

SATURDAY FOCUS



REPORT
ASHLEY ARGOON

He was 'the Oskar'

Robin de Crespigny believes when you know someone's story, you begin to feel compassion for them. By getting to know the character in her book, the author hopes people will realise the asylum seeker issue is not black and white.

A SYLUM seekers.

Two words that drive fear and division into the hearts of the Australian public and the country's politicians.

It's a subject that's dominating our current political landscape, heightened by the looming federal election.

This week on national television Opposition Leader Tony Abbott vowed to "stop the boats" within three years if elected.

Meanwhile our new Prime Minister Kevin Rudd is under increasing pressure to state his policies for tackling the issue with conjecture further heightened by his visit to Indonesia last week.

At his first press conference as PM, Mr Rudd indicated he would challenge Mr Abbott on asylum policy and suggested the Opposition Leader was risking conflict with Indonesia with his intention to turn the boats around.

But with all the to-ing and fro-ing there is one voice conspicuously absent from the vigorous debate — that of asylum seekers themselves.

A new book, *The People Smuggler*, by a Sydney author provides such a voice.

Robin de Crespigny has spent this week on the Border speaking about her book, and what she knows about asylum seekers and smugglers — the human perspective, not the political point-scoring one.

The Sydney film-maker spent three years getting to know a man who became a people smuggler and wrote a book on his life, published last year.

Ali Al Jenabi was born in Iraq.

At 20 he, along with his brother and father, were captured by Saddam Hussein's army on suspicion of belonging to a political party intent on overthrowing the dictator.

For the next four years Ali would be locked up in a single cell at Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad with 25

other men, regularly tortured and a witness to murders of those who became his friends.

He watched as officers dropped an axe on the fingers of his brother Ahmad, whose hands were nailed to a table, because Ali did not confess to his political affiliations.

The frightened youth did not even know the name of a political movement in order to pretend.

He never saw his brother again.

EVENTUALLY released from Abu Ghraib, Ali was intent on getting what was left of his family to safety.

He became a people smuggler, sending his loved ones and 500 others by boat to Australia.

He was eventually caught by the Australian Federal Police as part of an operation in Thailand and became the first people smuggler to be extradited and brought to Australia under former prime minister John Howard's sentencing laws.

"The trial aimed to prove what heinous criminals people smugglers were; that's what the Howard government was saying," de Crespigny said.

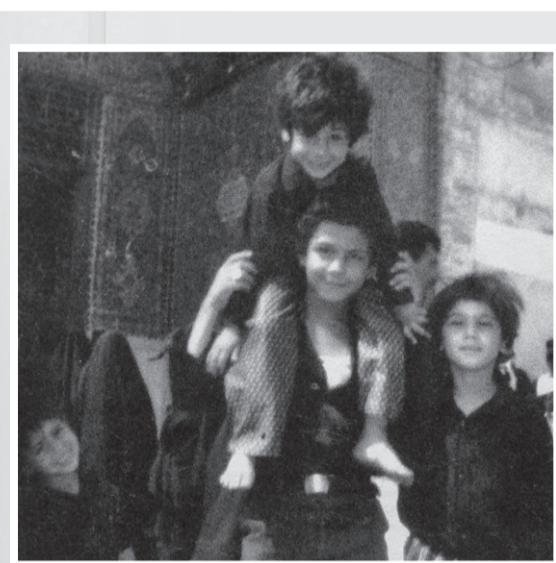
"But the Supreme Court judge himself said that Ali was more of a freedom fighter and humanitarian who did what he did for the love of his family and his country men."

"He referred to him as the Oskar Schindler of Asia."

What de Crespigny found fascinating about the case was this assessment by the judge of a man who spent nearly a year in their court.

"So he knew this man quite intimately ... and yet you have both sides of the major parties portraying him, in Kevin Rudd's terms, as 'scum of the earth' and 'the vilest form of human being that should rot in jail,'" she said.

Ali went on to serve four years in Darwin Jail and more than a year in the Villawood detention centre, a place de Crespigny said Ali described as worse than the



ABOVE: Ali Al Jenabi grew up in Iraq with his brothers Basim, Asad (pictured on Ali's shoulders) and Ahmad. BELOW: A decade after this photo was taken, Ali (right) would become a political prisoner with Ahmad and his father Hassan Pilot.



Baghdad prison in which he was tortured almost every day.

"He said he could handle the physical horror better than he could handle the hopelessness and despair of the mental horror that turns in on you," de Crespigny said.

