

SOS MEDITERRANEE

THE CASTAWAYS FROM HELL
Testimonies collected on the *Aquarius*



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Hausa proverb

“Idan ka ga wani yana gudu kuma yana so ya fada cikin wuta, yana nufin cewa abin da yake bin shi yafi wuta”

“If you see someone fleeing who would rather fall into the fire, this means that whatever it is that is chasing him is worse than the fire.”

FOREWORD

One of the three essential missions of SOS MEDITERRANEE is to bear witness...

Marie Rajablat's work, far from naive optimism or voyeurism, shows how crucial this mission of bearing witness to the situation in the Mediterranean is. Having read this book, it is impossible not to understand that any reservations around the rescue of those who are drowning in the Mediterranean, “*mare nostrum*”, are ridiculous or even irresponsible. In fact, their rescue is not an option, but a necessity, in the philosophical sense that simply leaving them to drown at sea is “something which cannot be”. When it comes to migration policies, everything is open to debate, questioning or argument; everything except the immediate rescue and disembarkation at a safe port of these human beings, these torn families who are fleeing hell. In this context, things are simple: we have no choice other than to act, unless of course we yield to the thoughtless temptation to lose our soul, to avoid facing facts, and thus to feed the poison that insidiously undermines Europe and our societies, in the same way that the desperate lack of will and strategic vision of our politicians does.

Let us keep an open mind and be receptive to the insight we gain from the first pages of this book, where we uncover the lives of the teams (crew, rescuers, medics, nurses and communicators) on board the *Aquarius*. Their discovery of the solidarity linking them together, and especially linking them, existentially, to the castaways themselves, is both progressive and brutal. Solidarity which is painful indeed, but also sometimes joyful; from simple seasickness to the rejection of despair and the embracing of life, through gestures, words and looks which may appear innocent but are often heavy with meaning and infinitely precious. We see this in the frustration of the rescuers when they have to transfer the people they have just saved to another ship, without being able to spend together the time it takes to reach the coast, perhaps 30 hours or so. Usually, this precious time allows rescuers and rescued to share food and water, but also, more importantly, to exchange words that help both groups hang on to life.

Let us respect and admire this hope which death might shake, but never stifle (although it sometimes manages to strike). Hope is, however, a force that does not protect anyone against the wounds, suffering or terrible blows to the heart inflicted by unbearable horror. This is why the SOS MEDITERRANEE teams sometimes need psychological support, or engage in joyful ritual-like exchanges when leaving a port where they have taken on supplies, where they barely rested, before they head off once again to “the rescue zones” ...

And yet the heart of the issue does not lie within this book although it is for certain an account, a cry, a relay of the call for help launched by our teams. It is above all a poignant testimony of the hell that refugees have lived and continue to live through. The hell they fled, whether “political” or “economic”, as well as the cruelty of their desperate African transhumance, and worst of all: the hell inflicted upon



them in Libya when they reach the only shore that is still accessible to them, where appalling horror reigns day in day out. A hell, or rather a succession of hells, in which they are the victims of the human condition.

Marie Rajablat's work is as unquestionable as it is unbearable. There are neither intellectual digressions nor generalisations. She rises to the challenge of the mission she has chosen: to be the scribe, the pen of the people she has met and listened to, people who represent so well the heterogeneous diaspora of these individuals, decapitated families or separated couples, children without parents, all confronted with impossible challenges. From information entrusted to her, she tells some of their stories, giving readers a comprehensive picture of the journeys of those who have been saved. Her work provides a much more factual account of reality than the most sophisticated statistics.

This account also describes the many criticisms, whether implied or expressed, whether more or less shameful, often levelled at those who support or perform rescues at sea. I refer in particular to the famous theory of the "magnet effect", disproved a thousand times by the facts since Operation Mare Nostrum ended: the truth is that the refugees are so desperate they will try their luck anyway and attempt to cross the Mediterranean. The danger of the sea is, in their eyes, a lesser danger than those they have faced before - and this is the case whether or not rescue boats are present.

And then there is the unrelenting and fundamental question, which we cannot easily avoid, of the respect for our values. Europe was founded on humanist values which we claim to be universal. Furthermore, we must adhere to the values of the sea like solidarity and rescue. In other words, there is morality, of course - with the unbearable risk of the excesses of the moralisers and preachers - but also and above all the question of our own coherence, without which we renounce our very being.

In conclusion, I would like to stress the urgency of challenging our politicians. An organisation like SOS MEDITERRANEE, entirely and exclusively dedicated to rescue, has no competence or legitimacy to work on the deep and immediate causes of migration which have already resulted in more than 50,000 corpses lying at the bottom of the Mediterranean Sea on Europe's doorstep. SOS MEDITERRANEE does not want to, and should not, get involved in politics. But it is completely legitimate in denouncing the disaster and demanding that those whose responsibility it is make it a top priority and stop invoking the complexity of the problem. Saving lives is as simple as it is unquestionable. However, the complexity of migratory issues demands urgent real and in depth action which is long overdue.

Migration will not cease in the years nor the decades to come, and the more the European governments delay defining a strategy, the more difficult it will be to implement. For ultimately the solutions that will reduce the high number of deaths at the gates of a union of 27 countries with nearly 450 million inhabitants must come from them. Europe has been guilty of burying its head in the sand for many years.

Francis Vallat
Honorary President of SOS MEDITERRANEE France



PREFACE

By August 2019, the *Aquarius* had saved 29,523 people, 29,523 human lives, 29,523 unique life stories. Marie Rajablat tells us the stories of some of these lives in this book. As we read, the names and faces of the people embarking on these courageous journeys come to life, and their words give meaning to a reality that was, until now, unimaginable. These women, these men, these children have experienced such violence and suffering that it is difficult, even impossible, for us to appreciate the depth of their traumas and for them to describe them. Listened to with great gentleness and sensitivity, they share all or part of their story. These narratives remind us that no-one decides to emigrate for the sake of convenience. It is always a wrench to leave one's country, one's land, one's origins and one's family.

Behind these testimonials, there are also families and loved ones: some family members have been lost at sea, others have remained behind with no news and no answers.

On one side is the horror that they have already come through, on the other the hope of a new life at the end of their journey with many challenges on the way. In the middle is the *Aquarius*, on which humanity at its best takes over; firstly by saving people who are drowning but also by simple gestures: cradling a child, wrapping a survival blanket around a survivor or just by simply being a silent presence beside someone. This ship has become a symbol. Maybe one day it will be pictured in history books, to illustrate the terrible humanitarian crisis that these sea-rescuers are trying desperately to address.

At the time of writing, our new ship the *Ocean Viking* is in the Mediterranean. It is a new lifebuoy for those who are desperately attempting to cross the "Mare Nostrum". It too is equipped for performing sea rescue operations, as well as looking after those who have been rescued in a respectful manner and providing them with immediate psychological and medical assistance. All this is made possible by the team of attentive experts on board as well as the experience acquired on the *Aquarius*.

The land-based SOS MEDITERRANEE teams in the 19 different regional offices all strive so that this great sea-rescue effort can continue. The tremendous work they do challenges the three evils which condemn those attempting the crossing even before they have set out: indifference, lack of courage and misinformation. Numerous European citizens, seamen, medical personnel, volunteers, donors, artists, navigators and so many more from different horizons refuse to remain passive in the face of the unacceptable. They defend the humanist values that Europe advocates and show that, contrary to what some would be want to believe, public opinion refuses to look the other way. And as you are holding this book in your hands, your interest is also proof. Upstream of the rescues, SOS MEDITERRANEE strives for increased involvement from the public. Solidarity engenders concrete actions: today the return to the sea of our rescuers, tomorrow we hope it will be quick landings, coordinated by the countries of Europe, of the victims of this humanitarian crisis which is taking place on our doorstep.

Together we will write the next chapter of the maritime epic of SOS MEDITERRANEE and we will continue to bear witness so that the men, women and children who are fleeing their countries, who have lost everything, do not sink into oblivion.

François Thomas
President of SOS MEDITERRANEE France
August 2019





4th August 2019. SOS MEDITERRANEE is part of the “*Festival Ingénieuse Afrique*” in the town of Foix near the Pyreneese Mountains in France. We have just watched a film called “Asma”¹. Youssouf, a young man exiled from Sudan has asked us if, by chance, we have the list of the people who have drowned in the Mediterranean Sea.

In the early hours of a morning in May 2017, he and his friends were pushed off in different boats from the coast of Zawia in Libya. Only one boat was picked up by a ship. He told us snippets of their rescue but it was quite confused. As he remembered people dressed in white and red, he wrote to the International Red Cross to try to find his friends, but he has still not received an answer.

The team of volunteers of SOS MEDITERRANEE from Toulouse/Ariège had created a book of those who had died based on the list which was published in an article in The Guardian newspaper on 20th June 2018². The thirty four thousand three hundred and sixty one people who died during their journey made a very long list when we unravelled it on the walls and pavements to raise public awareness. So we stared to look though the list with Youssouf in search of his friends who were lost at sea. But they were not on this fatal registry. So Youssouf took out his mobile phone and showed us a series of photographs of their rescue, the type of rescue that all rescuers dread with many women, children and men in the water. The pictures were taken from the bridge of the rescue ship and from the rescue boats. Looking closely at each of the photos I noticed the initials “MOAS”³ on the ship. I explained to him that this international humanitarian organisation is dedicated to supplying aid and urgent medical assistance to refugees and immigrants around the world. Whilst we were sorry that we couldn’t help Youssouf trace his friends, he at least had a new lead...

¹ The documentary ASMA, which means “listen” in Arabic, tells the story of the exile of seven young refugees from Sudan in North Africa to Châtelleraut in France. The directors wanted to give voice to these men who fled the horrors of war and who are seeking asylum. <https://www.documentaireasma.com>

² The network “United for Intercultural Action” was based on press articles and NGO (non-governmental organisation) reports. A team based in Amsterdam counted, between 1993 and 2018, 34,361 migrants who died during their journey or after they arrived. The list was published in the British daily newspaper *The Guardian*, on 20th June 2018, World Refugee Day. Nearly 80% of these people died at sea.

³ MOAS (Migrant Offshore Aid Station): <https://www.moas.eu>

INTRODUCTION

“Migrants in the Mediterranean, should France open its doors”; *“Migrants, an evacuation with no way out”*; *“Spain on the path of the migrants”*; *“Migrants, fatalities as boats sink”*... Dramatic headlines with photos of thousands of tents, crowds of Black people on a rescue boat or shrouded ghosts in a prison camp. Sometimes a bedraggled man, drawn and haggard, the face of a child dressed in rags amongst the ruins, women sitting on the ground, all with the same sad expression with a crowd of children around them... Everything is set up so that we only perceive the worrying “foreignness” and continuous streams of ghostly shadows. It is these images we wish to fight against in this book. We want to put faces and thought-provoking stories to those human beings who are labelled as “migrants” and who disappear, both literally and figuratively, in speeches where the cursor moves between profiteers and delinquents, and even potential terrorists. It is important for us that they are not just reduced to predetermined roles and places but are recognised as human beings, each with a soul, dreams and desires. We want the way they are perceived to progress from shock to consideration: Consideration is careful thought about something. If you show consideration, you pay attention to the needs, wishes, or feelings of other people... It combines looking (examination with your eyes or your thoughts) and respecting.⁴

I embarked on the *Aquarius* in the winter of 2016⁵ and again in the spring of 2018⁶ and my first encounters on board left me stunned. I heard tales of arbitrary detention, forced labour, extrajudicial killings and all sorts of brutality suffered in Libya. Through writing, I managed to unravel what the stories had petrified within me, within us, the volunteers on board and all those who contribute to SOS MEDITERRANEE onshore. I became committed to accurately transcribing what each of the people who had been rescued confided in me, highlighting the parts of their being which had been destroyed but also the life, energy and creativity which underlie their pain and sadness.

These children, these women and these men, who had only just been saved, decided to tell me - and through me, us - what drove them to leave. Above all they explained that the worst of their experience was not to risk drowning at sea but that hell was elsewhere.

To be listened to with respect and empathy, to be heard, and that their testimonies be communicated to the citizens of the world, all this is essential to bear their grievance beyond themselves and maybe transform it into something. And this is the reason that we continue to relay their voices wherever we can.

But so long as Europe acts with cynicism, this will not be enough. Since the summer of 2017, as we will see, the political environment has completely changed. Whereas before the mantra was: *“We cannot accept all the poverty in the world”*, today the European States duck and dive, with total impunity and against Fundamental Human Rights, International Humanitarian Rights and International Maritime Law, quibbling

⁴ Macé (M), *Sidérer, considérer - Migrants en France*, 2017, Editions Verdier, Paris, 2017, page 26

⁵ From 4th November to 17th December 2016

⁶ From 26th April to 17th May 2018



about quotas of eligible asylum seekers and consigning so-called economic migrants to the waste bin of Europe. We are living in a dog-eat-dog world which is little better than the slave markets of Libya and elsewhere...

A change in the geopolitical context

In February 2017, Italy, supported by the European Union and the United Nations, signed an agreement with Fayez Al Saraj's Libyan government to "*fight against the illegal traffic of migrants in the Mediterranean*". The informal summit of heads of state and European governments approved this initiative⁷ and assigned 200 million euros to finance, train and equip the Libyan "coastguards"⁸ with the intention of externalising the migration issue to the Libyan authorities.

The direct consequence of the European logistical and financial support of the Libyan "coastguards" is the increasing number of interceptions of people fleeing poverty, persecution and/or human trafficking on board unseaworthy vessels, to take them back to Libya and reintroduce them into the human trafficking system. Moreover, through their declarations and political measures from February 2017 onwards, the European States succeeded in progressively blocking the activities of NGOs⁹ and significantly reducing the humanitarian effort in the Central Mediterranean and as a consequence causing the deaths of hundreds of human beings and sending thousands of others back to the hell of Libya.¹⁰

Declaration of the Libyan Search and Rescue Zone

To coordinate rescue operations in the event of maritime distress, each ocean and sea across the globe is divided into "Search and Rescue Zones"¹¹. Each coastal state is responsible for the coastline of its territorial waters and the surrounding international waters.

