

# Swimming to Berlin

Their heroic flight from war-torn Syria made the Mardini sisters, Yusra and Sarah, famous all over the world. They now live very different lives in Germany

BY VERENA MAYER

Two sisters. Their father is a swimming coach; both started swimming at a very young age. They trained, they competed and their lives were like those of lots of children from ordinary middle-class families. Yet there is nothing ordinary about these sisters. They come from Syria where they had to flee the war. From Lebanon they traveled to Turkey, and from there they crossed the Mediterranean to Greece. When the engine of the inflatable boat they and countless other migrants were crammed into suddenly broke down, they leapt into the sea and helped keep the boat above water for several hours. They made it to the coast and from there to Macedonia and Hungary and then finally on to Germany, where they caught the attention of the media. Two female Syrian swimmers who saved others from drowning while fleeing the war – their story catapulted the two young women into the global spotlight.

The girls' odyssey ended in Berlin in 2015, and from that point on the sisters' stories have taken diverging paths. Yusra Mardini is now 21

caught between the front lines, how their house was destroyed, how a bomb hit their local pool. After bombs forced the family to move six times in two years, the sisters realized they would rather risk their lives and flee Syria than continue living in a war zone. Their mother then sent her daughters to Europe with a relative. Yusra can still clearly remember sitting with her sister in the plane from Beirut to Istanbul. It was full of Syrians and the cabin crew threatened to arrest anyone trying to bring a life jacket with them. Since fleeing Syria, she has avoided the sea, says Yusra. But she still wanted to keep swimming.

In Arab countries, people look askance at a female swimmer, a woman in a swimsuit, said Mardini in a 2018 interview at Berlin's Olympic Stadium. "People thought I was just doing it to meet men." In Germany, she was able to prepare for her next big dream, the 2020 Olympic Games in Tokyo. She trains for three to five hours a day. She might have been a refugee, "but when I'm in the water, I'm an athlete." She is often asked whether she feels she's living a dream with her story, which has taken her from a refugee boat to the Olympics and then to meeting the US president and the Pope.

fewer inhabitants. Sarah served as a translator and interpreter, looked after the children and bought washing machines with donated money so the refugees could at least wear clean clothes.

But in the eyes of the Greek authorities, she was committing a crime. In August 2018, Sarah and three dozen other helpers were arrested and accused of human trafficking, membership in a criminal organization, money laundering and spying. It was alleged that Sarah had cooperated with people smugglers and communicated with them over encrypted networks to bring people illegally to Lesbos.

Sarah denies these accusations. She has personal experience with the methods used to exploit people fleeing their countries, so she would never make common cause with human traffickers. Prosecutors had no proof of Sarah's alleged crimes and in December she was freed on €5,000 bail and allowed to leave Greece for Germany. However, her trial in Greece wages on. Greek authorities are seeking to criminalize the work of voluntary refugee helpers on Greek islands, said Sarah's lawyer, Zacharias Kesses, at a December press conference in



Becoming butterflies: In 2016, Yusra and Sarah Mardini received the renowned German Bambi award in the "Quiet Heroes" category.

years old. In Germany, she took up where she had left off in Syria: training to swim. She joined the swimming club Wasserfreunde Spandau 04, where sports officials noticed her and nominated her for the new refugee team that was to compete at the Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro. Yusra qualified and by the time she clambered out of the pool after her races in 2016, she had become an international star and one of the few feel-good stories of the global refugee crisis. She met Barack Obama and the Pope. *Time* magazine named her one of the world's most influential teenagers.

Yusra is now also a special ambassador for the UN Refugee Agency. She travels the world and takes the stage at events. In one interview, Yusra announced that she wants to use her fame to give other refugees hope. So she tells her story repeatedly, most recently in a book titled after her favorite swimming stroke – *Butterfly* – in which she recounts how her family's home in Syria was

But she assures people that they wouldn't want to trade places with her. She and her sister have lost so much, "and we just want peace."

This could all end happily ever after. The Mardini's story could stand as an example of how you can achieve it all, even if you've had to leave everything behind to flee a war – that is, if it weren't for Yusra's sister Sarah, her elder by three years. Sarah injured her shoulder on their journey to Europe and had to give up swimming. She went to Lesbos, where in 2015 she washed up in an inflatable raft and nobody would sell her any water, even though she had money to buy it. Sarah resolved to save other refugees from this sort of experience. She was active as a lifeguard and helped settle the refugees arriving in boats when they washed up on the coast. She volunteered at the refugee camp on Lesbos, where thousands of refugees still live in the worst possible sanitary conditions in a tent city designed for far

Berlin. Sarah's case highlights the challenges confronting NGOs, those rescuing people at sea and others helping refugees across Europe; these heroes operate in a legal gray area and face increasing pressure from a range of unsympathetic governments and critics.

The two sisters don't see much of each other at the moment. They both travel a lot and each has her own life. Yusra is training in Hamburg, while Sarah lives with their parents, who were also able to leave Syria, in the German capital, where she is studying politics and economics at Bard College Berlin. The last time the wider public saw the two sisters together was in 2016, when they were honored with a Bambi Media Award. The award they received was in the "Quiet Heroes" category.

