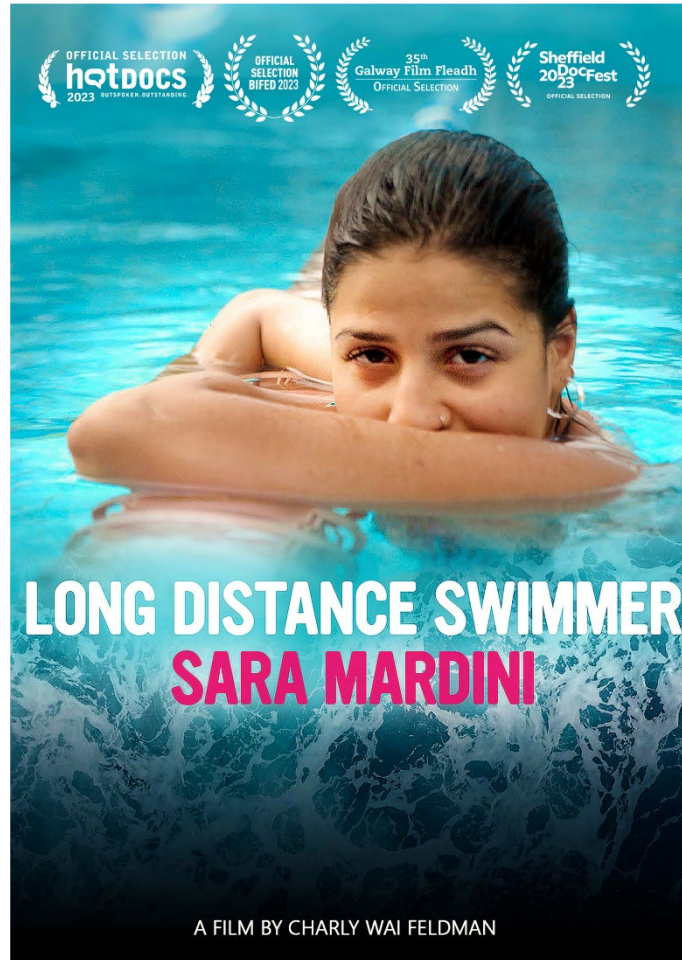




LONG DISTANCE SWIMMER: SARA MARDINI



STUDY GUIDE

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Long Distance Swimmer: Sara Mardini

At 20, Sara was already famous. She fled Syria in 2015 with her younger sister Yusra. When their boat broke down as they were crossing the sea to Greece, Sara and Yusra and two others jumped into the waves and swam for three and a half hours in open water to stop their dinghy from capsizing, saving the lives of everyone on board. Their journey made headlines around the world and is dramatized in a Netflix film called *The Swimmers*. Our story begins when the fictionalized drama ends. Sara has spent three years rescuing refugees on the same journey that made her famous, but she was suddenly arrested on August 2018. Sara was accused by Greek authorities of running a criminal enterprise and charged with “international espionage and people smuggling”. If convicted, she faces up to 25 years in prison and the end of her humanitarian career. Banned from Lesbos and waiting for news of the trial, she lives a surreal existence in Berlin.

Refugees

Every year, hundreds of thousands of people leave their homes and become refugees. These people leave for many different reasons including war, violence, or repressive governments in their home countries. UNHCR—the UN Refugee Agency—defines a refugee as, “Someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war or violence. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group. Most likely, they cannot return home or are afraid to do so. War and ethnic, tribal and religious violence are leading causes of refugees fleeing their countries.”

According to UNHCR, just over half of all refugees come from three countries: Syria, Ukraine, and Afghanistan. Of these three countries, Syria is the origin country for the largest number of refugees—19 percent of the world’s total. Ukraine and Afghanistan each account for 16 percent. The major host countries for refugees are Turkey, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Colombia, Germany, and Pakistan. Most countries do accept a certain number of refugees every year, however, there are far more refugees worldwide than the number that are accepted. As a result, many refugees travel illegally, often paying smugglers to guide them.

The Mediterranean Crossing

A large number of the refugees who flee to Europe travel there illegally by water, crossing the Mediterranean Sea, and arriving on the shores of Italy, Greece, Spain, Cyprus, and Malta. This is a notoriously dangerous route, and thousands of people die every year on this journey. Not only can the weather be stormy and unpredictable, but refugees are often on overcrowded and unseaworthy boats, and have limited flotation devices. UNHCR estimates that more than 159,000 people traveled to Europe by sea as refugees in 2022. It says that more than 2,400 of them are missing or dead. Many people believe that deaths are even higher than official estimates.

Greece is one of the primary gateways into Europe for the many refugees who cross the Mediterranean. UNHCR keeps statistics on refugee arrivals in Greece. It reports that the most common countries of origin for sea arrivals in Greece are Syria, Afghanistan, and Palestine, accounting for 31 percent, 20 percent, and 16 percent of arrivals. Overall, it finds that there were more than 40,000 sea arrivals in Greece in 2023.

