DESPERATE FOR A NEW LIFE

Young Muslim refugees from the war-torn Middle East are trying to escape and build new lives in Europe. Will they succeed?

BY MELISSA EDDY
Migrants traveling from Turkey aboard a fishing boat reach the island of Lesbos, Greece.
INTERNATIONAL

LAST YEAR, Ahmad Dandoush, 22, along with two dozen others, crammed into a rubber boat designed for eight people. They set off from Turkey, heading across the dangerous waters of the Aegean Sea—an arm of the Mediterranean Sea—for Greece. (See map, p. 13.)

The Syrians, Afghans, and Iraqis who were packed into the boat were refugees fleeing violence in their homelands. Each had paid $1,000 to smugglers, hoping to reach Europe and its promise of a new life. Dandoush, who grew up in the Syrian city of Latakia, was escaping from that nation’s civil war, which has killed nearly 500,000 people since 2011 and caused millions to flee.

“We all knew what happened to other refugees, that some had died,” Dandoush recalls. “We just wanted to get to Greece alive.”

When they reached the shores of the Greek island of Lesbos, Dandoush was among the first to spring from the boat—his first step on what would become a three-month-long journey across Europe by train, by taxi, and on foot. By the time he arrived in Weimar, Germany, last October, the trip had taken him through five countries: Greece, Macedonia, Serbia, Hungary, and Austria. The journey cost him $3,000 and left him 20 pounds lighter.

Dandoush is one of more than 440,000 migrants who made their way to Germany last year and applied for asylum—protection given by a government to someone who has left his or her country to escape war or persecution. They’re part of the biggest refugee crisis Europe has experienced since the end of World War II (1939-1945). Germany, with its strong economy and generous social welfare benefits, has been a top destination for the mostly Middle Eastern migrants.

A WARM WELCOME, THEN A BACKLASH

Initially, Germans welcomed the migrants. But integrating these new arrivals, most of whom are Muslim, poses one of the biggest challenges Germany has faced in decades. It wasn’t long before a backlash against the migrants began.

More than 1,000 attacks on refugee shelters took place in 2015, including 92 cases of arson. Political parties that call for closing the door to more migrants have become more popular. Such groups have also held sometimes violent demonstrations to protest the flood of foreigners.

Fears of Muslim newcomers have been heightened by recent terrorist attacks carried out in Europe by the radical Islamist group ISIS—the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, also known as the Islamic State or ISIL.

The attacks include one in Paris, France, last November, which killed 130 people, and another in March 2016 in Brussels, Belgium, which killed 32 people. Concerns that terrorists might be let in along with refugees have slowed down the screening process in some countries, including the United States. (See “The U.S. and Refugees,” left.)

Having made it to Germany, Dandoush is one of the lucky ones. Overwhelmed by the arrival of so many migrants, several countries Dandoush passed through have since sealed their borders. About 50,000 migrants are stranded in camps in Greece until European authorities decide whether to admit them. And in March, the European Union—a lawmaking body in Europe—reached a deal with Turkey to send some newly arrived migrants back to that country.

“FORCED TO FLEE”

From the moment Dandoush crossed the border into Germany last October, he has been trying to assimilate...
Ahmad Dandoush is trying to build a new life in Weimar, Germany.

“We all knew what happened to other refugees, that some had died. We just wanted to get to Greece alive.”

into German culture. His first priority: learning German, with the help of an app made by the German government.

Even though some Germans think migrants like him should be sent back to their home countries, Dandoush wants to put down roots in Germany. First he needs the equivalent of a high school diploma so he can go to college. That, he hopes, will lead to a good job.

Dandoush fled Syria in 2014—three years after the civil war began—to avoid being drafted into the army of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Dandoush went to neighboring Turkey, where he worked odd jobs trying to save money. But singing is his passion, and while in Turkey he tried out for Arab Idol, a TV contest modeled after American Idol. He made it onto the show and was invited to the finals.

But summer—when the waters of the Mediterranean are calmer—was nearly over by the time the call to appear on the show came. Dandoush had saved enough money to travel to Europe. He knew he couldn’t wait.

Dandoush had to give up his chance at stardom, but thousands of migrants have had to endure much greater hardships.

“Many children and young people have traumatic experiences behind them, from the reasons they were forced to flee to what may have happened en route to Europe,” says Ninja Charbonneau of Unicef.

FEARS OF EXTREMISM

One-third of Germany’s new arrivals are children. Young adults under age 26 account for almost another quarter of the refugees. Many hope to continue their education, and the German government is eager for them to do so.

