

# AN ORDINARY HUMANITY

On May 13, 1939, the *SS St Louis*, part of the Hamburg-America Line (Hapag), sailed for Havana with 937 passengers, mostly Jews, on board. They had applied for US visas in Germany, and planned to stay in Cuba only until they received their visas and could enter the USA.

German persecution of Jews had reached such a level that Jews were willing to pay large sums of money to leave Germany. They desperately sought visas from the USA (among other countries), which enforced immigration quotas.

The economic situation of these formerly wealthy passengers had deteriorated markedly because they had been forced out of their previous professions and had to pay high rents to the Nazi regime. The huge sums required to leave Germany and to purchase fares on the liner were often paid by relatives living overseas or families would combine to scrape together the funds to send one family member to relative safety outside Germany.

Under pressure of anti-Semitic right wing protests, the Cuban president had issued a decree invalidating all landing certificates. When the ship arrived in Havana harbour two weeks later, only 28 passengers were allowed to land. One passenger ended up in a Havana hospital after a suicide attempt. On June 2, the Cuban president ordered the ship out of Cuban waters.

The ship sailed north, parallel to the eastern seaboard of the United States. Sailing close to Florida, passengers cabled US President Franklin D. Roosevelt asking for refuge. The State Department and the White House had already decided not to let them enter the USA. Roosevelt never answered the cable.



Jewish refugees aboard the *SS St Louis*  
Photo: American Joint Distribution Committee

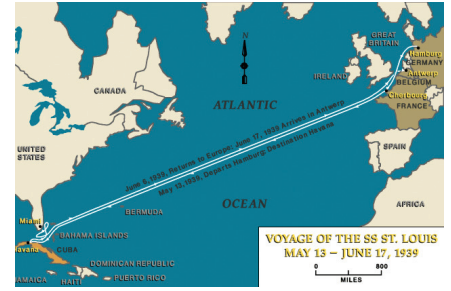
A State Department telegram sent to a passenger stated that the passengers must 'await their turns on the waiting list and then qualify for and obtain immigration visas before they may be admissible into the United States.'

American public opinion historically favoured immigration restrictions, with 83 per cent of Americans opposed to relaxing them. While US newspapers generally portrayed the plight of the passengers with great sympathy, only a few suggested that the refugees be admitted into America. The passengers were forced to return to Europe, where most of them were murdered a few years later, in the Holocaust.

Now, of course, no one who was involved in this drama in 1939 *knew* that the passengers of the *St Louis* who returned to Europe were going to be slaughtered.

One might ask: would it have changed their minds?

Would it be OK to say: 'We are a really generous nation. We have provided home and welfare to thousands of refugees and immigrants, but right now we're full up. Besides, we're not absolutely sure that you, in particular, are under threat and maybe you're just seeking a better life.'



The route of the *SS St Louis*  
Photo: US Holocaust Memorial Museum

Would it have been OK for the United States government to say: 'Well, we won't send you back to certain death in Europe, but you can stay on a small island in the Caribbean for, oh we don't know, some time... a longish time ... so that you don't get a head start – just because you were brave or desperate enough to come here on a boat – on all those other Jews who we know are really in desperate straits and can't make it here? Besides you are rich! Is it fair that you're jumping the queue?'

What's more, it's dangerous hopping on a boat. You might die (nearby). We wouldn't want your death (here) on our consciences. In fact, it would be immoral to admit you because we might encourage other people to follow your lead. And they might die (close to us).'

When we discuss asylum seekers in Australia, is the Holocaust analogy a step too far?

After the war, the experience of the desperation of refugees who were not allowed to find a haven encouraged the recently formed United Nations to develop the Refugee Convention. Australia signed the Refugee Convention in 1954 and the 1967 Protocol Relating to Refugees, which amended the Convention to include places other than Europe, in 1973.

Australians like to think of ourselves as generous, not only on an individual level but on a national level. In fact, almost every politician and many refugee advocates rehearse the same line: we are a generous people. Even *Welcome to Australia*, the website that pushes strongly for a welcome to refugees and asylum seekers provides this anodyne understanding of the Australian character – in the face of plenty of evidence to the contrary.