But this geographical definition alone is not enough. To be accredited according to the international maritime conventions¹², each state must strictly comply with a series of criteria including having set up a Rescue Coordination Centre¹³, with the personnel, logistics and technology necessary to be able to coordinate without delay the rescue of any vessel in distress or missing¹⁴, to provide urgent medical assistance to those who have been saved and to land them ashore in a safe port¹⁵.

⁷ "Declaration of Malta" of 3rd February 2017

⁸ We always put quotation marks when mentioning the Libyan "coastguards" as we never really know who we are dealing with, members of governing bodies or pirates, who force the boats to go back to Libya. This is also the reason why we refer to "interceptions" rather than "rescues" for their operations.

⁹ Out of a dozen rescue boats operating in spring 2017, there were only 5 left by the spring of 2018 and on 23rd August 2018, only the *Open Arms* was not blocked. From the beginning of June, Malta retained the *Life Line*, the *Sea Fuchs* and the *Sea Watch 3* in order to investigate the validity of their respective flags.

¹⁰ <https://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/what-we-do/news-stories/news/stop-arbitrary-detention-refugees-and-migrants-disembarked-libya>

¹¹ Search and Rescue or SRR Search and Rescue Region

¹² SAR Convention or 1979 Hamburg Convention which came into effect in 1985.

¹³ MRCC - Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre, equivalent to the CROSS in France - Centres Régionaux Opérationnels de Surveillance et de Sauvetage. These are decision centres which record and coordinate all rescue missions as soon as the incident is reported to them.

¹⁴ SOLAS (International Conventions for Safety of Life at Sea), 1960

¹⁵ ICMSAR (International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue), Hamburg, 1979



The definition of a safe port is *“a location where the survivors’ safety of life is no longer threatened and where their basic needs such as food, shelter and medical needs can be met”*¹⁶.

When civil rescue ships such as the *Aquarius* began operations, Libya was not considered as a “safe” destination and as a result it did not have a Rescue Coordination Centre. The international waters off the Libyan coastline were a “grey zone”, requiring the assistance of a neighbouring Rescue Coordination Centre (primarily Italy or Malta).

On their side, the European States wanted to prevent those seeking asylum and other protection from crossing into Europe, but they could not send people back to Libya without breaking the law. *“So, they invented a means of circumventing the problem: they started helping the Libyan Coastguard in different ways, including donating boats, training crews, helping with planning and coordination, and especially doing all the legwork towards the declaration of a Libyan search and rescue region in the central Mediterranean”*¹⁷.

On 13th August 2017, the Libyan navy declared in the press that it was responsible for its own search and rescue zone, threatening the NGOs performing rescues in international waters¹⁸. Even though the International Maritime Organization¹⁹, the global authority on the maritime legal framework, postponed the accreditation of a possible Libyan Search and Rescue Zone until 2020, it ended up by announcing very discreetly at the end of June 2018 the creation of a Joint Rescue Coordination Centre (JRCC) in operation in Tripoli. In its conclusions of 28th June 2018, the EU Council ordered that *“all vessels operating in the Mediterranean must respect the applicable laws and not obstruct the operations of the Libyan Coastguard”*²⁰.

This totally ignores the fact that saving lives at sea is a legal obligation. We cannot emphasise enough that the law states that: every ship shall give a prompt response to distress calls from another vessel, provide medical assistance to survivors and disembark them in a safe port. No state has exclusive rights to rescues in their search and rescue zone.

¹⁶ SAR CONVENTIONS. Hamburg, 1979, CAP 1.3.2

¹⁷ <https://www.amnesty.org/fr/latest/campaigns/2019/01/cut-adrift-in-the-med/>

¹⁸ *“On 10th August Tripoli announced the creation of its own Search and Rescue (SAR) zone off the coast of its territorial waters. Up to that point, NGOs could patrol within 12 miles (22 kilometers) of the Libyan coastline, the limit of the territorial waters allowed by international law. The new limit of the SAR is not yet officially known, but it could be at a much greater distance. The Tripoli authorities announced that NGOs were forbidden in this zone without their authorisation.”* quoted in *“Le Monde”* newspaper of 13th August 2017
https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2017/08/13/msf-suspend-des-activites-de-sauvetage-de-migrants_5171859_3210.html

¹⁹ The International Maritime Organization (IMO) is the United Nations institution in charge of ensuring the security and safety of maritime transport and preventing pollution of the sea by boats.

²⁰ Conclusions of the EU Council from 28th June 2018



Interference in NGO rescue operations by the Libyan “coastguards”²¹

On many occasions in 2016 and 2017 boats which identified themselves as belonging to Libyan “coastguards” caused serious incidents in international waters with vessels from NGOs²² and from the spring of 2017 their interventions during rescue operations became more and more frequent. These violations of international maritime law and of human rights have been widely documented²³ and can be illustrated by the following incidents:

- **23rd May 2017:** the Rome Rescue Coordination Centre requested the *Aquarius* to come to the aid of several boats in distress. Whilst the rescuers were handing out life jackets to the people on one of the rubber dinghies, they were interrupted by gunfire. Two so-called Libyan “coastguards” jumped on board one of the other boats and demanded that the passengers give up money and mobile phones and then ordered them to jump in the water, firing 18 shots into the air. Seventy people had to be pulled out of the sea by SOS MEDITERRANEE rescuers²⁴.
- **During the winter of 2017-2018:** rescue teams from SOS MEDITERRANEE and other NGOs witnessed more and more interceptions of boats in distress by Libyan “coastguards”, their passengers being turned back to the countries they were trying desperately to flee. In many instances, the “coastguards” declared that they were coordinating the rescue and refused the assistance of international NGOs.
- **6th November 2017:** the interception of a boat in distress by the Libyan “coastguards”, when the rescue mission had been assigned to the NGO Sea Watch by the Italian Rescue Coordination Centre, ended in brutal manoeuvres which caused several deaths and dozens of people were declared missing.
- **27th January 2018:** 15 nautical miles²⁵ from the Libyan coast, whilst the *Aquarius* was already involved in a mission assigned by the Rome Rescue Coordination Centre, a vessel belonging to the “coastguards” intervened, ordering the crew of the *Aquarius* to stand down and refusing all assistance from them.
- **18th March 2018:** the vessel *Open Arms*²⁶ was searched and detained whilst three members of the crew were arrested for “*association with criminals with the aim of aiding illegal immigration*”²⁷

²¹ For further information see: <https://club.bruxelles2.eu/2018/06/n63-la-presence-des-navires-des-ong-au-large-de-la-libye-saluee-encouragee-puis-vilipendee-et-refusee/>.

²² Boarding of the vessels of the German NGOs Sea Watch and Jugend Rettet in April and June 2016; shots fired at the *Bourbon Argos* belonging to the NGO Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) also known as Doctors without Borders (DWB) in August 2016.

²³ <https://migrantsatsea.org/2017/06/14/un-report-documents-extensive-and-grave-human-rights-violations-by-libyan-coast-guard-against-migrants/>

²⁴ See the press release by SOS MEDITERRANEE : <http://www.sosmediterranee.fr/journal-de-bord/1004-personnes-secourues-par-laquarius-sauvetage-interrompues-par-des-tirs-darmes-a-feu>

²⁵ 1 nautical mile = approximately 1,852 metres

²⁶ From the Catalanian NGO Pro Activa Open Arms

²⁷ On 16th April 2018, the examining magistrate from Raguse, Giovanni Giampiccolo, ordered that the vessel belonging to the Spanish NGO Proactiva Open Arms be released. He thereby rejected the request from the district attorney: “SAR operations are not simply about pulling migrants out of the sea – stated the judge according to the agency Ansa – as they are only terminated when the survivors are disembarked to a place of safety, in compliance with the 1979 International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue (SAR) ratified in Hamburg”. A place of safety is “a location where the rescued persons’ safety of life is no longer threatened; basic human needs (such as food, shelter and medical needs) can be met”. As it happens, “according to information from Libya, there are still serious cases of violation of human rights”. On Thursday 17th May 2018, the Raguse review tribunal rejected the attorney’s plea against the release of the Open Arms from the Spanish NGO Proactiva, which had refused to hand over the migrants to the Libyan authorities. “Assuming that the will of the ship’s Master is conceivable in not having cooperated fully with the instructions received from the Libyan authorities and the Italian Rescue Coordination Centre”, these are not sufficient to “establish the alleged offense” reported the Gionarle di Sicilia newspaper. “The lack of safety and the existence of conditions dangerous to the migrants, whilst determined by his actions, justified the rescue”, stated the tribunal.



- **5th March 2018:** the Libyan “coastguards” interrupted a rescue mission being conducted by the *Aquarius* without any opposition from the Rome Rescue Coordination Centre.
- **5th May 2018:** using the threat of weapons, the Libyan “coastguards” demanded that the *Astral* and *Sea Watch* ²⁸ leave the rescue zone²⁹, located in international waters.
- **6th May 2018:** whilst the *Aquarius* was assisting a boat in difficulty with several people in the water, the Libyan “coastguards” ordered the crew to leave the zone.

Criminalisation of NGOs, “Code of Conduct”: stricter policies in Italy followed by Malta

The problems and hindrances of the NGOs started in early 2017 with a strong campaign of defamation coming from the Italian extreme right networks who accused the NGOs of “collusion with traffickers”. This information was relayed in a media campaign which reached its peak in the summer of 2017. Whilst the European states circumvented international maritime law and the Libyan “coastguards” committed acts of piracy with impunity, the NGOs were criticised and criminalised.

Parliamentary enquiries were conducted and a “Code of Conduct” was drawn up and imposed upon the rescue NGOs by the Italian Minister of the Interior in July 2017³⁰.

- On **2nd August 2017**, the *Iuventa*, of the German NGO Jugend Rettet, was seized by the Italian authorities.
- On **23rd October 2017**, the Italian police boarded the *Vos Hestia*³¹ in Catane, Sicily. Its vessel was searched and impounded and the NGO Save the Children was accused of “*aiding illegal immigration*”. It ceased its operations in the Central Mediterranean.
- On **18th March 2018**, it was the turn of the *Open Arms* from the Spanish NGO Pro Activa Open Arms to receive the same treatment.

The Italian elections in June 2018, and the accession of Matteo Salvini of the Northern League party to the Ministry of the Interior, radicalised the Italian immigration policy. Right from his entry into office, Mr Salvini decided to deny the NGOs access to the Italian ports. Malta followed suit. This was just the beginning of the struggle with the other European States.

- **6th May 2018:** the Rome Rescue Coordination Centre requested the vessel *Astral*³² to prepare to assist the Libyan “coastguards” if required with the rescue of 150 people, including a dozen women and children, who were crowded on a rubber dinghy in distress 30 miles from the Libyan coast. It took over 24 hours of procrastination, as we will see in a later chapter, for Rome to finally assign a destination to be able to disembark those rescued.

²⁸ From the NGO of the same name

²⁹ Search and Rescue Zone, always located in international waters

³⁰ Certain NGOs operating in the Mediterranean signed the first edition of the “Code of Conduct” at the end of July 2017. Others refused to sign the text, considering that it could not substitute international maritime law and that it contributed to the smear campaign against the NGOs. SOS MEDITERRANEE signed an amended version.

³¹ Vessel belonging to the NGO Save the Children

³² Vessel belonging to the Catalan NGO Proactiva Open Arms



- **On 9th June 2018:** the *Aquarius*, with 630 survivors on board, was completely denied access to the Italian and Maltese ports. After long negotiations at the highest level of the States, the *Aquarius* set off for Valence in Spain (approximately 1,700 km away), as this was the only country which responded to the humanitarian emergency.
- **On 21st June 2018:** it was the vessel the *Lifeline*³³ which was forbidden from disembarking 233 people rescued at sea. It had to remain at sea for 6 days with its passengers before Malta finally agreed to accept the survivors.
- In parallel, the Italian Minister of Transport, Danilo Toninelli, announced that the *Lifeline* and the *Seefuchs*³⁴ “would be lead to an Italian port to verify which flag they were flying”. In the end they docked in Malta and were detained.
- **29th June 2018:** the “*Times of Malta*” announced that the government of the island was closing its ports to the vessels of NGOs.
- **30th June 2018:** the *Open Arms*³⁵ which had just picked up 59 people was barred from Italian ports. “*This vessel is situated in the Libyan Search and Rescue Zone, the closest port is Malta, the NGO has a Spanish flag. They shouldn’t even think about docking in an Italian port. Stop the human trafficking mafia: the fewer the people that leave, the fewer the people that die*” justified Matteo Salvini in a tweet. The vessel had to sail to Barcelona in order to disembark the 59 people rescued³⁶.
- **4th July 2018:** the *Moonbird* reconnaissance plane³⁷ was forbidden from taking off in Malta.
- **14th July 2018:** it was exactly the same for merchant ships. When a boat in difficulty was reported by a merchant ship, the Maltese and Italian coastguards refused to assist and in the end a Tunisian merchant ship, the *Sarost 5*³⁸ performed the rescue. The same authorities refused to receive the people who were rescued and the ship sailed to Tunisia, its flag state³⁹. At first, Tunisia also refused to allow the vessel to dock but relented two weeks later “for humanitarian reasons” the Prime Minister, Youssef Chahed⁴⁰, explained. The vessel, the people rescued and the crew were blocked at sea for 18 days before they could disembark at Zarzis (Tunisia)⁴¹.
- **1st August 2018:** on instruction from the Libyan Rescue Coordination Centre, the *Open Arms* rescued 87 people. They waited 4 days for authorisation to disembark the passengers in Algésiras (Spain). It then sailed up to Barcelona to take on board new provisions.
- **10th August 2018:** on instruction from the Libyan Rescue Coordination Centre, the *Aquarius* came to the rescue of two boats in difficulty with 141 people on board. They had to wait for 5 days at sea before receiving authorisation to disembark the people rescued in Malta.

³³ Vessel belonging to the German NGO of the same name

³⁴ Vessel belonging to the NGO Sea Eye

³⁵ Vessel belonging to the NGO ProActiva

³⁶ <https://club.bruxelles2.eu/2018/06/n63-la-presence-des-navires-des-ong-au-large-de-la-libye-saluee-encouragee-puis-vilipendee-et-refusee/>

³⁷ The plane is managed by Sea Watch and the Swiss NGO Humanitarian Pilots Initiative.

