

Iraqi family braves perilous journey to new life in Germany

23/12/2015 18:49 by admin

Heidelberg, Germany: The Qasus do not normally cry, but this felt nothing like normal. Like hundreds of thousands before them and untold more to come, the Iraqi family had just completed a disorienting dash across Europe and found refuge in Germany.

Settling down in the city of Heidelberg, the parents comforted their four children as the reality of what they had just endured struck like a thunderclap and the tears flowed freely. They were tears of trauma, loss and flickering hope.

"We used to have a home. A fine life. We used to have money and never needed anyone," said the mother, Bessi Qasim, who uses her father's surname. Dabbing at her eyes, the 42-year-old homemaker said her job now was to make a new home.

"I just want my children to be happy and see them growing up. I want to be able to replace the bad memories with new good ones."

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Those bad memories include at least three brushes with death: with murderous invaders, the fear of drowning, a daughter's cancer.

Had they not left Iraq so quickly, the Qasus might well be dead or abducted now. They are Yazidis, a religiously distinctive ethnic group within Iraq that has been singled out for persecution by Islamic State militants, who have slain thousands, particularly in and around Sinjar, where the Qasus are from.

The Qasus escaped as IS forces seized the city on Aug. 3, 2014. All six — Bessi, husband Samir, daughters Delphine and Dunia, sons Dilshad and Dildar — climbed aboard a truck heading north for the Turkish border. They soon heard word of wholesale slaughter, rapes and kidnappings back home as thousands behind them retreated without food or water to Mount Sinjar.

"We took nothing with us. I didn't need to see IS to know how horrifying they are," said Samir, 45, who abandoned his convenience store in Sinjar. He said cousins who stayed behind have vanished.

For 15 months, the Qasus existed on the fringe of Turkish society. As a refugee, Samir was barred from working legally and said his children faced intimidation at school because of their Yazidi identity.

"We had a miserable life," said Samir, who kept his family out of Turkish refugee camps and rented an apartment, but struggled to pay bills by working illegally part-time in construction jobs. "I reached a point where I couldn't take it anymore. We had no dignity. I just wanted my children to live in a safe, peaceful place."

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The smuggler in Istanbul demanded \$10,000 for the six of them to join 26 others on a cabin cruiser designed to carry perhaps a quarter that many. They left the Turkish coast before dawn on Dec. 3 bound for the island of Lesbos, the first port of EU call for nearly 400,000 asylum seekers this year. Scores have drowned as boats, typically helmed by novice refugees, are swamped or overturned.

Samir paid in part with money provided by his brother, who had already made it to Sweden. The boat appeared more substantial than the typical rigid inflatables that smugglers deploy as one-use throwaway items. That didn't stop the engine of the overloaded boat from breaking down midway, leaving the Qasus to bob helplessly on the choppy Aegean.

"I was 95 percent certain that death would take us," said Samir, who said he prayed for God to claim him and save his loved ones.

Greek rescue officials spotted their dying craft and towed them close to shore, where aid workers waded knee-deep to carry the Qasu family the final few meters into Europe. This was the moment The Associated Press met the Qasu family: struggling to remove their knotted life vests and caressing each other with shaking hands, emotions overwhelming them.

An AP photographer spent that week following the Qasus as they nimbly hopped from border to border. Their rapid progress reflects Europe's concession that German-bound asylum seekers should not be left pointlessly stranded for days outdoors in the bleak Balkans winter.

Within two days, the Qasus had traveled by midnight ferry from Lesbos to Athens and then by bus to Greece's northern border with Macedonia. They slept chiefly on trains, buses and benches while passing through registration centers in four Balkan countries, getting their first proper sleep in a bed in a massive tent holding hundreds of asylum seekers near the Austrian city of Salzburg on Dec. 7.

Life has been a German whirlwind since then: ID photographs and fingerprints, housing in a former development for U.S. Army families that now holds 5,500 refugee applicants, distributions of free food and clothing — and most importantly for the Qasus, the most thorough medical check in years for 13-year-old Dunia.

In February 2012, Turkish doctors performed a life-saving liver transplant on the girl, removing a cancerous section and replacing it with a liver portion donated by her mother. The liver is the only human organ able to regenerate in this way, but Dunia remains vulnerable to infections and must take daily injections to block antibodies from attacking her mother's donated tissue. Underscoring her vulnerability, she wore a surgical mask throughout December's odyssey from Turkey to Heidelberg.

"I want to be cured and grow up. I love Germany and the people here," Dunia said.

Samir said the German doctors at the Heidelberg camp "have been so kind to us. As soon as they learned about her situation, they went through all the proper procedures to check her and told us that she is fine."

Dildar, 10, now dreams of becoming a soccer star in Germany. As he kicks a ball outside with siblings Dilshad, 17, and Delphine, 18, their talk turns to the possibility of school in January and of using one of their first German words: "Danke" — thank you.

Delphine says she hopes to train to become a doctor and continue the cycle of aid to others less fortunate.

"I dream of helping people, the ones who need the most," she said.

The parents watch from a park bench, pleased to be in a land that offers a future now unimaginable where they came from.

"Iraq is destroyed, shattered into millions of pieces," Samir said. "It's no longer my home and no longer a home for my family. ... Home is where your family is safe and happy."

- AP