"You don't know who your enemy is in detention, it's just a whitewall of administration and phonecalls that never gets returned."

Now, Ali is on a Bridging

Removal Pending visa and could be sent back to Iraq at any time, where he would most likely be killed.

ALI'S story is at odds with the depiction of people smugglers.

Rather than a "people smugglers business model", de Crespigny said her research often found smugglers were "a bunch of people who are just trying to

make a living who are desperate themselves to get to safety".

"The majority of people involved in people smuggling are refugees themselves who arrive in Indonesia with no money, on their way to Australia," she said.

"They don't have the money to get on a boat so they work for a people smuggler to get passage themselves."

So who are the real criminals then in people smuggling?

De Crespigny agrees it's the "big



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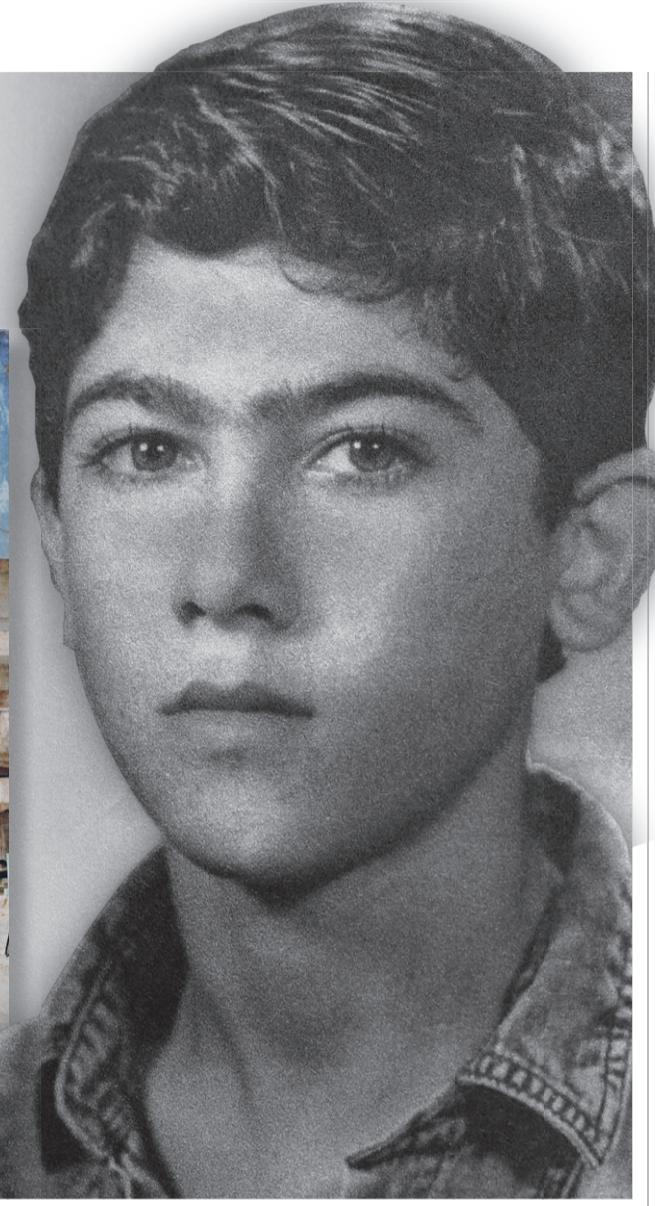
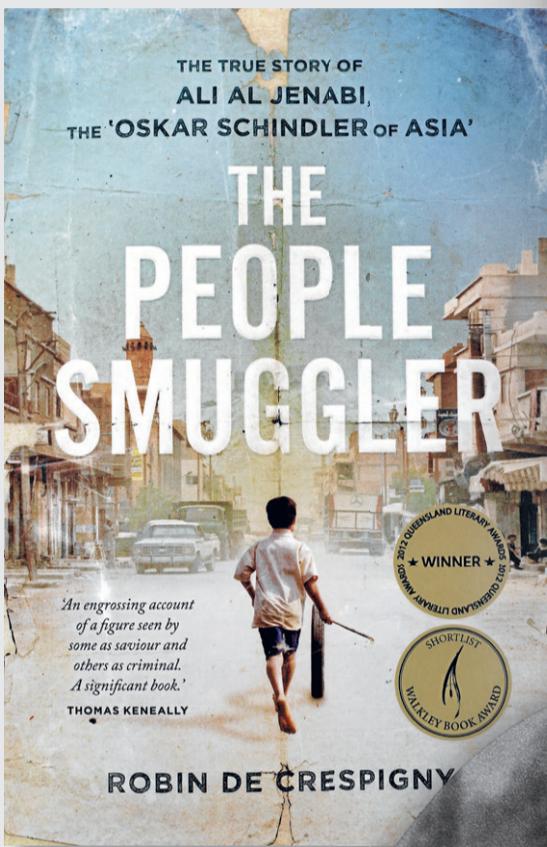
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Schindler of Asia'