<https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1123963/migrants-malte-bloque-un-avion-de-reconnaissance-dune-ong-allemande.html>

³⁸ Merchant ships are not equipped to carry passengers (they have no protection from sun and rain, no food or first-aid supplies on board, no blankets...)

³⁹ <https://blogs.mediapart.fr/philippe-wannesson/blog/240718/apres-avoir-sauve-des-exile-e-s-le-sarost-5-est-bloque-en-mer>

⁴⁰ Dépêche AFP / <http://www.france24.com/en/20180728-tunisia-allows-boat-with-40-migrants-dock>

⁴¹ Survivors disembarked in Zarzis on 1st August 2018 - https://twitter.com/IFRC_MENA/status/1024721204018655233



- **15th August 2018:** the *Diciotti*, a patrol boat belonging to the Italian navy, came to the rescue of 177 people. After 6 days at sea off the coast of Lampedusa, the vessel was authorised to dock at Catane for a crew changeover but not to disembark the people rescued. These people were “released” little by little over several days during which time the Italian Minister of the Interior threatened to take them back to Libya if no European State proposed to take them in. At the same time, the Libyan Foreign Minister announced that he would not take them either...
- **20th September 2018:** the *Aquarius* came to the assistance of 11 people who were drowning and 3 days later to another 47. The crew and survivors had to wait for 5 days for an agreement to be reached between European States before Malta would accept to do a transshipment in high seas and take the people to the port of La Valette.

It is in the interests of certain parties to make it look like the NGOs do what they want at sea. However, this fails to address the fact that they operate in a very controlled environment. Having been granted the authorisation to conduct a rescue by one of the Coordination Centres, NGOs have to report to the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, Frontex⁴², the Ministry of the Interior of the host country in order to prepare to receive the rescued people⁴³, the Ministry of Health of the host country⁴⁴, the owner of the vessel and to its flag state⁴⁵.

The “Deflagging” of the *Aquarius*

The *Aquarius* had been sailing under a Gibraltar flag for two and a half years and had performed more than 230 search and rescue operations with full transparency, informing the Gibraltar Maritime Administration at each operation. SOS MEDITERRANEE, who chartered the ship which was operated in partnership with Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) hereafter referred to as Doctors without Borders (DWB), had complied with all regulatory requirements falling under the Gibraltar flag and all the technical verifications related to the security and safety of the vessel. Not a single fault had been reported. All of a sudden, further to the odyssey to Valence (Spain) in June 2018, the Gibraltar Maritime Administration contacted the German ship owner Jasmund Shipping, calling into question the rescue activities of the *Aquarius* for which it was apparently not correctly registered. It was in fact the Gibraltar Maritime Administration itself which had registered the *Aquarius* as a rescue ship at the International Maritime Organization (IMO). Despite the discussions taking place between the owner of the *Aquarius*, the operations director of SOS MEDITERRANEE and the Gibraltar Maritime Administration, the order to remove the flag was confirmed from 20th August 2018. Given that the *Aquarius* had always scrupulously respected the flag State requirements since its start of operations, and that a vessel without a flag is not authorised to sail, it was obvious that the “deflagging” was yet another manoeuvre to prevent the rescue operations of SOS MEDITERRANEE⁴⁶. Contacted by the ship owner, the State of Panama agreed to grant its flag to the *Aquarius* which became the *Aquarius 2*, after numerous certifications, and was able to return to operations on 15th September 2018.

⁴² For information concerning the boats

⁴³ An anonymous list of people specifying age, nationality, pregnant women, injured people, unaccompanied minors etc.

⁴⁴ For injured people or anyone else needing to go to hospital or requiring other specific attention

⁴⁵ Gibraltar for the *Aquarius*

⁴⁶ <http://www.sosmediterranee.fr/journal-de-bord/EtatPavillon-Gibraltar-entraver-action-sauvetage-CP-13082018>



One week later the Panama Maritime Administration announced to SOS MEDITERRANEE and MSF that it was also withdrawing the *Aquarius 2*'s registration as a rescue ship. In their official press release, the Panamanian authorities declared that the Italian government had urged them to take "immediate measures" against the *Aquarius*, specifying that "unfortunately, it [the *Aquarius*] must be excluded from our register, as maintaining this flag would entail serious political difficulties for the Panamanian government and for the Panamanian fleet who work in European ports".

By immobilising the *Aquarius*, this new decision condemned hundreds of fleeing men, women and children to the cemetery at the bottom of the Mediterranean Sea. It was a major blow to the vital humanitarian mission of the *Aquarius*, which was the only non-governmental search and rescue ship still operating in the Central Mediterranean.

Major fluctuations in the numbers of people crossing the Central Mediterranean

Broadly speaking, 2015 was the year when the highest number of people crossed the Mediterranean Sea while 2016 was the one when the highest number of people reached Italy⁴⁷. After a significant increase in departures in spring 2017, with a peak on 25th May when the *Aquarius* disembarked 1,004 people in Salerno (south of Naples)⁴⁸, the number of arrivals decreased considerably from July of the same year⁴⁹. On the one hand, clashes between armed groups in Libya made embarking even more perilous, while on the other, agreements reached since the beginning of the year between Libya and the European Union via Italy⁵⁰ encouraged the Libyan "coastguards" to intercept boats and bring them back to their shore. Finally local militia who were well known for their participation in human trafficking in Libya allegedly received several million euros from Italy to take migrant boats back to Libya⁵¹. During the first quarter of 2018, a drop in crossings of 74 % was recorded⁵² in this zone compared to the previous year. By not taking their share of survivors alongside Italy, the European Union strengthened nationalist political parties. Today migration flows mainly take other routes, especially to Spain and Greece.

More worryingly, whilst the flow has decreased in the Central Mediterranean, crossing to Italy has become more and more dangerous and the death rate has increased considerably⁵³.

⁴⁷ <http://www.unhcr.org/fr/news/press/2018/4/5acf30b3a/voyages-desespoir-rapport-hcr-mouvements-refugies-europe.html>

⁴⁸ <http://www.sosmediterranee.fr/journal-de-bord/1004-personnes-secourues-par-laquarius-sauvetage-interrompues-par-des-tirs-darmes-a-feu>

⁴⁹ <http://www.unhcr.org/fr/news/press/2018/4/5acf30b3a/voyages-desespoir-rapport-hcr-mouvements-refugies-europe.html>

⁵⁰ On 2nd February 2017 Italy signed a memorandum with Fayed Al Saraj's Libyan government (recognised by the UN) to fight against the illegal trafficking of migrants in the Mediterranean (<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2017/02/03/malta-declaration/>). On 3rd February 2017, the European Council which met in Malta adopted the Malta Declaration "on the external aspects of migration: addressing the Central Mediterranean route", which consisted mainly of helping Tripoli fight the smugglers, granting 200 million euros to fund the training and equipping of the Libyan coastguards http://www.lemonde.fr/europe/article/2017/02/04/a-malte-l-europe-choisit-la-prudence-face-aux-eclats-dedonald-trump_5074490_3214.html.

⁵¹ <https://www.letemps.ch/monde/entre-libye-litalie-un-accord-eaux-troubles-contre-migrants>

⁵² UNHCR, "Voyages du désespoir", 2018

⁵³ Ibidem. Also see the article from *Le Monde* of 8th August 2018 https://www.lemonde.fr/europe/article/2018/08/08/migrants-amnesty-denonce-des-politiques-europeennes-meurtrieres-en-mediterranee_5340622_3214.html

Amnesty International accused Italy, Malta and the European Union (EU) of endangering migrants and of violating their rights through their policies in the Mediterranean, in a report published on Wednesday 8th August. According to the NGO, 721 people drowned or were missing at sea in June and July 2018 alone, out of 1,111 victims since the beginning of the year, as a consequence of the more stringent Italian and Maltese policies for the rescue and acceptance of migrants. Amnesty International reported on its website of "deadly European policies" https://www.lemonde.fr/europe/article/2018/08/08/migrants-amnesty-denonce-des-politiques-europeennes-meurtrieres-en-mediterranee_5340622_3214.html



Whilst the *Aquarius*, the *Dattilo* (a ship owned by the Italian navy) and the *Orion* (a ship belonging to the Italian coastguards)⁵⁴ transported 630 survivors to Valencia, and the *Open Arms* took 60 more to Barcelona and the other rescue vessels were blocked in Malta for administrative reasons, 721 people drowned because of the lack of rescue operations⁵⁵.

Suffice it to say that the writing of this second edition of the book was fuelled by great anger, my own but also that of all the volunteers on board the *Aquarius*, as well as those on land who support SOS MEDITERRANEE from near and far.

Let us hear from Abdoulay⁵⁶ who wanted to be the symbol of this narrative: *“I have so much rage inside that drives me to tell of my experiences because if I had been told what the journey would be like, I would never have left. We must spread the word that when you start this journey you enter a different dimension, a different life where, at each step of the way, there are no rights, no pity, no feelings... Nothing but cruelty in its purest state... It is unimaginable... Nobody talks about it... I just wanted to live freely. That’s why I left. And all these other people around us, that’s why they left too... And the only risk I perceived was the water whereas in fact the water is the least risk of all”*. Until Abdoulay writes his own story, I will be the scribe for all the people who have been rescued.



⁵⁴ As a reminder, the *Aquarius* refused to sail to Valencia with the 630 survivors on board for obvious safety reasons, hence the transfer of some of the people to two other vessels.

⁵⁵ UNHCR (UN Refugee Agency, “Desperate Journeys”, 2018, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/63039> “We estimate that 3,100 people lost their life at sea [in 2017] whilst attempting to cross to Europe, and this figure was 5,100 in 2016. From 1st January to 31st March 2018, 501 people joined the list of people drowned or lost at sea”.

⁵⁶ The names of the people who wanted to testify have been changed, and so as not to overload the text, their names are followed by an *. These refer to a list of all the interviews in Annex 1 at the end of the book. The same has been done for all the staff and volunteers.



THE ORIGINS OF SOS MEDITERRANEE AND THE AQUARIUS

Klaus Vogel⁵⁷ and Sophie Beau⁵⁸ founded SOS MEDITERRANEE in Germany and France in 2015. Klaus Vogel often told this story which illustrates his path: *“When I was 25 years old, I was a simple seaman on a big cargo ship on the China Sea. My captain preferred to make long detours on the return journey to avoid the boat people as it led to too many problems for him. To me this was scandalous and I promised myself that if I ever became a Captain one day I would not do the same... When Mare Nostrum⁵⁹ was stopped, the reaction was total indifference. There were no reactions from governments, no demonstrations in the streets... So I had no choice but to find a way to do something.”*

Sophie, an ethnologist by profession, studied the migratory movements between Mali and France in the 1990s. *“As I remained in contact with the villagers where I performed my study, I followed from afar the disastrous consequences that the reinforcement of borders had on the lives of these people with a growing feeling of helplessness. To me the common solutions applied to this problem were not sufficient compared to the human tragedy taking place at sea. Meeting Klaus was decisive. We shared the same outrage and the same ethics. I did not have to think for long. You must get involved...”*

Together they succeeded in launching a crazy project. They proved it really was possible to change the course of things, despite what we are told every day in every speech and every news reel. The concrete proof is in the phenomenal mobilisation which collected 275,000 Euros in six weeks from citizens in 42 countries, most of them in Europe. A citizens' Europe is still very much alive. The political commitment of these civil societies and more specifically SOS MEDITERRANEE is testament to that commitment.

A formidable resource: the *Aquarius*

The *Aquarius* is a 77m long and 12m-wide ship built in 1977. Formerly used in the North Sea to assist fishing boats then by coastguards, its cruising speed is 13 knots. Gibraltar was its flag State. It had three rescue boats - Easy 1, Easy 2, Easy 3 - and numerous floatation devices. Its stability and its autonomy made it the ideal candidate for rescue operations on high seas. Equipped with four decks and many covered areas, its interior was specifically equipped to shelter survivors. There was a clinic with a consultation room and a ward as well as two big shelters* to accommodate the people rescued. Women and the children were separated from the men. In emergency situations the *Aquarius* could host up to 800 people. We will see that in critical situations, it could hold many more.

⁵⁷ Merchant Navy Captain and Honorary President of SOS MEDITERRANEE Germany

⁵⁸ Social and humanitarian project manager, Vice-president of the European network and managing director of SOS MEDITERRANEE France

⁵⁹ Italy is one of the main gateways for illegal immigration to the European continent. The shipwreck on 3rd October 2013, which claimed the lives of 366 migrants, caused deep emotion in Italy and led to the creation of *Mare Nostrum*, a military-humanitarian operation aimed at rescuing shipwrecked migrants and discouraging smugglers. The resources deployed and their cost were enormous and almost entirely funded by Italy. Following a lot of controversy, this operation was stopped in November 2014. The EU then launched operation *Triton* under the FRONTEX agency, which has no mandate or equipment to search for and rescue people who are drowning and does not compensate in any way for the stoppage of *Mare Nostrum*. It only manages border control.



Three Missions

SOS MEDITERRANEE is a European maritime and humanitarian organisation for the saving of life in the Mediterranean. It has three goals:

- To save human lives through maritime rescue operations of boats in distress
- To provide medical and psychological care for the refugees on board and to liaise with supporting authorities.
- To testify about the realities and the many faces of migration.

Three Teams on Board

Other than the 11 crew members of the *Aquarius*⁶⁰, SOS MEDITERRANEE had a team on board of roughly 10 volunteer rescuers specifically dedicated to rescue operations. The team was made up of professional seafarers, mainly of European origin. They participated in 2 to 3 rotations of an average of 3 weeks each before being replaced. Some of them took part regularly.

There was also a medical team of 7 to 8 people from DWB on board the *Aquarius* for the treatment and care of those rescued. They were medics, midwives, nurses, cultural mediators and a logistics specialist.

The rescue operations and welcoming on board of those rescued was conducted by the Ship's Master⁶¹ and the coordinators of DWB and SOS MEDITERRANEE. Whilst each team had a specific role to play during the sea rescue itself, they all joined together to look after the rescued and keep watch round the clock. If the rescue and protection missions ceased at the end of the gangplank leading off the *Aquarius*, testifying takes much longer, both on board and ashore.

