

## **'From Aleppo to Berlin: Band of Brothers Escapes Civil War'**

Ahead lie 2.5 million square kilometres of the Mediterranean Sea. Six young men from Syria, – four brothers and two friends – have fled civil war at home. After 15 hours, two ships appear on the horizon: the Italian coastguard. The migrants erupt in cheers of 'Italia'. The migrants are taken to the island of Lampedusa. At the reception centre, the scale of the migrant influx in this tiny Italian outpost is clear. From there, authorities transfer the brothers to Sicily, where they are let free. They take the first night train north to Milan. It is here that Voice of America (VOA) first met them; nervous, exhausted, fearful, on a cold marble bench in the ornate surroundings of Milan station. The eldest brother recounts their journey.

'We escaped to Jordan, and from there to Algeria. Then we went illegally to Libya; it took five days to cross the desert. It was very hard. Five days close to death. We got to Tripoli, and from there to Sabratha. We had a lot of trouble there because the traffickers stole from us. Then we escaped and took the boat to Lampedusa.'

He says the boat trip was more terrifying than the war back home. 'It was a death trip. Your mind stops thinking. You stop thinking about anybody and anything, even about yourself. You are just living minute by minute on this hard journey. It's a very strange feeling.'

The four brothers and two friends are on their way to Germany on the night train. The brothers' father is already in Berlin, their final destination. Their mother is still in Syria.

'We have lost our future in Syria. We hope to find it in Germany for now, and hope things get better there in Syria, and go back to live there.'

With minutes to go, they grab their few belongings and head to the platform. They ask VOA not to film them boarding the train. Under European laws, refugees must apply for asylum in the country where they first arrive. Police sometimes search the railway cars and send the migrants back to Italy. The brothers' future will be decided on this train. For two days there is no news. Then VOA receives a message; the brothers have made it to Munich. After a night in the refugee shelter they are on their way to Berlin. We manage a fleeting reunion on the train; there is relief and elation. 'I can't wait to see my father again after six years apart. I hope that I can see my mother again soon and we can be one family, all together.'

The eldest brother sent VOA a video with the reunion with the boys' father on the station platform in Berlin. There is much tragedy in Europe's migrant crisis. Solving it won't be easy. But at least for these brothers and their friends, the escape from war, across desert and ocean, has a happy ending.