What Germany’s government doesn’t want is for the newcomers to wind up living in segregated communities. It fears such areas could become breeding grounds for Islamist terrorists, as they have in parts of France and Belgium.

To prevent that from happening, the German government recently passed an integration law—the first of its kind for the country. It provides refugees with housing assistance, health care, language lessons, and help getting jobs. In exchange, newcomers must adopt Germany’s customs and follow its laws.

Adapting to a new culture is generally easier for young people than for their parents. Still, many young refugees face challenges. Most of them come from conservative Muslim countries with male-dominated societies. In Germany, Muslim boys are often confronted for the first time with women in positions of authority. And Muslim girls have to balance their families’ expectations of modesty with the couples they see holding hands on the streets and German girls wearing shorts at school.

“THEY CALL US TERRORISTS”

Loreena,* a 14-year-old from Syria, is in ninth grade at a German school.

* Loreena asked that her last name not be used, to protect family members who remain in Syria.
high school in the city of Weimar, where her family now lives in a three-room apartment. Her family belongs to the Yazidi religious minority, a group that’s been targeted by ISIS. The militants have enslaved Yazidi women and girls, and forced them to marry ISIS fighters.

Like Dandoush, Loreena’s goal is to finish high school so she can go to college. Loreena speaks Arabic, Kurdish, and Turkish, and she’s picked up German. But making friends has proved more difficult than schoolwork.

“The German girls don’t like us,” she says. One classmate she worked with on a school project completely ignored her the next day when they passed each other on the street. Although Loreena doesn’t wear a head scarf, one of her best friends (who’s also a Syrian refugee) does, and the two are often taunted.

“They call us terrorists and say we are from ISIS,” she says. “That really hurts because we ran from ISIS. They chased us out of our country!”

ARRIVING ALONE

Loreena came to Germany with her parents. Shakir Yakoupi, 15, wasn’t so lucky: He’s one of some 14,000 unaccompanied minors to arrive in Germany last year. Shakir made his way from Afghanistan through Iran and Turkey, and then across the Mediterranean, along the same route Dandoush took.

Shakir’s parents sent him to Germany on his own out of fear he would be targeted by the Taliban—a group of Islamist militants in Afghanistan and Pakistan. His father, who worked for a German government agency in Afghanistan, is now considered a traitor.

Once in Germany, each minor who arrives without any family is assigned a legal guardian and a place to live, either with a foster family or in a group home. They’re enrolled in school and given a monthly allowance of about $160.

At the start of the last school year, Shakir landed a scholarship at a respected German boarding school. He began language classes, as well as regular courses in math, science, and art. In his free time, Shakir joins pickup soccer games with his German friends on the school’s campus.

His allowance normally pays for his cell phone—a critical device for all refugees because it serves as a pocket translator and a way to stay in touch with family and friends. Yet one of the first things Shakir bought was a German national team soccer jersey.

“I like the German team very much,” he says in German.

TRYING TO FIT IN

Back in Weimar, Dandoush has also discovered that soccer is a good way to make friends. He plays with a group of refugees and Germans once a week. The rest of his free time is devoted to improving his German. As part of that effort, he rides his bike in the park and strikes up conversations with elderly Germans.

“At first they look at me kind of funny, but when I sit down next to them on the bench and start talking, I think it makes them happy,” he says, smiling. “The people here are really good, really nice. Some of them just need some time to get used to us.”

“They... say we are from ISIS. That really hurts because we ran from ISIS.”
A Long Journey  This map shows the route Ahmad Dandoush took from Syria to Turkey in 2014—and from Turkey to Germany in 2015.

Top 5 Destinations  Countries with the most applications for asylum (2015)

1. GERMANY  441,800
2. HUNGARY  174,435
3. SWEDEN  156,110
4. AUSTRIA  85,505
5. ITALY  83,245

SOURCE: Eurostat

Questions
1. From Latakia, Syria, in which direction did Ahmad Dandoush travel to reach Izmir, Turkey?
2. How many applications for asylum did Sweden receive in 2015?
3. What is the capital of that country?
4. Which body of water is located north of Istanbul?
5. Through which country did Dandoush travel after Macedonia but before Hungary?
6. What is the capital of Dandoush's home country?
7. From the capital of Macedonia, in which direction would you travel to reach Athens?
8. Which city on the map is southwest of Brussels?
9. Which country had about half as many applications for asylum in 2015 as Hungary had?
10. About how many straight-line miles is the capital of Italy from the city where Dandoush now lives?

Why might adapting to a new country and culture be easier for young people than for older generations?

Watch a video about migrants working in Germany at junior.scholastic.com.
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