On board, for education and transparency purposes, communication officers (one for DWB and one for SOS MEDITERRANEE) worked in shifts to document the rescues and the testimonies of those who had been rescued. In addition, one of them was in charge of writing the online logbook so people could follow the activity of the *Aquarius* and its teams in almost real time. They also document all observations related to the rescue zone.⁶²

The operations were also reported by media, reporters, photographers and film crews who were always invited to join the *Aquarius*' missions.⁶³

On land, SOS MEDITERRANEE France is lucky to have over 450 active volunteers working in 13 regional units⁶⁴ who inform the public and secondary school pupils about the situation in the Mediterranean. They tell the

⁶⁰The crew members of the *Aquarius* are employees of the German ship owner *Jasmund Shipping*.

⁶¹ The *Ship's Master*, to distinguish him from other sailors also called *Captains*.

⁶² <https://onboard.sosmediterranee.org/>

⁶³ *More than 170 international journalists have joined rescue missions at sea with SOS MEDITERRANEE since February 2016, to give voice to the rescue teams and those they have rescued in France, Germany and throughout the world.*

⁶⁴ Alpes-Maritimes, Bordeaux, Brest, Caen, Grenoble, Hérault, Marseille, Lyon, Nantes, Paris, Perpignan, Rennes and Toulouse.



stories of people who have been rescued, of the perilous conditions of the crossing and the treatment they received in Libya. In addition, they seek the support of French citizens to allow the *Aquarius* to continue its life-saving mission.

The *Aquarius*, a short interlude in the lives of those rescued

On land as well as on board, we are all conscious that the time on board the *Aquarius* represents a short interlude in the migrants' difficulties. Before arriving on the ship, they were treated like slaves, sub-humans, even animals. They were not considered as human beings by the jailers who put them through hell.

In Europe, they will have to wait in detention centres for weeks or even months; they will sometimes be abused by administrations or by the police; they will have to constantly justify their story, their journey, their intentions, their good faith...

Georgia, an Advocacy Officer for DWB on the *Aquarius*, summed up well the feeling we all share on board: *"Having listened to the stories of all these people who have survived the journey across the African borders, the Sahara Desert, the hell of Libya and the Mediterranean, I know I have met heroes..."* The SOS MEDITERRANEE teams make a special effort to provide warmth and respect to the survivors during this short interlude they have on board so that they can reclaim their humanity. The team look at those they have rescued, listen to them and touch them. Given that one of the symptoms of trauma is doubting one's own perception, or recollection, it is important to name what survivors have experienced, so that they have a chance to heal their psychological as well as physical wounds. A rape is a rape. No, they did not dream it. No, they did not invent anything. No, they did not exaggerate. Thankfully, there are also all the joyful moments on board where the crew and survivors laugh, sing and dance together...

LIFE ON BOARD

A Saturday in December

- **7 pm:** First rescue of the weekend. A small wooden boat. 36 people were rescued including a woman who was nine months pregnant. She was immediately entrusted to the care of the DWB's midwife.
- **11 pm:** End of the rescue operation.

Sunday, 11th December 2016

- **6:30 am:** Rescue of a wooden boat with more than 300 people on board.
- **7 am:** Rescue of a rubber dinghy.
- **10:30 am:** The double rescue operation is complete.
- **11 am:** Rescue of another rubber dinghy.
- **1 pm:** The third rescue operation of the day is finished. Everybody is safely on board, more than 660 people were rescued.
- **1:50 pm:** Birth of "Favour", a baby boy.



Not all rescue operations are as intense as this one, but this is what we have to be ready for on the *Aquarius*. All scenarios must be anticipated whether this relates to the rescue operations themselves or to the care of the people saved that will be necessary afterwards. The crew need to be trained in different rescue techniques but, long before embarking on the noble task of saving lives, it is important to prepare the teams for life on board the *Aquarius* because this also determines the quality of the care that the survivors receive.

Building the group

To succeed, the teams must prepare themselves both physically and psychologically. Organising life on board is excellent training, great for team bonding. One of the key events that takes place every three weeks is the unloading and storing of supplies. A long human chain is formed and we pass each other or even throw things down the line for at least three hours: 1,000 survival kits, 30 kg of leaks, 100 kg of potatoes, 20 watermelons, drums of detergent, crates of soap, packs and packs of bottled water, fruit cordial, milk, and so many more things... Once in a while, due to tiredness or a fit of the giggles, a yogurt bursts, a watermelon lands on a foot, a box almost goes overboard... And because our human chain is international everybody wants to show their neighbour they know a little bit of their language: “Chou!”- “Khol!”- “Cabbage!” Kourou”- “Cavolo!” - “Kanysta!”, etc... Sometimes it descended into the polysemantic frenzies Iasonas* was master at: “Give me dou chou, moun chou !” (Give me some cabbage, my darling!)

Better than any teambuilding exercise or ice-breaker game, I assure you that after this exercise the ice is, indeed, completely broken and the team is ready to work together.

And then there is seasickness...

When the sea is calm, it takes 2 to 3 days to get used to life at sea and for the body to digest all of the new information. But in winter, it is different. In the Mediterranean Sea especially the wind picks up suddenly and a heavy swell builds.

While the sailor friends argue over the strength of the swell - *“It is at least 15 knots.” “No, you know very well when there is foam it’s approaching 30...”* - you have gone completely pale. In reality you do not know this but you can guess by looking at the faces of your neighbours and you do not feel well at all. It is useless to hold on to anything because there is nothing stable neither around you, nor inside you. It is total chaos, even though the sea is not really raging and we are in a very big ship, while others, the “migrants” are facing the same elements in little “tubs”.

So sometimes the big *Aquarius* bobs along on the waves, alternating between pitching and rolling or doing both at the same time. When the wind gets up, it looks like the waves are chasing the ship, but this big boat ignores them and continues on its way. Sometimes there is an even bigger wave. The ship rides up it, then sinks into it and finally the wave explodes against the hull. If you have to go up or down a



ladder it's like doing it in zero gravity, like being on the moon instead of at sea... It takes time to be able to put one foot on the rung and actually keep it there until you put the other one on the next rung...

At the same time as the movement there is the sound. When the boat sinks into the wave, you hear a big "thump" as it strikes the hull : a thump followed by a long silence then another "thump", then another silence and so it goes on. The bigger the swell, the more frequent, and louder, the "thumps" become. They are amplified in some way by a resonance which makes the ship's hull and the bodies inside it vibrate. It is a sort of guttural song, a bit like the *cante jondo* from Andalusia. This show, especially in the evening or during the night, is both fearsome and hellish. This is no doubt because it sets the scene for the journey across the Mediterranean of those fleeing poverty and war: a hell which unleashes not only the elements but the darkest side of mankind... So we take care of each other, the least sick looking after the ones worst off. This is necessary and essential if we are to take care of the survivors.

Training Sessions

Whilst it is important to be physically and psychologically prepared for the rescues, it is also essential to be technically prepared. The rescue operations are extremely precise. Everybody has a specific task, a specific place, whether it is on deck or at sea. But everybody must also know the different tasks, to be able to replace a colleague who is tired or busy elsewhere. Training sessions are therefore key and the more the teams train the better prepared they are. These drills, as they are known, are organised systematically every three weeks just after the *Aquarius* has taken on food, various supplies and "newcomers". After every rotation, the first two days at sea are dedicated to many different exercises.

Some exercises only involve the rescuers: carrying out an inventory of the equipment, launching and using the rescue boats, trans-shipping somebody who can walk and somebody who is lying down, man over board and many other really exhilarating activities the rescuers have lots of fun doing...

Other exercises involve all the teams: learning or revising emergency first aid skills, transferring people onto stretchers, simulating a sudden arrival of victims, preparing for a helicopter airlift... These exercises, which are an opportunity for some to show-off their drama skills, also help to creating bonds between these professionals who come from different backgrounds.

Of course, we need to add to this non-exhaustive list of tasks all the cleaning that has to take place between rescues: the washing down of the decks and life jackets, any repairs...

I keep watch, he keeps watch, we keep watch...

Once we have arrived in the search and rescue zone, and when all training is complete, the waiting begins and this is the longest part. The *Aquarius* zigzags along the Tripolitan coast from east to west and back. On board, a routine sets in: meals, meetings, fitness for some, yoga for others, chess, reading, writing...



Meanwhile on the bridge the watch is in full swing. This task involves scanning the portion of the sea between the ship and the coast looking with binoculars for a boat. The watchmen remain at their posts for two hours. Of course it is not possible to scan the sea for that entire time because the eyes are not able to. Moreover, when they screw up their eyes behind the binoculars their entire body bends forward, their elbows resting on the safety railings. Every 10 minutes they slowly sweep the surveillance zone. As Stéphane* explains: *“It is not an easy task. You are looking for a black dot on a skyline made of waves and froth. The heart rate quickens with every doubt...”*

As the storyteller for SOS MEDITERRANEE, I joined in all the rescue team’s exercises and tasks in order to be able to tell the stories from their perspective. The watch remains one of the most fabulous moments that I was able to share with them. You would think that the radar would be more efficient than they are at detecting boats, but this is not the case. As a matter of fact, *“it would be interesting to see whether the rescues spotted with binoculars exceed those spotted by radar”* says Stéphane. Whichever it is, I am convinced that their work as lifesavers begins there, on the bridge, eyes glued to the binoculars, long before the actual rescues. Having observed them for many hours, I got the impression that the watch is an appointment with themselves, a moment to refocus on their inner daymarks*... Maybe a way to get ready to meet those they will rescue, to be ready to help them...

I loved joining them up there. I would stay quietly by their side, eyes glued to my binoculars just like them. We shared a moment of calm solitude. Antoine* described what we were looking at and explained the sea and its variations. Stéphane shared his values and his convictions. I also liked to join Brigitte*, whose watch was the last of the day. The first half-hour we talked a little, she patiently answered my many questions, then the rest of the time we kept a lookout in silence, facing the sunset.

The watch ends at nightfall until the following morning. While Andreas* or Sergeij* keep a look out from the bridge and Richard* or Francis* watch over the deck, the others try to sleep until the alert is raised...



“...KEEP WATCH AND PROVIDE ASSISTANCE TO ANY VESSEL IN DISTRESS”

Erri De Luca, an Italian writer, joined the crew aboard the Prudence⁶⁵ in April 2017 and here is an extract from his account:

“I’m not one for tattoos; my surface area carries only signs of its years. But events in the world where I’ve been physically involved have inscribed tattoos on the inside of my skin. I live inside it, so I sense them, and I can distinguish one from another. I have patterns written on the side that doesn’t fade. These two weeks on board imprinted me with a new tattoo: a rope ladder trolling in the void. On its final step, one by one, I saw faces pop up, the people climbing from the edge of the abyss. Packed onto a raft, they climbed up the steps to their salvation. Those hundreds of faces: I don’t have the force to hold them back. I’ve simply had the absurd privilege of seeing them. From them I have left only the rope ladder they climbed, half-naked and shoeless, up its wooden rungs.”⁶⁶

I was also privileged to meet some of these people and I also have an image printed deep down. Maybe it is even tattooed inside. It was a night in November. Alexander*, the Ship’s Master, was searching the night with his binoculars: *“But... I can see them on the radar... They are close by... Why can’t we see them?”* Even if those of us gathered around him could not see anything either, in that moment, he alone seemed to be bearing the weight of a hundred human lives. He asked Laurin* to look through his telephoto lens. Laurin went over to the starboard side and stared through his camera. Nothing. Ferry* and Mathias* were also desperately searching the night through binoculars. Nothing. Then all of a sudden, Nico* shouted: *“There!!! They are there!!!”* pointing his finger for the novices and shouting out the azimuth for his sailor colleagues. Everybody looked in that direction and the Ship’s Master directed the *Aquarius’* powerful search lights that way. And there it was... a thin line, luminescent and indistinct, which slowly widened. We could make out shapes, then twinkles, until suddenly faces emerged from the dark. It was with terror that it dawned on me that these twinkles, like fireflies in the night, were none other than the reflection of the *Aquarius’* search lights in the eyes of men, women and children... Faces that were unbelieving, bewildered, dazed... We stared and time was suspended for just a few seconds, which seemed to me like an eternity... On their side, they had lost all hope and on my side, I could not believe what I saw... This is migration: a dilapidated wooden boat just 8 to 10 metres in length, loaded full of human beings, drifting with no chance of landing anywhere...

The situation can change in an instant

Nobody can predict how a rescue will unfold. The situation can change in an instant. What appear to be the “simplest” rescues can turn into a nightmare and quite the opposite; what appear to be dangerous rescues can run smoothly. On a boat, all your muscles are tensed to maintain your balance. The worse the weather,

⁶⁵ Ship operated by the DWB

⁶⁶ <https://lithub.com/saving-lives-at-sea-onboard-a-migrant-rescue-ship-in-the-mediterranean/> (This feature originally appeared in Italian in *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, and was translated by Jim Hicks.)



the more you use your muscles. It is exactly the same for your psyche. Baptiste*, a rescuer, explained: *“When approaching a boat in distress we know that we do not have complete control over what will happen. We could do everything perfectly and yet the situation could get out of hand...”* The rescue teams are prepared for rescues of large numbers of people and are well-practiced at making contact with those shipwrecked on their fragile craft. They know to take all possible precautions, to quickly identify people they can call on to help etc...

But the situation can become critical in the blink of any eye: a word pronounced incorrectly, a misunderstanding, a movement on the boat... If just one man jumps overboard, all the rest will follow. *“It is at this critical stage when anything can happen... We are totally exposed to losing everything!”* concludes Baptiste.

The management of operations

As mentioned previously, sea search and rescue is conducted according to a strict legal framework under the control of the closest Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre (MRCC*). During such operations, the *Aquarius* is positioned off the Tripolitan coast and sails in international waters from east to west as close as possible to the distress zones assigned to them by the coordination centre. Whilst there was no official coordination centre in Tripoli, the *Aquarius* was working with the Rome Rescue Coordination Centre (RCC).

According to normal proceedings, the RCC centralises and relays the signals of all boats in distress and gives instructions to the nearest ships, irrespective of whether those ships are search and rescue, private, navy or merchant navy. Regarding the place for disembarking the people rescued, the rule is that the RCC organises assistance on its own territory. Up until the election of the new Italian government in June 2018, as the Rome RCC was the *Aquarius*' point of contact, the Port of Catania was generally assigned for landing survivors. After the Italian politician, Mattéo Salvini, decided to close Italian ports⁶⁷, the other RCCs became reluctant to coordinate rescue missions, in order to avoid having to open their doors to those rescued.

