joined the resistance at Kurdistan and put his life on the line. He came from a regime where you could not even trust your own family. Police would take a family member aside and say that if you don't tell us we will kill your children in front of you.

Ali, his mother, young sisters and brothers had to leave Iraq for their safety and ended up in Iran. Ali then went to Malaysia and Indonesia in order to get to Australia, so he could bring his family to be with him. After paying to go on a boat Ali was left abandoned on the beach. The majority of people smugglers were asylum seekers. With no money he worked for a smuggler he found was ripping people off. So he entered the so-called people-smuggling business himself. Until 2010 it was not illegal to smuggle people; it was a legitimate business. He managed to get ten members of his immediate family out on seven boats. The

² Paul Barclay on ABC National Radio, Big Ideas interviewed Robin de Crespigny, filmmaker and producer on 23 November 2012.

³ Paul Barclay interview 2012

irony is that the family did apply to UN but all were rejected. Ali heard the term 'queue jumper' for the first time at his trial in Australia. To join a queue he would have had to illegally leave his country.

Of the 500 people Ali helped get to Australia all except one have been given refugee status. Ali was finally captured and tried in Darwin for the crime of people smuggling. Judge Mildren who sentenced Ali was clearly sympathetic. He was reluctant to call him a people smuggler and gave him a minimum sentence of four years. On his release from prison Ali was immediately detained at Villawood in Sydney and, so far, his requests for asylum have been denied. The man, who informed on Ali, himself a smuggler, was giving information to the Australian embassy. He was paid \$25,000 by the Australian government.

Paul Barclay referred to the deeply personal and deeply shocking revelations in the book and asked Robin how she worked her way through that? Robin responded:

It was a credit to Ali; he really is extraordinary. He did have this amazing commitment - in a way it's an every day refugee story. He was doing it for all those people he brought here. He did not want them to have to expose their lives in public, in the way that he eventually committed himself to do.

He is a very humble man. He does not like to stand out. It's not part of his culture to have 15 minutes of fame that we all crave. He does not want to be famous. He does not want to be noticed. He knew there was tremendous value for many people in doing it but also it would help him to be recognized as worthy of getting residency here. But the third thing that was hard for him and I admire his courage on a daily basis ... One of the ways he had survived was he never looked back, and his father who he was influenced by had taught him this. ..and every day it was how do I conquer the task of today. I think it is part of the way he not only stayed alive but did not seem to suffer the post traumatic stress that most people escaping from these awful situations seem to end up with.

For three years Robin made him relive his life – relive and relive it in excruciating detail. Writing in his voice was completely convincing and a reason for the success of the book. It gives an insight into the fear that drives people to leave their country and the challenges and dangers along the way. In Thomas Keneally's words: 'An engrossing account of a figure seen by some as saviour and others as criminal. A significant book.'

Ali Al Jenabi's story is based entirely on oral history and in its telling Robin de Crespigny has created a gripping autobiography and proved herself an oral historian extraordinaire.

Sources

Robin de Crespigny, *The People Smuggler: The true story of Ali Al Jenabi, The 'Oskar Schindler of Asia'*, Penguin Group (Australia), Victoria, 2012.

Robin de Crespigny, filmmaker, producer and a former Directing Lecturer at the Australian Film, Television & Radio School interviewed by Paul Barclay on ABC National Radio, Big Ideas on 23 November 2012.