RIGHT: This photo of Ali Al Jenabi's younger brother, Ahmad, was taken prior to their imprisonment in Baghdad's Abu Ghraib, where Ahmad was tortured and killed. Pictures supplied **BELOW AND FAR LEFT:** Sydney author Robin de Crespigny says her book sheds new light on the issue of asylum seekers and people smuggling. Picture: MATTHEW SMITHWICK



“

The Supreme Court judge himself said that Ali was more of a freedom fighter and humanitarian who did what he did for the love of his family and his country men.

— ROBIN DE CRESPIGNY

or having no work rights in the community.

“You have to question, what is actually in it for (the politicians), apart from making us be seen by the world press as a cruel and frightened people?

“Why has this become one of the most significant electoral issues of our day?”

If you’re wondering how we stack up against other countries, here’s the figures:

The *Sydney Morning Herald* last month reported on a United Nations report that showed Australia hosted 0.3 per cent of the world’s refugees, a total 30,000 people.

Meanwhile, Pakistan hosts 17 per cent, or 1.6 million of the world’s 9.9 million registered refugees, although Pakistan has roughly the same landmass as NSW.

Another thing that grinds de Crespigny’s gears is the “stop the boats” slogan.

“I don’t understand what that means,” she says.

“Do we want the boats to just disappear, which means let (the asylum seekers) drown at sea, or do we want to stop them coming to Australia when we have an obligation under the UN convention for refugees to process anyone who comes here, any way they can get here?”

Similarly, policies that make life difficult for those who do arrive by boat make no sense to de Crespigny.

Things like putting asylum seekers in detention or not allowing them to work.

“What seems to be missing completely from the debate is that in order to deter someone, you have to make what they’re running to worse than what they’re running from.”

She has been told stories of people who saw their entire family executed, of a teenage boy who managed to climb from underneath the bodies of his loved ones and get to safety, of another child who was the sole survivor after their family’s home was locked up and set on fire.

“I think anyone in immigration could tell you these stories,” de Crespigny said.

She believes the political attempts to dissuade asylum seekers from coming to Australia show a lack of acknowledgement and awareness of the horrific circumstances they are fleeing from.

After speaking in so many communities during her book tour, de Crespigny said she had been overwhelmed by the number of people who told her they had been looking for an alternate perspective to current views.

She hopes Ali’s story will prompt a discussion about an issue that literally spells life or death for thousands of people.

“Why can’t we just have a reasonable conversation about it?” she asked.

De Crespigny never intended her book to be political.

It’s the story of a man who acted to get himself, his family and others to safety.

But de Crespigny does hope that through her book, Australians might come to realise the asylum seeker issue isn’t black and white.

And perhaps, even, that our communities might become more compassionate towards those who have suffered pain and persecution unfathomable on our shores.

“Through this book, people will feel they know Ali,” de Crespigny said.

“And once you get to know someone you get to understand them.

“Once you understand someone you begin to respect them.

“And once you begin to respect them you feel kindness, and with that comes acceptance, generosity and compassion.”

fish”, like corrupt government and police.

But as Australia’s election date closes in, de Crespigny is in no doubt the issue of asylum seekers and the standard dialogue about people smugglers will feature prominently in political debate.

And she’s unswayed by the numbers game used in the debate.

In an interesting dichotomy of number crunching, consider this: A document on the Parliament of Australia website shows that our

nation saw 11,500 asylum claims in 2011.

Yet, on the same website, it states Australia took in 190,000 migrants in 2012-13, “the highest on record”, to fill skill shortages and reunite families.

A similar intake of migrants for 2013-14 has been proposed.

“So it’s not about numbers,” de Crespigny said adamantly.

“We take in such a tiny number of refugees, we’re talking a few thousand, and at the same time we

don’t feel at all disturbed by bringing in almost 200,000 immigrants.

“I do get frustrated because I question the point of making such a relatively small number of people, who also happen to be the most desperate of those who come to this country, such a focus ... (to the point) that a huge percentage of our community have become so fearful of them they’re almost relieved to see them incarcerated in detention centres and punished by being put on remote, poverty stricken islands

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