In 2017, the rescue missions became more complicated due to the intervention of the Libyan “coastguards”⁶⁸ and from the spring of 2018 they became almost impossible as mentioned in the Introduction. Most of the time, we had to keep our distance, as was the case on 6th May 2018.

From the beginning of the day, there was activity on the phones and the radio on the bridge. We knew that migrants had set off from the coast further west of Tripoli. The *Sea Watch* had gone to the port of Pozzalo⁶⁹

⁶⁷ As a reminder, Italy along with Greece and Spain are the main entry points for immigration into Europe. For years, Italy repeatedly called on the help of the European Union to share out more fairly the inflow of migrants but to no avail. This no doubt was a contributing factor to the political radicalisation of this country. From June 2018, Spain became the country who accepted the most migrants.

⁶⁸ <https://migrantsatsea.org/2017/06/14/un-report-documents-extensive-and-grave-human-rights-violations-by-libyan-coast-guard-against-migrants/>

⁶⁹ In southern Sicily



the day before to disembark some rescued migrants and the Astral was already engaged in a rescue mission. We are therefore the only vessel ready to intervene in the zone east of Tripoli and the atmosphere is tense.

- **12 pm:** Things start happening. On the bridge⁷⁰ Theo*, who is on watch, spots a rubber dinghy in distress. Nick*, the Search & Rescue Coordinator on board the *Aquarius*, immediately alerts the Italian Coordination Centre who instructs SOS MEDITERRANEE to approach the craft. Whilst the *Aquarius* is heading full throttle to the rescue zone, the Ship's Master awaits the fax from the Rome RCC confirming that they are to launch the rescue operations with the help of the DWB and SOS MEDITERRANEE coordinators on board.
- **12:10 pm:** Unknown to the bridge, everybody had gathered in the mess below for lunch at 12 noon sharp, instead of the normal situation of several sittings between 11.30am and 1.30 pm. They had just sat down to eat when an announcement comes over their radios, calling everybody up on deck. The passageways are filled with the noise of radios and footsteps. Crew members grab their helmets, waterproofs and life jackets. In passing, they drum on any closed cabin doors to ensure everybody reports for duty in time.
- **12:20 pm:** All the teams are in place, each member knowing what he has to do. It is like a well-oiled machine. Nick directs operations from the bridge. Tanguy*, his deputy, relays the commands on deck: launch of the Easy 2 rescue boat, loading of four bags of life jackets for adults and one for children. Then the crew climb aboard, firstly the rescue coordinator, then the rescue boat driver, followed one by one by the third rescuer, the photographer, the cultural mediator... Permission to leave the ship is requested from the Ship's Master on the bridge: "*Green light!*". Launch of Easy 1...
- **12:45 pm:** A dramatic turn of events. A call from the Libyan "coastguards" informing us that they have returned from an interception elsewhere at sea and are taking over the coordination of the rescue. We are to move five nautical miles back and wait; we are to intervene only if they ask us to.
- **12:55 pm:** The *Aquarius* contacts the Italian RCC to inform them that the Libyan "coastguards" want to take over the coordination.
- **12:55 pm:** Response from Rome: if the Libyans take over the coordination, this rescue no longer concerns the Italians. We have to obey, end of story.

This procedure, which we had already been subject to over several months, forced us to watch - helplessly - as people in distress who would subsequently be repatriated, sometimes violently, to the Libyan hell they were fleeing, were intercepted... The people on the decks of the *Aquarius* could not see anything, but from the bridge, despite being three nautical miles away from the Libyan launch - we had not yet moved back - Loïc⁷¹ was tracking the situation through his binoculars.

⁷⁰ Control room from where the ship and communications are managed. The bridge has a wing on either side to allow bridge personnel a full view to aid in the manoeuvring of the ship and from where crew members can scan the horizon or coast in search of craft in distress.

⁷¹ A trainee Search and Rescue Coordinator



The dinghy was overloaded. Those on board were wearing life jackets. When they saw the Libyan patrol boat approaching, several people jumped overboard, trying to escape.

It was a long, long wait but we are used to this now. A war of nerves. Unfazed, at least in appearance, and focused, Nick calmly answered the phone and radio, informing the Italian Coordination Centre, in vain, how the rescue was unfolding and the danger the people were in. He did not even lose his cool when a man - who may or may not have been a "coastguard" - shouted at him in a mixture of Arabic and English to leave the zone as we were disrupting the operation. This was a firm and definitive order which did not leave room for any subterfuge without endangering the *Aquarius'* crew.

Searches at sea

Unlike the situation described above, when a Coordination Centre alerts us of a boat in difficulty, we generally have between 30 minutes and several hours to reach the rescue zone. During this time, it is essential to eat as, while we can estimate when the rescue will begin, we have no idea when our next break will be. Staring at our coffee cups if it is night time or a plate of pasta if it is daytime, we gather the little information we have and try to extrapolate: depending on its size, a rubber dinghy can hold between 120 and 200 people and a wooden boat 150 to 1,000 people. From that we can vaguely work out how long the rescue will take.

It is not always enough to know the position of a boat to find it. Sometimes the search takes a long time and worse, sometimes it is fruitless. One morning in November, Max*, the deputy coordinator of the rescue team, joined us on deck and asked us to stop what we were doing. Even though the crew always await a rescue with anticipation, the announcement of the one that day did not please anyone as there was no certainty that we would arrive in time to make the rescue: *"There are two boats in distress one has already been deflating for about three hours and it will take us two hours to reach them..."*

On reaching the rescue zone, we spotted one of the two small boats from a distance. From what we could gather through the binoculars, the boat was still holding up. The priority was therefore to focus on the second boat, the one that had been deflating for almost five hours by that stage. The Ship's Master sounded the *Aquarius'* siren to let the passengers of the first boat know that they had been seen and that we would come back to pick them up.

On the bridge, eyes glued to their binoculars, the crew turned their attention towards the horizon ahead, but below on the foredeck, Shaun*, Brigitte and I were looking at the fragile skiff and imagining the despair of its passengers as they saw their potential saviour leaving them ...

We searched the surrounding sea. Blue, blue, nothing but blue. We spotted some dark brown spots which turned out to be jellyfish... Then here and there, small empty plastic bottles... Then, a white polystyrene float... But no sign of life in view... What if we had arrived too late? ... And what if the small rubber dinghy



sank? ... And what if all this flotsam marked the place of a shipwreck? ... and what if... and what if...? I do not know how long we searched but it seemed hopelessly long. In the end we had to turn back. As the *Aquarius* changed course to go back to the small boat we had passed a few minutes before, we could not take our eyes off that little piece of white polystyrene. All these lives were swallowed up, here or elsewhere, in total indifference⁷²... Then the little white dot finally disappeared, and we turned our attention to the living.

Assessment of a critical situation

From that point everything happens very quickly, and it has to happen quickly as the people on board a rubber dinghy often get agitated and the boat could capsize. Two rescue boats are launched with life jackets loaded on board to be handed out to the people in the rubber dinghy before the transfer. During this time, the gate to the landing zone is opened ready to land the survivors onto the *Aquarius* and survival kits are lined up on deck.

It takes just 15 minutes for the rescue boats to reach the people shipwrecked on the rubber dinghy, but it feels like forever. *“Don’t be scared, we’re not the police!”* We use short, clear statements in French, English, Arabic and sometimes in other West African languages, depending on the origin of the survivors and the languages spoken by the mediator. As soon as the life jackets have been handed out, any medical emergencies are assessed: a member of the medical staff always goes on the first trip to a boat in distress to assess critical cases and start administering care on the return trip to the *Aquarius* if required. It is this key member of the rescue team who communicates the number of sick and/or wounded. After this assessment, the “mass influx of victims” plan is set in motion. Whilst one rescue boat performs multiple trips back and forth between the *Aquarius* and the rubber dinghy, the other remains close to the people in distress to maintain contact and prevent panic from seizing the exhausted group. Women, children, the sick and the injured are taken off first and taken to the shelter*, one of the covered areas on board the ship. Finally the able-bodied men are transferred over and settled on deck.

Disaster scenarios

When a rescue starts in the middle of the day, in mild weather and bright sunshine, you would expect it to go well. But that doesn’t take into account human factors such as exhaustion, pain and panic which can turn a rescue into a disaster scenario. People are inclined to panic when they get a glimpse of being saved, and the approach of our rescue boats can tip the precarious balance. Even though they may have shown huge self-control for many hours, suddenly it is as if they cannot wait a fraction of a second longer. It is as if their fear and pain kicks in, in a single moment, having been switched off for hours on end as they fought for survival.

⁷² We learnt the following day that the boat we searched so long for had drifted quite considerably. It was therefore no longer in the zone indicated by the time we arrived. It was found in the early morning with only fifteen survivors on board. Ninety people had disappeared into oblivion overnight.



Another key factor is the time between the distress call and the arrival of the rescue vessel. On 27th January 2018⁷³, when the *Aquarius* reached the rescue zone, some of the migrants had already been in the water for at least 20 minutes. Many people had already drowned and, to the great despair of the rescue team, around 10 more drowned during the rescue mission.

When Basile^{*74}, Edouard^{*75} and Anthony^{*76} circled around the craft to assess the situation, they realised that what they had seen through the binoculars was the better side of the rubber dinghy. What they discovered on the other side, amid the deafening noise of the engine and human screams, shocked them as they witnessed the fatal consequences unfolding before their eyes. The far side of the rubber dinghy was completely deflated, clusters of people were struggling in the water, most of them unable to swim, while inert bodies floated 50cm below the surface... The scene was total chaos. In just a few seconds the three men's senses were entirely saturated. They had lost their bearings. In the time it took for all the information to reach their brains, be sorted and begin to take on meaning, it was as if there had been a bug - which, though it only lasted for a fraction of a second - made the scene seem surreal. Edouard described it in the *Aquarius*' Logbook and in an interview with Médiapart⁷⁷: *"I was stunned. My ability to absorb emotions was totally incapacitated."*

Little by little the senses return. The situation takes on meaning and the mechanisms needed to take charge of it spring to mind. The automatism acquired through training enable each member of the rescue team to compose themselves, to channel their emotional overload and to regain control of their thoughts and actions again.

A baby was floating below the surface of the water. Basile pointed out the target to Edouard. He pulled the baby from the water and started CPR (cardiopulmonary resuscitation) whilst the driver of the rescue boat sped back to the *Aquarius*. Foam came from the baby's mouth before it was handed over to the medical crew on the ship.

Anthony revved the engine of the rescue boat and headed back to the disaster area. Basile gave the orders, Edouard executed them. They pulled another six or eight small bodies from the sea and performed relentless heart massage whilst Anthony sped back and forth. Babies were passed from one to another, with foam on their lips. The rescue team went back again and again and continued to recover lifeless or unconscious bodies from the sea for a period that seemed to go on forever. They did not speak. They were like machines with all muscles clenched. They did not let up for an instant until all the bodies had been dragged from the water. They didn't let up until they knew the fate of the babies.

⁷³ This rescue was recounted to me by the rescue team as part of the psychological support I set up when they next came into port. I have described the rescue in their words with all the emotions they shared with me.

⁷⁴ Team leader or boat leader

⁷⁵ Chief mate

⁷⁶ Coxswain or driver

⁷⁷ <https://sosmediterranee.com/log/logbook-83-i-cant-throw-up-i-cant-cry-the-experiences-are-stuck-somewhere-inside-me/>
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_d-B80moDOI or read the interview in French on <https://blogs.mediapart.fr/edouard-courcelle/blog>.



It was the same emotional overload on each of the rescue boats. It was the same drive to recover bodies from the sea and drag them on board. It was the same silence until all survivors have been saved and until they received news of the babies...

Chaos also reigned on the decks of the *Aquarius*. For the rescue team on board, the arrival of so many babies was staggering. Fortunately, as on the rescue boats, there was always someone who leapt into action quicker than the others and helped the rest of the team to compose themselves. Viviana* told how the deck leader, Waldemar*, helped her focus again on the job at hand. The pace of the transshipments did not let up. Each baby, each child and finally each adult was passed from one member of the rescue team to another until they reached the DWB medical staff who would take over their care. Having finished their work at sea, the rescue team turned their attention to helping the lifeless, haggard survivors lying in shock on the decks.

When the medical team announced that the babies were all alive and well it was “...as if the black shroud which was hanging in the sky over the rescuers was torn down.”⁷⁸ For some the emotion was released and the tears could fall at last.

Some of the rescue team are pulled towards the living; others focus on the dead. While one listens to the story of a survivor, another grips the hand wrapped around his; others take turns to give a bottle to Baby Richard. But Dragos* cannot take his eyes off a shape lying on the deck in their midst, covered by a sheet. He lifts the sheet and looks at the young woman with the blue dreadlocks. He keeps trying to protect her so that people do not step over her like a mere obstacle. While Baby Richard snuggled into the chests of those holding him, while he tried to suckle the cheeks and necks of the rescuers who cradled him, his young mother was lying lifeless nearby and would not be there to see her young son grow up...

The living and the dead

In two and a half years, the rescuers of the *Aquarius* have often brought back dead people and many more drowned right before their eyes. The dead, dragged from a stagnant cesspool at the bottom of the rubber dinghy, had often succumbed to asphyxia due to smoke fumes or the ingestion of a mixture of fuel and seawater.

Then there are those we think we have saved or thought we could have saved: “*We did not see them at the bottom of the boat. When we asked the men to show us the floor, we discovered two people lying there unconscious. I did not know what state one of the girls was in but the other had opened her eyes when she was moved and we made eye contact. I was hopeful, I thought she was going to make it...*” There is nothing we can say to comfort Thomas*, other than to listen to him.

There is nothing we can say to Tanguy who didn't manage to convince a man to let go of his dead wife and save himself from drowning. There is nothing we can say to Dr. Anja*, Helmi* and Tashan* who blame

⁷⁸ Édouard's testimony of 15th June 2018 (see note 77)



themselves for failing to revive the two girls suffering from hypothermia. And above all, there is nothing we can say to Mariana who has just lost her older sister...

It is always a moment of infinite sadness when the rescuers bring the bodies out of the shelter, in front of their family, friends and travelling companions ...