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Carola Rackete did what her conscience told her was right: After 17 days floating in Italian waters of the Mediterranean, with 40 increasingly desperate refugees onboard her rescue boat *Sea Watch 3*, the 31-year-old German captain docked at Lampedusa harbor, without permission from authorities. In so doing, she flouted a decree initiated by Italy's newly minted interior minister, Matteo Salvini, which forbade ships operated by NGOs from calling at Italian ports. The minister of justice then detained her on June 29 and placed her under house arrest. Salvini subsequently tweeted: "Law-breaking captain arrested. Pirate ship seized. Big fine on foreign NGO. Migrants all redistributed to other European countries. Mission accomplished."

## UNSAFE HAVEN

Rackete has become a hero for opponents of Salvini's blockade policy. German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas criticized the arrest: "Saving human lives is a humanitarian obligation. Rescue at sea must not be criminalized." Rackete herself announced: "I am ready to go to jail." As of the latest reporting, Rackete is supposedly being sued for "battering" a small motorboat belonging to the Italian police. The vessel, with five policemen on board, had to quickly evade the *Sea Watch 3*. Rackete "deeply regretted" the near mishap. As of the printing of this paper on July 2, two defense funds, one in Germany and one in Italy, had already collected €1.3 million to cover Rackete's legal costs.

collaborated with the *Iuventa*. The man sent e-mails to Salvini as well as to Luigi di Maio from the populist Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S), in which he insisted that the rescue missions were no coincidence but rather a direct transfer of refugees, with the *Iuventa* as the last link in a chain of human trafficking. He claimed that the crew had communicated with smugglers via a WhatsApp group and said that they had even dragged an empty refugee boat back into Libyan waters and allowed smugglers to reuse it. In another instance, he argued, they had made it possible for a fisherman or smuggler to dismantle the boat engine and take it with him.

Girke denies these accusations. A report from the Forensic Architecture research group at Goldsmiths College at the University of London also exonerated the crew. Their research findings come to the conclusion that "the seizure of the *Iuventa* is emblematic of a new attempt by European authorities to stem the flow of migration across the Mediterranean."

The individuals rescued on that day have not been questioned about these events. Canestrini has signaled his readiness to provide the PIN numbers and passwords of the confiscated phones, tablets and computers as soon as an independent expert is put in charge of evaluating the devices and their content.

Italian state prosecutors continue to defend the confiscation of the *Iuventa* as a "preventive measure" designed to thwart further "aid in illegal entry" into the country. Other maritime rescue ships have also been confiscated for months. In 2016 and 2017, there were 13 NGO ships operating on the Mediterranean; in 2016 alone, these ships saved the lives of roughly 180,000 people. Today, according to Canestrini, there is only one NGO ship still out there. He calls it a "Europe-wide wave of repression" and a "campaign against solidarity."

In the *Iuventa* case, 24 investigations are currently being carried out into search and rescue crews on suspicion of aiding and abetting illegal immigration to Italy. In addition to the 10 *Iuventa* crew members, these also include individuals at Save the Children and Médecins Sans Frontières. A total of more than 100 investigations and criminal cases are underway for so-called "crimes of solidarity," such as those against aid workers in Lesbos, Tunisian fishermen, Italian mayors, French farmers, Eritrean priests and others.

If the *Iuventa* crew members will actually be charged, they face imprisonment as well as hefty fines. Public prosecutors have set a price of €15,000 for each of the 14,000 refugees rescued and transported, which brings the total to €210 million. All of this is going ahead even though the MRCC ordered the rescue of each and every one of these people. "Not once did we take someone on board without getting a prior order to do so from the control center," says Girke. "There were also no transfers to other ships that weren't ordered in advance."

Beigui is outraged that the very agency "trusted by all seafarers across the globe" participated in this event. On that day back in early May 2017, there were 21 boats in distress in that area alone; five of them – three rubber dinghies and two wooden boats – disappeared. "This means that as many as 1,000 people drowned, many hundreds of which we could have saved."

In 2018, more than 2,000 refugees died in the Mediterranean. Today, the Libyan Coast Guard alone is responsible for assisting people in maritime distress and monitoring "by far the deadliest border in the world." But this is not stopping people from drowning. Which is why Girke regretfully reports: "We really should be there now."

Peter Koepf is editor in chief of *The German Times*.



## PAID FOR BY THE POOR

There once was a world without borders – many millennia ago. Strict border-control measures began only after World War I, claims the sociologist and journalist Harald Welzer in his new bestseller *Alles könnte anders sein. Eine Gesellschaftsutopie für freie Menschen* (Everything could be different. A utopian society for free people). National and ethnic identity became one and the same and obligatory identification cards were introduced, making possible the "ethnic cleansings," resettlements and genocides that "have left such a lasting moral scar on the 20th century."

Walls are experiencing a renaissance the world over, according to Welzer. International conflicts are currently giving rise to walls on Cyprus (1), the Korean Peninsula (2) and between India and Pakistan. Illegal migration is the cited cause of walls and fences in Hungary (3), between Turkey and Syria (4), between the US and Mexico (5) as well as between India and Bangladesh. And ethnic and political conflicts are triggering the building of walls between Palestinian territories and Israeli settlements in the West Bank (6), between Saudi Arabia and Iraq as well as through Morocco in the Western Sahara.

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the planet has gained no less than 50 new and expansive walls, including in Europe. It would behoove the Europeans to consider "the increase in freedom and quality of life brought by the inexistence of borders."

