

Leaving parents behind, making a hazardous journey to Europe

By Los Angeles Times, adapted by Newsela staff on 09.28.15

BERLIN, Germany — If one looks closely, they stand out amid the massive human wave washing its way from the Aegean Sea to Germany.

Here is a solemn-faced, solitary boy gazing about a jam-packed train station with wariness and calm. There, a little girl whose hair has not been brushed or combed for days. Just beyond, a group of teens are clustered around the GPS on someone’s smartphone, intently debating travel strategy — all with no adult in sight.

In the language of aid groups and governments, they are “unaccompanied minors.” These children under 18 are making the dangerous thousand-mile trek across half of Europe without a parent. Sometimes, it is by accident, sometimes by deliberate choice, sometimes by a wrenching calculation of long-term gain for the family as a whole. They make up only a small portion of the tens of thousands of migrants and refugees currently traveling across Europe — between 4 percent and 7 percent, by the estimates of international organizations. Yet, these youngsters pose a particular challenge to those who are trying to help victims of war and persecution find refuge.

Help Is All But Exhausted And Still They Come

And their journeys come at a point when the resources of nations and aid groups are stretched to the breaking point, and safe haven is growing harder to find. Germany had thrown open its doors to asylum seekers for more than a week. However, the country is now enforcing border rules that are preventing some from reaching the most desired northern European destinations. The move is described as temporary, and German officials suggested that they expect to take in as many as 1 million migrants this year.

Mazen Hassoun is a 16-year-old Syrian boy, who arrived in Berlin this month from the town of Mansurah, near the city of Raqqah. It is the capital of the headquarters of Islamic State, the extremist group that has overrun large parts of Syria and Iraq.

“My parents believed I had to get out of there before I was forced to fight for Daash,” he said, using the Arabic acronym for the group Islamic State. “We didn’t have the money to bring the whole family, so it was decided that I would make the journey.”

Many of the youngsters are silent and traumatized when they arrive. Remarkably quickly, they get back their equilibrium — or appear to. On a recent day at a center in Munich, Germany, both the lunchroom and a game room were filled with boisterous chatter — some in German, some in the children’s native languages, including Pashto, Arabic and Somali.

Laughter In Daylight, Nightmares In Dark

“They become children again,” said administrator Jutta Stiehler. “But at night, the ghosts come back.” That is when the children’s frightening memories sometimes haunt them in the form of nightmares and bed-wetting, she said. Rimas, 9, sometimes cried for her mother during the long journey from Syria through Greece, Macedonia, Hungary and Austria, her uncle recounted. Her uncle said the sound of her nighttime sobs sometimes broke his heart

— but there was something he feared even more.

“The worst were the times when I could tell that the two of them, she and her cousin Mahmoud, they were too frightened even to cry,” said Abdel Rahman Koweifi. He agreed to take one child belonging to each of his two brothers on the long journey. They experienced some terrifying moments — their rubber raft overturned in the sea after setting out from Turkey, but close enough to shore that they were rescued. However, he managed to stay in touch with family along the way, updating the anxious parents on their progress.

Anchor Children Sent On Harrowing Journey

The close-knit Koweifi clan had agreed that sending the two children to travel in their uncle’s care might ultimately give all three families a chance at securing a foothold in Europe. The journey cost a total of \$4,500 for the three of them, Koweifi said. It’s a choice many of those enduring Syria’s seemingly unending civil war are making. Aid workers say that youngsters who travel without their parents often feel intense pressure under the weight of a family’s hopes. Either they will be able to secure work on arrival and send back money, or a successful asylum application can pave the way for other family members to join them. In the course of the journey, unprotected youngsters are vulnerable to sexual assault and robbery, or worse.

“There’s a whole range of concerns with relation to their safety in transit,” said Michael Bochenek, a senior counsel on children’s rights with Human Rights Watch in London. “Desperate people do what they have to do to make these kinds of journeys.”

Awaiting A New Beginning And A Reunion

In Berlin, Koweifi was happy that he had been allowed to remain with his two young relatives at the camp in Karlshorst. The children are able to communicate by phone or WhatsApp with their parents at least once a day. Their asylum paperwork has begun, though Koweifi expects it will take weeks or months before they know whether they will be allowed to stay in Germany. Of all the national groups currently on the move, Syrians have perhaps the best chances for being granted asylum. Koweifi recalled the tearful goodbyes in Damascus, the Syrian capital, when he swore to his brothers that he would guard their children’s lives with his own.

“I said that if one of them were to die, it would be like my own death, but much, much worse,” he said. “I look at them, and it is hard to believe we are safe. And perhaps we will all be together again — maybe not so soon, but someday.”