Beyond the fact that the dead accompany us physically throughout the journey on the foredeck of the ship, we keep their memories alive through the animated portraits that their rescued friends paint for us. If it was possible to identify almost all the deceased that we brought back with us, it was thanks to the testimonies of the survivors on the decks of the *Aquarius*. There are always some who volunteer to identify the bodies. And of course, we take extra special care of those who go through this traumatic experience...



Emotions

A few days after a difficult rescue, Stéphane and I are leaning on the guardrail of the bridge. Stéphane is a private man who listens much more than he speaks. I do not ask any questions. I'm just there for him, silent and ready to listen: *"Life hangs by a thread, by a red lifejacket. Intellectually we know this and we have known it for a long time but here it takes on a human face... Then, everything goes so fast. We want to push the pause button... We have prepared for rescues, physically and mentally... but ... reality is very different... During the rescue, there is no room for emotions. We cannot. We must focus. We fix just a single objective: spotting those who do not move or who do not shout out, because those who shout and*



move still have energy... And we proceed to one after another... You give your all to the rescue... You sometimes have to dig really deep within yourself to find the strength ... After the rescue, you are totally drained of all your energy..." Stephane had made three rotations on the *Aquarius*, the equivalent of two months of rescue operations. He left the *Aquarius* tired but happy, with the feeling of having learned as much as he had passed on. *"These rescues have changed many things in me; it is as if they have amplified something that was already important to me: the value of human life... At the very least, the human factor has become an essential part of my working life..."*

Mathilde, communications officer for SOS MÉDITERRANÉE, aboard the *Aquarius* for six weeks, also testified: *"The shock from witnessing rescue operations at sea is so strong that it leaves no one unscathed. There are no words to describe the shiver that runs down your spine at the sight of a deflated dinghy drifting on the horizon, the desperate cries of men in the sea, the terrified cries of babies brought on board, the pungent smell of bodies bathed in fuel and tainted by rape and torture in Libya. There are no words to describe this person who dies in our very arms while we are trying to revive him, no words to describe his corpse that we place in a body-bag, or the disarming sorrow of the family and companions of misfortune who are haunted by the images of the incident. There are no words to describe the tears of a man who clings to a piece of cloth entrusted to him by his mother, nor the nocturnal anxiety attacks of a 10-year-old child who travels alone..."*⁷⁹



⁷⁹ See Mathilde Auvillain's account in *the Logbook* on 19th January 2017; <https://sosmediterranee.com>



Rituals

If the stories told to us by the survivors upset us, the rescue operations shake us to the core and the deaths even more so. Confronted almost daily with inhumanity and death, we all face anxieties about it at some point or other, and with differing intensity. We have to expel what we have accumulated in our bodies and our souls, so certain rituals are conducted on board the rescue ship to help transcend the horror. These rituals evolve and change with time and between different rescue teams.

As night falls after a rescue mission, the survivors take time to settle and find a position that brings some comfort, while the watchmen keep watch over them. Slowly their bodies let go of the hours of ankylosis and fear they experienced at sea. Rolled up in their blankets, they lie so close together that the slightest movement of one ripples through the others... For the crew, the tradition is for the rescue teams, except the watchmen, to gather at nightfall on Monkey Island* to share a friendly drink, but let's be clear about the type of "drink". Most of the time, it is fruit juice or, and only on very special occasions, a thimble of Limoncello (a lemon liqueur).

At first, everyone is standing around, joking in large groups, then they begin to move around. We talk about everything and nothing. A couple of words are exchanged about the rescue but rarely more, as if it was too fresh in our minds... Then, helped on by nightfall, the group sits, often in a circle. It's time to share more intimately. We show the photos and videos, recorded on the decks, of the survivors dancing, singing, praying... The emotion is great and palpable, for them and for us, but we do not talk about it... What matters most during these nights is just being there, together and alive. We too are gathered close together and the slightest movement of one ripples through the others... This ritual plays out from time to time but no longer takes place after every rescue.

The following ritual no longer exists, but I will describe it, as it was very symbolic. It took place on the evening we headed back out to sea after disembarking the survivors in Sicily. The shelter, which just a few hours earlier had been full of the sick and wounded, was decked out ready for a party. We solemnly sacrificed a survival blanket for the occasion, cutting it to make a tablecloth and garlands. Then we set up a buffet, to the sound of Afro-electro music, and the teams gathered together to chase away the evil spirits. We drank, ate, laughed and danced. The cooks, the mechanics, the seafarers, the doctor, and the Captain all joined the party too, at least for a moment. Everyone joined in, at least until *Princess Sparkle* was brought out⁸⁰. We all danced around her, singing. Then everyone jumped on her, taking turns or several at the same time. *Princess Sparkle* was deflated by one of the assailants and we all pretended to be in the water. We shouted and ran around but in the end, we always won through. We got up, locked the *Princess* back in a cupboard until the next time and then resumed our dancing and singing. How a nice little unicorn became an expiatory object I do not know, but there was not a single trip back to the rescue zones where she did not come out...

⁸⁰ Walt Disney's unicorn is a huge inflatable toy



A new ritual was introduced in 2018 by a photographer who had a talent for sketching. He started drawing and writing on pieces of rubber dinghy⁸¹ to record what each member of the DWB and SOS crews represented to the others on board. The meal that takes place every three weeks, at the time of the crew changeover became the ceremony for giving these totems. The Search and Rescue Coordinator or his deputy would say a few words and there was applause all round.

The team spirit on board was strong, supportive and reassuring within the teams of SOS MEDITERRANEE, DWB and the two together. This team spirit was the key factor helping the crew to get through the hardest times. And it led to another long-standing ritual between the crews of the two charities since the start of operations: getting a tattoo of an anchor underlined by two little waves...

ON THE DECKS

The rescue boats go back and forth to the *Aquarius* with 12 to 20 survivors. Brigitte was the rescuer who greeted them on the ship during my first mission. At the end of a day of rescue, Brigitte had pulled up or supported between 200 and 700 people, helping them climb up, step off the accommodation ladder* and set foot on deck. Each new passenger held her hand in theirs. Brigitte, like all the rescuers at this post, embodies the passage between the hell of the past and a future where anything is possible.

The welcoming procedures go very quickly: the women, the children, the sick and the wounded are directed to the right, to the shelter assigned to them. The men are directed to the left towards the afterdeck. The most urgent thing most people need is a soapy shower; the mixture of petrol and salt water at the bottom of the boats causes serious skin damage. Now dressed in clean clothes they warm up and wait for "registration"⁸². Once dry, it is quite common to witness very happy moments. Many of the migrants are so thrilled to be alive and safe at last and those who are not in good shape abandon themselves to the care of the DWB medical team. Then there are the quiet ones...

Tensions from the trauma of the crossing

The hardest thing to manage up to spring 2018 was the overcrowding on the *Aquarius* due to the large number of people rescued. This made many aspects of life on board complicated: the distribution of weight on the boat, use of toilets and showers, food distribution, treating minor injuries, lack of privacy, and of course, seasickness. In winter, due to the cold, the wind and the storms, these difficulties are even greater. Despite the weather conditions, there are still a considerable number of migrants attempting the crossing, even though there are fewer rescue ships to assist those in distress. When several rescue missions took place one after another, the people rescued were initially assigned to certain decks, according to their order of arrival on board the *Aquarius*. This meant that the people rescued from a particular rubber dinghy found

⁸¹ Pieces of the rubber dinghies are cut out before they are sunk so that they cannot be used again.

⁸² "Registration" on the *Aquarius* is organised by DWB. It is anonymous and it only serves to know the number of men, women and children, accompanied or not, their age and where they come from.



themselves in close quarters again. But as Zeineb explained later, considerable tension could develop within a group during the crossing and finding themselves once again in close proximity aggravated these tensions. The objective of the crew was to use the space on the ship in the most functional way possible to facilitate movement and life on board - distribution of meals, showers, toilets etc. Whilst our logic focused on organisation, we did not take into account human factors. Even if we had wanted to take them into account, when the ship was packed, we did not have a lot of choice. However, once the rescues were complete and all the survivors were on board, they could change places. On numerous occasions the map of West Africa took shape on the decks: Cameroon, Nigeria, Benin, Togo, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Guinea-Conakry, Senegal... Sometimes it was the map of East Africa: Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sudan... and other times the map of the Middle East or the East: Syria, Pakistan, Bangladesh... The travellers often stayed in the same corner of the ship and gathered together by country or by affinity; the adventures shared along the way creating new friendships.

The first night in safety in a long time

On the first night, as the excitement of the rescue recedes, pain, images of the past, worries and anxieties emerge and sometimes overwhelm the survivors on board the *Aquarius*. The watchman is often assailed with various requests to “*see the doctor*” and “*get the drug*”. Behind the medical complaints, whether they are vague (“*It hurts there*” and the person points to his entire torso) or an endless list of symptoms, there are the thousands of questions which grip the survivors: dreams of a better place that seems unreachable; the fear of being alone; for some, images or flashbacks that mess with their minds; for all there is the nostalgia of their country, the need to reassure their families and hear familiar voices. Those who complain are among the better off, precisely because they still have the capacity to express their feelings. We tuck them in with blankets and words. It is often enough just to recognise that they have plenty of reasons to feel bad, to help them feel a little better. Just keeping them regularly up to date on what we know, and especially what we do not know, about our progress at sea helps them feel reassured.

The most worrying are the quiet ones, who remain motionless on deck. The crew know that they can be lost deep, deep within themselves or in a terrible place far away...

Little moments of grace...

9th May 2018. It was one of the last times that the *Aquarius* entered an Italian port. After a peaceful breakfast, everyone was occupied cleaning his or her corner of the deck and doing their washing to hang out in the bright sun. Just imagine the jeans, shirts and djellabas flapping in the wind on every available inch of the ship! Small groups had gathered here and there chatting when Aloïs* appeared on deck with his accordion. The benches were moved into a circle, Hamzé and Mohamed each took up a djembe and Aloïs started to play. Everyone joined in. Men, women, young and old: Bangladeshis, Nigerians, Ghanaians, Eritreans, Moroccans... and of course all the crew, Americans, Spanish, Italians, Germans, Belgians, Swiss, Greeks, Romanians and French; all sang the lalalala of the chorus at the tops of their voices. Everyone jumped up and down, sang, danced and clapped their hands. Ryon and M'di Kaïum sang a Bangladeshi song.



We sang the anthem of the Casablanca Raja Club Athletic with Abdoul, Anouar and their friends. Then Loïc, Basile, Edouard and Marc led us in one of their songs.

Perched on a ladder to get a better view, I sang along and clapped my hands with the others when suddenly the emotion welled up. It was as if all sound ceased abruptly and only the image remained in slow motion of all these happy people jumping up and down. Superimposed on this scene were images from the day before when, moving from group to group, people had invited me to sit down among them whilst they told snippets of their journey across Libya. Each tale was as tragic and violent as the last. Nothing had changed since my first mission on board the *Aquarius*, neither in Libya nor in the conditions of the crossing of the Mediterranean. And yet all this barbarity did not destroy the capability of these human beings to share a joyous moment together.

Then there are other moments when magic and fairy godmothers take over... Whilst women make up only a small number of the survivors, many of them are pregnant and some set out late in their pregnancies in the hope of giving birth to their child in a country where he or she will be free... The fairy godmothers, in this case, are the midwives who help these women during or just after childbirth. So Angéline* was the fairy godmother of Destiné-Alex⁸³, Jonquil* the fairy godmother of Newman-Otas and Mercy, Marina* the fairy godmother of Favour, Alice⁸⁴ the fairy godmother of Christ and Marie-Paule that of Miracle...

When tongues loosen

Collecting testimonials requires careful attention to the framework we set for conducting the exchange. When people share snippets of their stories with us, they place their trust in us. They take the risk of opening up to us and of letting go of their emotions. Their tales are raw and unpolished. Just as we aid this process of opening up, we must be careful to aid the process of closure. Also, we approach things differently depending whether we have just a few hours to spend together before trans-shipping the survivors, or a longer journey together to a common destination. The testimonials have not changed since 2016. Sadly they are still tales of tragic, sordid experiences.

Snippets of stories

Osei, the farmer from Ghana: It was essential for him to tell us that he did not want to leave: "I never thought about leaving my country. I owned my own farm. I was born there as was my father before me. We were not very rich but I had enough to feed my family... As every year, after the harvest, I burned my field, but this time the wind carried the fire onto the field of a neighbour. He pressed charges and I was ordered to pay 600 Euros. Since I could not pay, I decided to go to Libya to work. In the region, many men go to work there. That way, I thought I would be able to pay my debt and pay for my children's education so that they do not end up in the same situation as me. But once I got there, things didn't go as I expected.

⁸³ Alex in tribute to Ship's Master Alexander

⁸⁴ Alice Gautreau published a book about her missions on the *Aquarius* entitled "*Seuls les poissons mort suivent le courant*" Paris, Edition Pygmalion, Paris, 2018



I was arrested and locked in a cellar. I was asked to pay \$ 1,500 to be released. I could not pay such a sum. Who would I have asked?! So I managed to escape with others, but after that I had no choice but to cross the sea. I scrapped together 500 Euros because I could not go back. I would never have thought of going so far away from my family..."

David, the Nigerian English teacher, wore his coarse blanket over his shoulders as elegantly as he would wear a beautiful tweed suit. Yet, the after-effects of abuse prevent him from standing. He also wanted to testify that he had not chosen to cross the sea but that he just wanted to enrich his CV: *"I am an English teacher and I came to work in Tripoli in a renowned private institute... One day on my way home, I was kidnapped on the streets, taken to a camp, locked up and beaten for several weeks."* In refined English and with great modesty, he spoke of the cruelty of the Libyan jailers.