One can understand their point of view. You don't get people to change their minds by reminding them of their faults. You get them to change their minds by building an ideal picture of themselves and asking them to live up to their ideals.

But there comes a time when the country must look into a mirror and see a different reality.

I suppose that's what Alan Asher was getting at in his article in the November issue of *Parish Connections*. I suppose that was the thinking behind the TV 'reality' show *Go Back to Where You Came From*. The agenda of the makers is very clear: it's about what happens to change people's minds. In a way, audiences watch to see the drama of that process. It's not just that the agenda of the programme is to create empathy and compassion (fellow feeling/fellow pain) by putting people in the horrific situations that refugees face. Changing your mind is the central core of the programme.

That is why Raquel Moore – the 'bogan' princess – was the star of the first series. First reviled and then reclaimed. It was she who went through the most radical of conversions. Raquel, who was almost catatonic in the refugee camp at Karkuma, travelled furthest. Her character arc was the most dramatic.

I have consciously chosen the word "conversion" because there is something religious about the programme. And the religion I mean is Christianity. The pay-off is a road to Damascus event. That's why those of pro-refugee views like Alan Asher and Catherine Deveny don't carry the drama. We barely remember them. The experience is not likely to change them into rabid opponents of boat-borne asylum seekers.

It's Raquel, Angry Anderson, Michael Smith and even Peter Reith that carry the focus. It's people like them who experience a massive change of perspective. Refugees and asylum seekers are no longer our 'problem'; they are (briefly) a lived experience.

But, for me, one of the reasons why the second series didn't work is because it is much harder for people with a public career to be seen publicly to make such a change. We see them cry; we see them express humanity in their relationships with individual refugees; but there is too much at stake for the Damascus moment to happen. The power of the 'fiction' in the reality show cannot overcome the stake that high profile people make in their public personas.

The reality of people's actions is somehow secondary to their dramatic fictional role. In fact, when Catherine Deveny confronted Peter Reith with his real life shameful use of the 'children overboard' pictures in 2001, she was breaking 'the rules'. And besides she was so righteous. Or her character is/was. For the purposes of the show Reith was a lovable curmudgeon. To confront him with his real life role in one of the most corrupting moments of our history was to tear away the veil of fiction that kept us safe watching.



Children overboard. Photo taken by an unknown RAN officer from *HMAS Adelaide*

Which is why, though I watched both series and 'enjoyed' them, I have issues with them. To take the Christian imagery just a step further, the sacrificial role of the characters cannot save our humanity.

If the current poll figures on offshore processing are any indication, as a nation, we seem to be quite happy to sentence asylum seekers to very long periods of suffering in remote places. Or send them back to almost certain persecution. Is the reality of their humanity insufficient to balance the fantasy that they are a threat to the security of our borders? Is it just because we lack imagination?

Or do we really not care?

My mother was saved from a concentration camp or worse because a young Christian Hungarian municipal clerk, driven by ordinary humanity and perhaps ordinary love and lust decided to forge papers so that she could pass as a Christian and live with him for the last year of the war. He put his family and himself at enormous risk. And then, in an act of renunciation, at the end of the war, he delivered her to her Jewish fiancé, my father. I don't know anything about this man, Janos Zornansky. Except that, as I grow older, I admire him more and understand him less.

He was not alone. There were many of those ordinary humans to whom many of my generation of Jews owe their being. Small acts of humanity helped save our parents.

They saw humanity in the Other and they responded. They weren't saints. But their actions were saintly.

No sacrificial character can make that choice for the nation or each individual.

When the history of our sordid dealings with this latest generation of asylum seekers is written, who will be the ordinary heroes? Our nation needs to make a choice to reject the propaganda about how good we are, or have been, and settle for ordinary humanity.

*Ron Hoenig is a child of Holocaust survivors who has recently completed a PhD thesis entitled Reading Alien Lips about the print media depictions of lip sewing by asylum seekers and the construction of Australian identity. Ron is highly active in interfaith activities in South Australia.*