

Two Syrian sisters swim to safety from their war-torn country

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Yusra Mardini (left) and her sister, Sarah, both from Syria, pose for a photo during a training session in Berlin, Germany, Nov. 9, 2015.
AP/Michael Sohn

BERLIN, Germany — Two months ago Sarah and Yusra Mardini were swimming for their lives. Now they pull bathing caps over their long, black hair and slide into the pool. They vanish into the crowd of swimmers with strong, practiced strokes.

Two months ago the sisters had to jump off an inflatable boat carrying refugees to Greece. The boat had begun taking on water. Now they are shooting down the pool built for the 1936 Olympics in Berlin, Germany. It has become a home away from home for the two young women, who were once among Syria's brightest swimming stars.

"Everything was good," said 20-year-old Sarah. "That was before the war."

Fleeing Syria's War

The Mardini family moved around in Syria to avoid the fighting in the Middle Eastern country, and tried to make sure their daughters could keep on swimming. Ysra, now 17, even swam for

Syria at the short-course world championships in Turkey in 2012. As the war grew worse, however, fellow swimmers drifted away.

"We were 40 or 50 swimmers, and now we are maybe 10 or seven swimmers in Syria," said Sarah. "We want to have a future. I want to be in college." She and her sister want to swim all over the world, she said. "But if we stay there we will not reach that because the situation is not OK in Syria."

The Mardini sisters finally left Syria in early August. They joined a new wave of Syrians who had given up hope of seeing the war end soon. The sisters traveled to Lebanon then Turkey. From there they paid smugglers to take them to Greece.

The Turkish Coast Guard drove their boat back on the first try. The second time they boarded a small inflatable boat called a dinghy. Within a half hour it was taking on water. It was also overloaded with people, most of whom couldn't swim.

When the Aegean Sea turned rough, all bags were thrown into the water. Even that wasn't enough to keep the boat from sinking. To lighten the boat even more, Ysra, Sarah and three others who were also strong swimmers jumped into the water.

"I was not afraid of dying, because if anything happened I could swim to arrive at the island. But the problem was that I had 20 persons with me," said Sarah. "In Syria I worked in a swimming pool to watch people not drown. So if I let anyone drown or die I would not forgive myself."

Clinging To Ropes

There were ropes hanging from the side of the boat. For three hours the sisters clung to the ropes. Finally, they reached the Greek island of Lesbos.

For weeks after that, they hiked. Along the way, strangers gave them clothes. Others stole from them. Some of their friends were arrested at borders, and expensive tickets they bought proved worthless. Officials refused to let trains full of refugees cross borders.

The sisters made it to Austria and then Germany in the end. Shortly after arriving in Germany's capital, Berlin, a charity group put the sisters in touch with a swimming club near their refugee shelter.

The club has embraced its newest members and put them straight into a daily training program.

Sven Spannekrebs, their coach, says the sisters are making amazing progress. However, he is practical about their chances as athletes. "They can swim at the highest level for the Arab world, but there's a difference to Europe because of the training conditions," he said.

Ysra, who specializes in the butterfly stroke, is aiming high. "Maybe when I learn German I will start school. I want to be a pilot," she said. "And with my swimming I want to reach the Olympics."

Her older sister, Sarah, is battling government rules to bring the rest of the family to Germany. In the pool, she prefers long-distance swimming.

"It seems to me that I have balanced my life," said Sarah. "We can't do anything good in our life if we don't have swimming."