Nazi and Ahmad, Togolese cousins, only made brief allusions to their painful time in Libya. They showed me "only" the visible scars on their arms and their torsos. Regarding the crossing by sea, they revealed only the bare minimum too: *"We left on Monday morning at dawn and were very quickly lost... Around 8am we saw the coastguard so we waved our clothes so that they would see us... On our boat 7 women had died... And there were also 3 people in a critical condition but they were all saved, thanks to God... And then all day the coast-guard recovered other people like us from the sea... Tonight they can go to bed happy... They saved a lot of lives..."*

Mambie of the Gambia, who we had thought was better off than the others, affected us all very much: *"I wanted to leave my country because there, I did not find material I needed to make my shoes, my belts and my bags. I am a shoemaker. It is my job..."* And he reeled off the list of all the African countries he had crossed in search of leather for his shoes. Mambie was talkative and excited, he looked at me intensely, wanted me to hear his story: *"It's important Ma' to have good shoes to stand strong and go where you want..."* Then suddenly, in the middle of confused explanations of how to make high-heeled shoes, he stopped and stared at the horizon: *"It was hard in prison... I came from Agadez in Niger to Tripoli... In Libya, they do not like Black people... they throw them in jail... I stayed there for 7 months... I managed to escape... I was afraid of the sea but I did not have a choice..."* To anyone who stopped to talk to him, Mambie told his story of being a shoemaker, in exactly the same order, with the same explanations, in the same places, then he always stopped at the prison...

All these young people went to Europe with other rescuers on another ship. We only met very briefly before they had to leave. On the *Aquarius*, we do not like these transshipments. We prefer to accompany the survivors back to land. Until the spring of 2018, we had thirty hours to spend together to get back to Italy. This allowed time to get acquainted but also to evaluate from a distance what reactions were triggered by the recalling of these memories. Nowadays we can spend a week or sometimes longer together. The upside of this scandal is that the survivors and crew get to share some powerful experiences and unforgettable memories. It is these men, women and children that we will now follow, step by step.





“WHEN YOU GO ON AN ADVENTURE, YOU EITHER BECOME WISE OR YOU GO CRAZY...”

Portraits

In general, the men told me everything about their trip, explaining why they had chosen to leave and detailing the path they had taken. The women generally described a particular event that happened on their journey. To begin, we will follow the journeys of Enzo, Mouctar, Souleyman, Mohamed, Ibrahim, Sofiane and Selim.

Enzo, the Bamileke (Cameroon)

Although he is proud to be nearly 19 years old, everything about his appearance and his way of expressing himself hints at the little boy he must have been. He has been travelling for several months across West Africa, as his grandfather and his great-grandfather probably did before him. Enzo does it to support his family in Cameroon: *“...Mum sold goods in the village markets. She fought hard to raise us. She would go to Douala⁸⁵ to buy produce wholesale and then return to Dschang⁸⁶ to sell her goods at Ngan, the big market. She worked hard but argued with our father because he did not take care of us properly when she*

⁸⁵ Town located on the southern coast of Cameroon

⁸⁶ Town located about 200 km north of Douala



was not there. He was a taxi driver... So, one day, he had enough of her and he took a second wife. For Bamileke people, this is a common practice, even if women do not always agree. My mother did not accept the situation so she left my father and took us with her. I was 14 years old. I was the oldest, so I had to work to help my mother. The idea was to earn a bit of money to allow mum to pay off debts and buy stock. I also wanted to keep some for myself..." For several years, Enzo worked as a street vendor, a cook, a delivery man, a tinsmith, a taxi driver... in summary a thousand jobs that allowed him, his mother and his little brothers and sisters to survive. So, in September 2016, he decided to travel far away to get his family out of poverty...

Mouctar, the geothermal engineer (Guinea-Conakry)

Mouctar decided to leave his family home in Conakry for similar reasons to Enzo. Mouctar is a level-headed 21-year-old who expresses himself with precision and gentleness. He too is the eldest in a very large family. From the age of 10 he did a thousand odd jobs alongside his schooling which helped support his family financially whilst he finished his studies at the Boké Higher Institute of Mines and Geology. He hoped that the last internship required to complete his engineering studies would lead to a contract. Things turned out very differently: *"In Guinea- Conakry, if you have no contacts, you cannot get a job... So, we always hear about this person or that person, with whom we were at school or high school, who went to Europe and succeeded ... Even if I only sent 200 Euros a month to my mother, it would be a fortune for us. She would have enough to take good care of the family... So, I decided to leave. I knew the risks but I did not give myself a choice. I did not want my little brothers and sisters to live as I had lived and I wanted to give my parents an easier life in their old age. So, I sold my computer and all the electronic and computer equipment I had to raise money for the trip..."*

Souleyman, the child whose father was murdered (Senegal)

Souleyman is 19 years old and comes from a village in Casamance⁸⁷ where his family lived for several generations. *"My father, Hadji, was a respected leader. The rebels regularly visited villages and towns demanding the warriors' tribute, threatening to execute two people a month if the locals did not cooperate. But in fact, there were executions, whether they paid or not. That's how one morning... I was 10 years old... my father was executed right in front of me, with another man..."* Souleyman tells me about the execution of his father and the other villager as if it happened yesterday, even though the scene dates back nine years. I can measure the depth of the trauma by the accuracy of the details. He went silent for a very long time, turned his face away to stem the emotion and then continued: *"Before dying, my father made my mother promise to take my brother, Mustafa, and me to another country so that we could grow up in peace. Fortunately, he did not see the rebels, kidnap Mustafa that same day, to enlist him as a soldier. He was 12 years old. We never saw him again..."*

⁸⁷ A region in south-west Senegal



When Souleyman was 15 years old, his mother gathered all her savings, 560,000 CFA (850 Euros) for him to leave Senegal. So, to honour his father's memory, he left.

First he went to Mali where he worked for a year or so. He sold vegetables, apples and donuts. As he could not earn enough to live on and was even losing money, he went to Burkina Faso where he stayed for two years. There, he met Samboko who took him under his wing. Samboko was a renowned marabout. People come from all over the region to buy his talismans. He also owned a garage where Souleyman learned to be a mechanic: *“I would have stayed longer in Burkina Faso. I had found a family there with Samboko, but he kept telling me that a son's place was with his mother and a man's place on his land. I know he did not want to kick me out. He just did not understand how I could live so far away from my land and my people. But for me, it was out of the question to return to Senegal, precisely because this land took from me what I held most dear and whatever it cost me, I would respect my father's dying wish...”* So he set off again with 800,000 CFA (1,200 Euros) in his pocket...

Mohamed, the athlete (The Gambia)

Mohamed is also 19 years old. He had been playing football for about 10 years. He was talent spotted by coaches who convinced his parents to send him to the capital, Banjul, where he could continue his studies and train better. For the last three years he had also been doing shot put but he felt that it was getting more and more difficult financially. He decided to go to Europe to follow his dream of becoming a top-level athlete...

Ibrahim, the good son (Senegal)

Ibrahim loved school and would have liked to continue his studies, but his father died: *“My father died last year because of an accident at work. I am the eldest, so it was my job to provide for my family - my mother, my three brothers and my two sisters. I came back home and looked for work, but without training and without qualifications the odd jobs that I found did not pay more than 1,500 Francs CFA, or 3 Euros, a day, which is not even enough to survive. When my mother received compensation of 1 million CFA francs (1,500 Euros) for my father's death, she gave it to me to try my luck in Europe.”* It is not certain that Ibrahim actually wanted to leave home, but family pressure (and perhaps even the village's) was too strong for him to be able to resist leaving.

“I left on May 23, 2016, without telling my mother that I intended to cross the Mediterranean, otherwise she would have refused ...” Ibrahim crossed Mali safely and then entered Burkina Faso, where the trouble began: *“Naively, I thought it was a brother country since we are all Blacks. Well, not at all. We had to pay between 25,000 and 35,000 CFA francs (between 40 and 50 Euros). Whether you're paid or not, you were locked up and beaten with anything the guards could get their hands on. Sometimes they tied us up and electrocuted us... I won't tell you everything, Ma', because it's not pretty... I was there for a month and 10 days but I managed to escape.”* The rest of Ibrahim's journey was no better than his experience in Burkina Faso.



Sofiane, the energy of despair (Niger / Cameroon)

Sofiane is 40 years old. He was born in Niger but had been living in Cameroon for 15 years. An engineer in the petrochemical sector, he wanted to expand his professional experience in Libya. He had sent CVs to several Libyan oil companies and been invited to contact the Human Resources departments of two. Sofiane was convinced he would get the support of these companies to quickly regularise his illegal entry into the country. He left Yaounde on August 14 from...

Selim, the kid (Guinea-Conakry)

Selim has just turned 17. Like many young Guineans his age, he had not been living with his family for some years already: *“My parents were too poor and could not feed the whole family. I have eight brothers and sisters. As I was the eldest, they sent me to live with a friend's family. I was good friends with their son. His father was a civil servant in Conakry. I stayed there from the age of 11 to 17...”* So as not to be a financial burden on his friend's family and to be able to send a little money to his family, Selim was doing odd jobs after school such as picking up scrap metal, working as a taxi by motorbike or by car: *“In this country, no one is worried about whether you have a driving license or not! ... My friend and I had been talking about going to Europe for a long time to have the opportunity to improve our families' lives. So we saved up until we had enough money. A friend lent me the last bit...”*

The Algerian Prelude

Before deciding to emigrate to Europe, Enzo had tried his luck in North Africa. From Cameroon, he crossed Mali and then travelled on up to Algiers. The reception was not the one he hoped for: *“It was difficult to find drivers in Algeria because they risk prison sentences and fines if they carry illegal immigrants.”* Then, having no particular qualifications, Enzo could only apply for lower positions, all badly paid because he was an illegal immigrant. He also explained that life is not easy for Blacks in Algeria: *“Most of the time, they are forced to do Salam (begging). Or prostitution. I was not prepared to do either so I worked for three weeks on a construction site to collect the money needed for the trip to Libya.”*

From Mali to Algeria

While Enzo was crossing Algeria from the north to the south-east, Mouctar was crossing Mali from the south-west to the north-east, to reach Deb-Deb, the last Algerian town before Libya. Both their journeys were epic.

Mouctar left with a dozen companions crammed into the back of a pickup truck. It took a month to cross the 12,000 km from Bamako to Gao as there were many “rebels” along the way interrupting their long drive to extort funds. It was impossible for those who were unwilling or unable to pay yet more money to turn back.



They were locked up until their families sent the necessary sum, in this case 50,000 CFA francs (75 Euros) and if they did not pay, the prisoners were either killed or died slowly from illness and lack of food.

All these migration routes have well-defined and lucrative networks of agents who provide “all kinds of services” to the migrants along the way. Each agent in the chain charges a fee at each step (and/or between steps) for what he considers to be his due and, if migrants do not have any money, there are many ways to extort it: *“In Talhandak⁸⁸, as we could not pay because we had been robbed earlier on, we were first beaten with sticks, then strangled with hoses normally used to pump fuel out of drums. Then we were put in front of the sun and if we did not look at it we were slapped... It lasted for hours, then it stopped without reason then resumed again, without explanation. Then, after a while, they gathered all the passengers. Those who could not pay for their tickets were taken to prison until they could pay. Those who managed to pay for the trip, like me, got to leave. But we did not get far because the driver left us in the desert⁸⁹... In the middle of the desert there is always someone who pops up to “help”. This time it was a woman whom the driver of the truck had in fact sold us to. She offered us food and shelter. We had not eaten for a long time so deep down we were happy. Then she offered to find us other tickets... as long as we could pay of course...”*

The road continued in the same manner to a “hostel” in Timiaouine⁹⁰. There are many such establishments along this road: *“As soon as we arrived, Eza, the owner locked us up with only a bowl of porridge a day, claiming he had pulled us from the hands of rebels, and we had to repay him the sum paid for our “release”: 150,000 CFA francs (230 Euros)... At this stage of the journey, those who could not pay, went back to Mali...”* Mouctar stayed for four days in this place then took advantage of a “diversion” to escape. He went to the city market where he found “Black brothers”. They pooled their money to continue the journey to Libya. 17,000 Algerian dinars (150 Euros) later, they finally reached Deb-Deb⁹¹. But their journey was still far from over and the level of cruelty would go up several notches.

From Deb-Deb to Ghadames

Mouctar and Enzo continued to Ghadames⁹² and then to the suburbs of Tripoli. They travelled on the same roads but did not experience the same things. Enzo continues: *“Before entering Libya, I called Mum. I needed to hear her voice to give me strength. But when she found out I was going to cross into Libya, she wanted me to come home because it was too dangerous... I hung up before my resolve could falter. For sure, I would have ended up obeying her...”* People setting out to emigrate know more or less that crossing Libya will be difficult, but the greatest danger in their mind is crossing the sea, especially for those who have never seen it, so they are ignorant of the difficulties they might encounter in Libya.

⁸⁸ Last town in Mali before reaching Algeria

⁸⁹ The Hoggar Desert

⁹⁰ First stopover town in Algeria

⁹¹ Last stopover town in Algeria

⁹² First stop in Libya



The Nigerian prelude

Regardless of whether the illegal immigrants cross Niger from west to east, or branch off towards Algeria on their journey to Libya, Agadez is “unforgettable”. This is not because what was formerly the key passage for medieval caravans trading between the West African cities of Kano and Timbuktu is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site, but because it has become the main human trafficking hub on the road to Libya.

Sofiane testifies: *“We arrived in Agadez at dusk having travelled around 950 km, with fifty of us crammed into a truck, almost without food and water. Just a few stops to urinate and quickly climb back up. Those who were not fast enough, or were too sick were left behind. When we arrived in Agadez the smugglers and the rebels negotiated. As I spent part of my childhood in Niger, I understand the local language. For them, we are nothing but goods. The smugglers sell us to the rebels who will sell each of us for twice the price they paid...”* For every step of the journey, the transportation of the migrants is organised by the smugglers. They pay the drivers or transport companies⁹³ to take charge of the migrants as soon as they arrive. As soon as the 4x4s are “hired”, the rebels are informed either by the drivers or by the smugglers, that the “goods” are on their way. They stop the vehicles in the middle of nowhere and demand their fee. As Sofiane had hidden some money, he was able to pay the extra to continue the trip.