The refugees who arrive at the numerous islands along Greece's coastline are placed in detention camps until they can be processed and moved elsewhere. Many other nations in Europe have refused to accept any of these refugees, or have only accepted small numbers of them, and as a result, many refugees remain stranded in these detention centers for months or years. Lesbos (or Lesvos) is a Greek island that receives thousands of refugees every year. Moria was a large refugee camp on Lesbos that housed refugees, and was notorious for its overcrowded facilities, poor hygienic conditions, and a lack of food, clothing, and other basic supplies. In 2020, Moria burned down. Now, many refugees live in a new camp called Mavrovouni (also known as new Kara Tepe). According to a recent report by Human Rights Watch, that camp houses more than 6,000 people.

Syria

Many of the refugees who flee to Europe come from Syria. This country has been experiencing a civil war since 2011, and as a result, millions of Syrians have left their homes. According to UNHCR, Syria has the largest refugee crisis in the world. It says, "Since 2011, more than 14 million Syrians have been forced to flee their homes in search of safety. More than 6.8 million Syrians remain internally displaced in their own country where 70 percent of the population is in need of humanitarian assistance and 90 percent of the population live below the poverty line." The agency reports that Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt host the largest number of Syrian refugees.

Aid for Refugees

There are many different organizations dedicated to helping refugees. A non-governmental organization (NGO) is a group that operates independently from the government. NGOs help refugees in many ways including distributing food, blankets, clothing, and tents, helping the sick, and setting up schools and hospitals in refugee camps. UNHCR notes that it has partnerships with many NGOs. It says, "Today, we rely heavily on NGOs to implement a wide range of projects, including aid distribution, protection, logistics, shelter, health, water, sanitation, nutrition and education projects." Some people argue that NGOs also play an important role in helping immigrants because they tend to be more empathetic to immigrants than government officials, and immigrants often trust them more.

Sea-Watch is an NGO that runs search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean. Its website explains the group's goals: "Sea-Watch is vehemently committed to ensuring that no one has to die at Europe's deadly maritime border. In view of the humanitarian disaster with thousands of deaths in the Mediterranean, the idea for the Sea-Watch project was born in 2014. In the spring of 2015 we bought an old cutter and converted it for sea rescue. With the help of numerous volunteer activists who set up the project in Germany or have been sailing as crew members in the Mediterranean Sea between Libya and Italy since June 2015, we have succeeded in effectively rescuing thousands of people." The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) reports that in 2017, about 40 percent of all rescues in the Mediterranean were being carried out by NGO vessels.

Recently, there has been an increase in government action against individuals and groups that provide aid for refugees in Europe. According to Amnesty International, in recent years, hundreds

of people in Europe have been punished for aiding refugees. It reports that these punishments include fines, smear campaigns, criminal investigations, prosecutions, and entry bans. The FRA notes that as a result of administrative and criminal proceedings against crew members or vessels, some ships have not been able to carry out search and rescue operations.

Critics insist that actions against those who help refugees go against international agreements. Amnesty International explains that under a 1998 UN declaration, human rights defenders—which includes individuals who provide help for refugees—have the right to provide help without being punished. It says, “Human rights defenders (HRDs) play an essential role to advance the enjoyment of human rights in society, as has been recognized by all states in the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders. The Declaration requires states to guarantee a safe and enabling environment in which they can operate without fear of reprisals.”

Additional Resources

Books

- Helen Benedict, *Map of Hope and Sorrow: Stories of Refugees Trapped in Greece*. London: Footnote, 2022.
- Olivier Kugler, *Escaping Wars and Waves: Encounters with Syrian Refugees*. University Park, PA: Graphic Mundi, 2023.
- Sallie Latch, *Hear Me: Rare, Raw Interviews with Syrian Refugees and Other Heroes of the Refugee Crisis in Greece*. San Francisco: Latch Publishing, 2018.
- Yusra Mardini, with Josie Le Blond, *Butterfly: From Refugee to Olympian—My Story of Rescue, Hope, and Triumph*. New York: St. Martin’s 2022.

Online Resources

- Amnesty International, “Europe: Punishing Compassion: Solidarity on Trial in Fortress Europe,” 2020.
<https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur01/1828/2020/en/>
- Missing Migrants Project, “Migration Within the Mediterranean.”
<https://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/mediterranean>
- UNHCR, “Figures at a Glance.”
<https://www.unhcr.org/us/about-unhcr/who-we-are/figures-glance>
- UNHCR, “Refugee Crisis in Europe.”
<https://www.unrefugees.org/emergencies/europe/>
- Dalal Yessine, “Impossible Choices and Routine Tragedies: The Syrian Refugee Crisis at 13,” Middle East Institute, August 16, 2023.
<https://www.mei.edu/publications/impossible-choices-and-routine-tragedies-syrian-refugee-crisis-13Contact>

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