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## **BEHIND THE WIRE**

### An oral history project about immigration detention

André Dao and Jamila Jafari in conversation

André Dao is a writer of fiction and non-fiction. He is the co-founder of Behind the Wire, an oral history project documenting people's experience of immigration detention, a producer of *The Messenger* podcast and coeditor of *They Cannot Take the Sky*. He is also the deputy editor of *New Philosopher* magazine.

Jamila Jafari is a Hazara from central Afghanistan. Her people's story is a centuries-long struggle for justice. The Hazaras are an indigenous people of modern-day Afghanistan who can be traced back as early as the fourth century. For hundreds of years, the Hazaras lived in their independent homeland known as the Hazarajat. In the 1890s, the British crown funded the Pashtun King's first campaign of genocide against the Hazara. Sixty per cent of the Hazara population was killed, millions more were tortured and sold into slavery and many others fled into exile. Jamila came to know about Behind the Wire and wanted to share her story to highlight the realities of immigration detention in Australia. She is a university student and has a keen interest in writing, politics and the community sector.

## Discussion

We rarely hear from the asylum seekers and refugees who are the target of Australia's much-debated immigration detention regime. Behind the Wire is a multi-platform oral history project that seeks to address this imbalance by amplifying the voices of people who have experienced immigration detention. The coordinators of the project, who have not experienced detention, sought to do so by having lengthy, in-depth conversations with 'narrators' about their experiences, both inside and outside detention. Those conversations were then edited into short stories that were collected in a book, *They Cannot Take the Sky* (Allen & Unwin, 2017). Some of those stories were also filmed or audio recorded to form a museum exhibition of the same name. Throughout the interviewing and editing process, the aim was for narrators to feel as much ownership over their own stories as possible. In the following conversation, Behind the Wire coordinator André Dao speaks with one of the project's narrators, Jamila Jafari, about what it was like for her to share her story.

**André Dao (BTW coordinator):** The idea for Behind the Wire came about in 2014, when Sienna Merope and I started talking about the lack of depth and complexity in media representations of asylum seekers and refugees in Australia, especially of their experiences in detention. Even in the positive stories, there's so often a predictable narrative, and little more than a few soundbites from the person themselves. And there was hardly ever any detail about detention itself. We wanted to find a way to address that gap, because in our day jobs we were meeting people who had been in detention with the most incredible stories, and no platform for telling them. So our initial motivation was to find a way to make sure these voices – which should be the most important in this conversation – were part of the public discussion about immigration detention. We also wanted to surprise people who perhaps only had a cursory familiarity with Australia's refugee policies, or subvert their expectations, because there's been so much ink spilt on the 'issue' that people have very fixed, abstracted ideas about what it means to seek asylum. We hoped that in the course of doing this, helping people tell their stories of detention, that our narrators would get something out of the process too. But I've always been hesitant to make assumptions on that front, so I'm hoping that that's something we can explore in this conversation. In particular, Jamila, you

were one of the narrators who contacted us about being involved, and I'm very interested to know why? And how the experience of telling your story matched up with what you were expecting?

**Jamila Jafari (BTW narrator):** Growing up, I was often disheartened that the public had a very narrow perception of who the people in detention were and why they had come to Australia. As you've discussed, while there were personal accounts being broadcast in the media, I also felt that these snippets and soundbites were too inadequate to paint an accurate picture of people's refugee experiences. I often thought about what telling the full story in its rawest form would entail.

For most of my schooling years, I would dread being asked to write creatively by my teachers. What was I supposed to write about? I lacked imagination and had nothing to inspire me. Or so I thought.

In the last two years of school, without giving it any forethought, I found myself writing about Hazara people and people seeking asylum. I began writing short stories about characters, themes and issues that resonated with me and were inspired by my lived experience as a Hazara-in-exile. In my Year 11 English exam I wrote about my people's struggle to enlighten themselves in a land where target killings created a barrier to accessing education. My main character risked death every day to attend school because she knew the power of her pen was mightier than her enemy's bombs and bullets. In my Year 12 drama exam I performed a monologue about a little girl coming to Australia on a boat.

The feedback I received from those assessments motivated me to keep going with my new-found approach. I had once been the girl trying to avoid being seen as different but now I wanted my peers to know I was one of those 'boat people', all in the spirit of inviting dialogue and understanding. One day, I asked a close friend of mine, 'What would you have thought about Muslims and boat people if you and I had never met?' She said, 'I guess I would've believed everything my Dad tells me'. We both fell silent upon realising the impact our friendship had made.

This became a profound moment for me and it is the reason why I reached out to Behind the Wire. I had something to say and I saw that Behind the Wire was willing to help me be heard. I was pleased with the team's ethical approach to giving me, as a narrator, the platform to stand up and speak out – on my own terms – and to be consulted at every step of the way.

By sharing my experiences, I don't expect parliament to unanimously vote overnight in closing down the camps, although that would be wonderful. I don't expect xenophobes to hand me flowers and cake because they now want to make amends. I simply want to show people my undiluted human emotions and experiences and I genuinely believe the change of heart will come naturally.

My story writing, my lunchtime conversations with school friends and my involvement with Behind the Wire have all been my small way of magnifying the human element about how we are treating those who've come from across the seas in the national conversation. My parents raised me to appreciate the power of words and the effect they can have on societies. This is my way of trying to effect change.

**André:** One of the things that struck me throughout the project was how working with Behind the Wire was often only one of many ways that people talked about these issues. So it's interesting for me to see that that's the case for you as well, that you've spoken with friends and family, as well as using more creative forms like short stories and drama.

Actually, the question of form was something we thought about a lot as editors. Because the conversations we had with narrators would usually go for a few hours – across different days – it was necessary, just from a readability point of view, to cut the transcripts down. But then we were faced with a dilemma: what could we cut? And of course, length wasn't the only factor – we wanted readers to get some of the raw impact that we felt as interviewers sitting down and speaking to people about their personal experiences; at the same time we wanted the stories as a whole to reflect the diversity of detention experiences, without our preconceived ideas of what the 'important' details would be.

Our main approach to this challenge was to try and work as closely as possible with narrators on the editing of their transcripts. But in practice this varied – some narrators said they were happy for us to shape those lengthy conversations into more structured narratives, while others were closely involved in changes, almost going line by line through their stories. Jamila, my memory is that you worked pretty closely with us on your story, so I'm interested in hearing how you approached that side of the project. Did it feel very different from the 'telling' part? And how did you go about thinking about what were the important details?

**Jamila:** The conversations I had with Zoe Barron, the Behind the Wire volunteer who interviewed me, and the transcript that followed, was the first time I had a good amount of my refugee experience written down on paper. Since Zoe and I had met a few times in relaxed and casual settings I felt comfortable sharing more information with her. During the editing process, I took out information that I felt was quite personal for me. I consciously decided that that sort of information would be best relayed in a real-time face-to-face conversation rather than in written texts or other media formats.

Having conversations with people about topics that are important to me has always been very sacred to me. Ask any of my close friends and they will tell you I sometimes cannot stop chatting away! For some parts that I had removed, I felt that they were unnecessary as I knew I had gone off on a tangent again, which is also why I was happy for the editors to polish down some paragraphs into more succinct texts.

**André:** It's interesting that you mention face-to-face conversations being a better medium for relaying certain kinds of information. That was something we tried to keep in mind for another iteration of our project, an exhibition at the Immigration Museum in Melbourne. For the exhibition, we had the opportunity to use video, so we decided to film some of the narrators from the book delivering direct-to-camera monologues taken from their longer published stories. The videos were displayed in small booths where the audience could sit and essentially be face-to-face with someone telling their story.

The feedback we got from audience members was very positive. The Immigration Museum said that the exhibition had particularly high engagement rates, and lots of people – including school groups – left notes about how the videos had impacted on them. Jamila, your videos are a great example of how powerful the videos could be – every time I watch one of them I'm struck by how much emotion comes through in your voice, your mannerisms – even your silences. But I'm also conscious that the videos were a big ask for our narrators, and really very different to speaking to an interviewer, off-camera, in a lengthy conversation. How did you find speaking on camera? Did you have to prepare differently than for your conversations with Zoe? And did you feel like the video format allowed you to express more? Or was it more of an inhibition?

**Jamila:** As I reflect upon that experience now, I realise I didn't do anything drastically different to prepare. Because speaking on camera is slightly different to a real-time conversation, I had to bear in mind that the audience was not in front of me to listen and ask me further questions. Hence why I made sure to include any details I thought someone may potentially ask.

Each media format has its own strengths and weaknesses. The power of a video is in its ability to capture the things a book cannot: the pitch in a voice, the facial expressions, the silences. In my case, these things happened voluntarily and I think it really helped me to say what I wanted to.

I had intended to speak in a calm, neutral tone on camera. But when I watched the videos for the first time, I was really surprised to find that my emotions were so obvious in my voice. Where my voice trembles or my pitch rises a viewer can tell when I am anxious or excited. I was slightly confronted to realise I was a bit like an open book in those videos. But I had to tell myself it was okay to sometimes let myself be honest about how my experiences made me feel. It's not always in the best interests of a newsreader to tell the masses how government policies affected my life, so if I didn't allow myself to show emotion, to be human, then who would?

Through these videos, I hope the public is able to get a glimpse, however small it may be, of certain elements of my experience and the experiences of other people that the mainstream media has been reluctant to broadcast for nearly two decades.

*The following is an extract from Jamila's story. She was five years old when she fled Afghanistan with her mother and younger brother in 1999. After travelling by boat from Indonesia, they were intercepted in Australian waters, and were eventually taken to the detention centre in Woomera, South Australia.*

## The word 'freedom'

We had the initial interview, and it was in a lovely, clean, air-conditioned building – really different from the dongas. There was a desk, an interviewer, an interpreter, and a chair. Mum sat on the chair as she was being interviewed, and my brother and I had to sit on the floor. I think they gave us a piece of paper and a few coloured pencils to occupy us with. And, I mean, it should

have been something enjoyable to do but what was I supposed to draw? Razor wire all around me? That's all I'd seen ever since I'd arrived here.

So, once you've been initially interviewed, they transfer you over, make room for the other new arrivals. The other donga we were moved to was much bigger and it had a small living area, a corridor and three bedrooms on each side. Each bedroom had two bunk beds. So we took one of the rooms there, there were other Hazara families in the other rooms. And these other Hazara families, they were, I think, the epitome of what detention does to children. The psychological effects detention has. The lady, she had quite a few children. She had two older boys: one was 14 and the other was 12. She had lots of girls as well. When I think of detention, what I saw with them are a big part of the memories I have.

Woomera was the most notorious detention centre in Australia. There were lots of protests and riots and that sort of thing while we were in Woomera. I saw adults and children with their lips sewn, bruised and all this stuff. The 14-year-old and the 12-year-old, they both had their lips sewn. The mother too.

During one of the riots on 26 January 2000, I was standing there and there was arguing going on. There was screaming, people screaming out, 'Freedom! Freedom!' It was the middle of the desert during the really hot season and the conditions were just unbearable. I remember the 14-year-old, he had some kind of blade. He'd written out the word 'freedom', he cut that into his skin, his left forearm – I'm sorry this is so graphic – his skin's ripped open, his blood's dripping, and he's screaming out, 'We want freedom!'

I could never remove that image from my head. It's so vivid. And his voice is ... it's shaking, there's so much pain in his voice. Like, a 14-year-old! Doing that to himself! And all the other adults, older children, protesting and screaming out, 'Freedom, freedom, freedom.' When I think of my childhood, that is one of the main words that I remember, like it's been engraved in me, and I have never ... I wish I could, I wish I could remove those images from my head. But, I can't. It's impossible.

After the boy cuts himself, next thing I hear are people screaming and crying out because a man has climbed right to the top of the fence and then he just jumps off the fence. He lands on a coil of razor wire and people are shrieking, they're crying out. Everyone

is so surprised. As he lands, his weight causes the coil to bounce, so he bounces a few times like a heartbeat. His arms are all cut up because of the razor and he's bleeding. There's a documentary about him, called 'The Man Who Jumped'. He didn't die, but the conditions in the detention centre drove him off the edge, literally. You wouldn't do that if you were completely sane, you know?

And those boys, they were so damaged, honestly. They did a lot of hectic things but I just admired them so much for their fearlessness, their boldness and their bravery. It's not an easy task to sew your lips together, to go on a hunger strike, to then resort to cutting into your own flesh. You couldn't help but admire them for having those personality traits in the face of such hopeless times. I think there were other people who felt the same way about them, even people older than them.

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