Ibrahim took advantage of a fight between smugglers and rebels to escape. He crossed the Ténéré desert until Sabha alone, covering some 2,400 km. *“During the five day trip, I was very lucky to manage to hitch a ride twice over long distances without any problem...”*

Souleyman told me more detail about the events of his trip: *“Not even half an hour after we left Agadez, our pickup was ambushed. They dragged us out of the car, took all our bags, our wallets, our papers and of course, our money. They even took sneakers from some people because they were brand names. After robbing us, they demanded extra money from us to continue the journey. Since we had nothing left, they took us to a camp and imprisoned us. We did not have money so we had to work to pay for the trip. This hell lasted five months, during which time we were beaten with everything the guards could find, iron or wooden bars or pipes. We were electrocuted if we worked too slow or for any other reason. We had a small bowl of mush a day with barely any water... We could hear people screaming... We knew they were being tortured for no reason, just like that, out of pure cruelty. We also knew that there were others who were raped. Many women, yes, but men, too... People were dying around us and we were helpless. If someone was too weak to go to work, he was shot. Others were killed trying to escape...”* Souleyman told me all this in one go, without emotion, as if he did not want to stop so that he could tell me as much as possible. He stared into the distance for a moment that seemed to last a lifetime. Then he went on: *“Then we were lucky, there was a “big delivery” (implying humans) to the camp requiring free space. Ousman, myself and about twenty others, were released and loaded into 4x4s and taken to the next stop: Sabha...”*

⁹³ The drivers are either self-employed or they have purchased a “license” to be part of a transport company



The Libyan Hell

Sofiane sets the scene: *“In Libya, we can never go directly from point A to point B. We must always follow a very organised network, where every agent along the way strikes terror into the hearts of the migrants in order to make money: smugglers, militiamen, armed rebel gangs and the inhabitants who provide us with what is supposed to be food and shelter.”* Human trafficking is very lucrative in a country where there is widespread chaos since the overthrow of Gaddafi in 2011, which leaves an open playing field for mafia networks and trafficking of all kinds⁹⁴: drugs, weapons, various other “goods” including humans.

False imprisonment, degrading detention conditions, ill-treatment, use of torture, rape and sexual abuse, forced labour including prostitution... This is a list of just some of the daily violence reported to us. *“Men are sold for between 325 and 3,250 Euros depending on their capabilities. Women are sold for between 150 and 1,500 Euros. They are abused, raped and sometimes the captors organise scenarios in front of us and force us to watch. Worse still, sometimes under armed threat, the captors force some of us to rape the women, they make videos which they send to the women’s friends and families. Or they sell women to prostitution networks, what they call the “connection houses”... When I talk about women, I include very, very young girls as well...”*

Ghadames

Enzo and Mouctar entered Libya through Ghadames, a city which sounds like a dream going by the review in the Lonely Planet tourist guide: *“It’s a place like no other on earth... Listed as a UNESCO world heritage site (yes this city too!), this ancient city, where time seems to have stopped, is an invitation to the magic of the caravan towns of the Sahara...”* Yet, as Enzo says: *“At Ghadames hell truly began. We were locked in a warehouse for four days. We only went out to go to work, accompanied by armed guards. We had nothing to eat and just some salt water to drink. People were beaten, sometimes even to death ... An important new delivery of “goods” arrived and that’s why we were able to leave...”*

Whether they take the road that goes through Algeria⁹⁵ like Enzo and Mouctar, or the one through Niger⁹⁶ like Ibrahim, Mohamed, and Souleyman, both lead to another stopover city, a former caravan crossroads on the outskirts of the Libyan Sahara: Sabha. This city, which is the scene of regular tribal and ethnic clashes, is one of the “unforgettable” stages for the “travellers”, due to the levels of violence they were exposed to there.

⁹⁴ The links between human trafficking and criminal groups or militias as well as other forms of smuggling (such as drugs and weapons) have been documented by organisations such as the UN Office of Drugs and Crime, the Small Arms Survey and the US Institute for Peace. Problems of exploitation and abuse of migrants in the hands of smugglers have also been highlighted by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the Danish Refugee Council.

⁹⁵ Agadez-Arlit-Thamanghasset-Djanet-Ghat

⁹⁶ Agadez-Bilma-Madama-Al Quatrun



Sabha

Let's come back to Selim, Ibrahim, Mohamed and Souleyman on another stretch of road that will also take them to Tripoli. Sabha is a city totally organized around human trafficking and migrants are unlikely to slip through the cracks.

Selim sets the tone: *"...In Libya, we always have to hide because we, the Blacks, are used as merchandise to be sold, not by the police but by the militia. There are plenty of private prisons... The worst part is that they are guarded by our brothers: Ghanaians, Nigerians and Gambians... There, everyone is armed, even small children. There are also places called "Chads" which are gathering places for men looking for work, where the bosses come searching for cheap labour. Such places are traps where it is easy to catch us... In principle, these people do not kill us but, most of the time, you work without pay. Then there are the connections houses, where the girls are kidnapped and forced into prostitution... When we arrive in Sabha, there is a warehouse⁹⁷, which is known as "The Garage". That's where we are "parked"... I saw the girls they were taking... They were screaming... We never saw them again... Another time, I saw three men and a pregnant woman being beaten to death..."* Selim trembles, but it has little to do with fact that it is 4am and it is cold...

Mohamed also paid a high price for his time in this city: *"We had arrived in Sabha in the middle of a clash between two armed groups. Suddenly, the driver left us there and ran to protect himself from the gunfire. We all ran away because people were shooting everywhere... Then suddenly, a guy found us... We did not see it coming, he pushed us into a car, another guy inside blindfolded us. They took us to some sort of cellar... There was a guy the others called Walid, it sounded like he was the boss... He wanted 400 dinars (265 Euros) to let us go. I did not have enough money and no one to send me any, so I stayed locked up for three days, beaten, without anything to eat but a bowl of mush a day. I knew that if I wanted to stay alive, I had no choice but to escape, even at the risk of being killed... Thank God I succeeded."*

Ibrahim was caught by another armed gang: *"There, it was worse still. They chained me up and beat me... I thought it was over, that I was going to die there... This treatment lasted for several days... Then they left me alone... I do not know why... Then they proposed that I work to pay for the rest of my trip. Of course I accepted, I had no choice. But every time we worked, what we earned was stolen immediately by someone else. We were paid every night but the bosses tipped off the "rebels" who then robbed us. I worked in the fields in the day and at night I went with the others to the hostel. If there was too much work, we slept in a cabin in the field. I was eventually able to leave after one month and three weeks... Sabha, took so, so, much out of me..."*

⁹⁷ It is always difficult to know what type of centre it is. There are official centres, run by the DCIM (Detention Centre to Combat Illegal Migration) and unofficial centres (each tribe having its own militias and prisons and illegal centers, whilst ordinary citizens could also have their own prison on their property). The fact that the center is official (and sometimes even visited or supported more or less regularly by international NGOs to improve the fate of the detainees) gives no guarantee as to the way the detainees are treated. Especially since the detention can be equally as arbitrary in these official centres as in the unofficial ones.



Crossing the desert

Whether they set out from Ghadames or Sabha, all our travellers had to cross the vast desert plain of Hamada Al-Hamra and Djebel Nefoussa to reach Tripoli.

We left Souleyman, his friend Ousman and twenty other young people in Agadez. They travelled for four days through the desert, in a truck overloaded with men, women and children, under the blazing sun, with nothing to eat but grass or roots, while sharing a drum of water which was supposed to be enough for everyone for the entire trip. Like the others, they were kidnapped on arrival and ransomed. If they pooled the money they had left, only one of them could go on. They drew lots and it was Ousman who left. Souleyman remained imprisoned for 22 days, until a new “arrival” forced the guards to make room.

Shortly after leaving Sabha, in Brak, Ibrahim and his companions were intercepted by an armed gang and locked up for four days on a farm. They were beaten violently but always in a way that did not prevent them from working in the fields. They only had one meal during the whole time they were held and once the work was done, they were thrown out on the road.

Mouctar and his “friends” made the trip to Tripoli in three days without any problems. However, Enzo’s journey was more epic: *“At first, we came across a good Arab who hid us for a week and a half because there were clashes between different militias going on all around as at that time. The best way to stay safe is to lie low, as you never know who is fighting who and why... It is no coincidence that we talk about the Wild West out there... We are always suspicious, always on our guard. We cannot trust anyone. When you go on an adventure, that’s how it is: you either become wise or you go crazy... A man found us a truck and we travelled with him for two days and two nights, almost without stopping, without drinking or eating... But in the middle of the desert, we were stopped by armed men. They made us get out and the driver had to leave... The guys yelled at us. We did not know if they were police officers, soldiers or Asma Boys⁹⁸. We were shoved into a huge hole. At the bottom there were rooms, lots of rooms... It was unbelievable... I had never seen anything like it⁹⁹... There we were given a small half litre bottle of water for ten people. We even licked the bottle as we suspected we would have nothing more before the next day... We had not eaten for two days, we had no strength left. Some people tried to escape but they got shot... There was a woman with a baby who was crying... He must have been hungry... They killed her and the baby... They rolled up the dead in newspaper and forced us to load the bodies into a truck, they then dumped them somewhere... This lasted several days, then one morning, without any explanation, they shoved about fifty of us into a covered truck and we drove all the way through to Tripoli without stopping...”*

⁹⁸ A gang of bandits

⁹⁹ After cross-checking, these are Berber underground houses in Gharyan. Round pits of about 10 metres, excavated on several levels, in the middle of the desert, for protection from cold, heat or invaders. Today these houses are abandoned.



Beni-Walid

Beni-Walid, is another unavoidable place for human trafficking. Selim will not say much about the detention conditions there, but his silence speaks volumes: *“I stayed locked up in this prison for 7 days... We were given food every four days or so... I thought I had seen the worst in Sabha, but no...”*

To reach the next stage, he travelled for eight hours in a container full of “human goods”: *“I was lucky, I just fainted. Women and young children died...”*

Until then, Sofiane had managed to keep hold of his belongings since he had hidden enough money to pay the extra amount requested at each stage. But in Beni-Walid, he was robbed of everything he owned: *“photocopies of my diplomas and my references, my passport, two USB keys and my three phones. Absolutely everything was taken. It was the Asma Boys. My belongings were worth about 500 euros. I thought they had extorted enough but no... They like to humiliate us and as they know all the tricks we use it is not difficult for them... We hide everything that is most important to us in our anus... I had the USB key that contained the most important files, including my studies... I'll just tell you that they pointed a weapon at my head to get what they wanted...”*

All his fellow travellers were imprisoned in various ghettos¹⁰⁰ in the city. Sofiane does not know the name of the one where he was kept but they were all abused. People were beaten or stabbed and left for dead. Some died from their wounds later on. Others were shot at close range. More than twenty of his fellow travellers were executed in one way or another: *“This prison was one of the worst. Naval officers ran this camp. There is a torture room. My friends who tried to escape were all killed...”*

In addition to his possessions and documents that were stolen and the 2,000 Euros he had paid since the start of his trip, Sofiane had to pay 1,500 Libyan dinars (1,000 Euros) to be released. He will always bear the scars of his stay in Beni-Walid on his arms and back...

The journey was not yet over; it was still over 150 km to the Tripolitan coast: *“We left Beni-Walid in covered trucks, and were driven through the desert. We were put up on one farm after another. It did not occur to us to try to escape because the next farmer would have snitched on us and we would have been caught, ransomed, raped, shot or all of these things. The Asma Boys are everywhere and they run the entire area...”*

¹⁰⁰ Maxwell Ghetto and Abdou Karim Ghetto are names that have cropped up several times in the testimonials my colleagues and I collected on the Aquarius



Tripoli¹⁰¹ and the surrounding area¹⁰²

Sofiane had already lost everything by the time he reached Tripoli; then his brother informed him by telephone that their mother had died of a heart attack when she heard about the perils of his trip...

He felt all the more obliged to succeed, but while walking the streets of Tripoli, looking for one of the companies where he had wanted to apply for work, Sofiane was kidnapped. He was taken to a detention centre reserved only for Black people, known as the “Gray Garage” or “Prince Ghetto”: *“The detention conditions were terrible in this place. We had a single, barely edible meal each day and very little water, and were also kicked and beaten with iron bars all day long, threatened with weapons, slashed with knives... I cannot even say what the women were going through... Some of them lost their minds, others were lying face down on the ground... NGOs came to these centres to assess the situation. There were people from DWB and the International Organization for Migration (IOM*). If you complained, the jailers generally ended up hearing about it and you would not come out alive (at best, you would not have been tortured before you were killed). Even if these organisations suspected what we were going through, they could not do anything if they did not have a testimony. I could not take it anymore and I had nothing to lose so I decided to talk, whatever it cost me. I was ready to die so I thought if it could help in some way... But they must have felt I was more interesting alive than dead; so I was hung by the arms and beaten for three days...”*

Sofiane emerged from this hell after nine days, on September 10th, 2016, because volunteers were needed for a construction site. On this occasion, he found his cousin. He did not know that he had left home too. They decided to call their families in Cameroon to try to raise the 800 Libyan dinars (530 Euros) per person they had been asked for. That day Sofiane decided to sail to Europe too because he felt nothing good could happen to him in Libya. On September 22nd, 2016, he left Prince Ghetto for Sabratha¹⁰³: *“We were 58 people (men, women and children) crammed into a container on a truck. We set off for Sabratha, but just as we arrived there we were kidnapped again with about fifteen other people... We managed to escape thanks to a Tripolitan who gave us a free lift to Sabratha, where we stayed for about three weeks... You know, Sabratha is a city organised around human trafficking. There are about 300 transit camps. There is even one (if not more) rubber dinghy factory... After three weeks, we were escorted to the beach and we finally left.”*

¹⁰¹From the west to the east of Tripoli, there are different transit zones, for those waiting to embark on a boat, and the beaches where the rubber dinghies leave from: Zouara, Mellitah, Sabratha, Zaouira, Tripoli, Tajoura, Graboli, Misrata.

¹⁰²*“Following the uprising in Libya in 2011, the north-western coastal towns of Zuwara, Sabratha and Zawiya became the three main smuggling hubs for people seeking to take boats irregularly to Europe”* according to a report by Amnesty International, “Libya’s dark web of collusion: abuses against Europe-bound refugees and migrants”, 2017, pages 15.

¹⁰³*“Once famous for its ancient Roman ruins, Sabratha, divided and weakened by the fighting between local militias and armed groups that had declared allegiance to the armed group calling itself the Islamic State, became infamous in 2016 as the centre of people smuggling by boats to Italy. The smuggling industry in Sabratha quickly picked up where Zuwara left off. The move happened so quickly that there was no noticeable drop in operations nor in the numbers leaving. Smugglers staked out vast areas of the city for their operations, renting out land or apartments and villas - whatever they could use to house thousands of people while they awaited their turn to leave. The smuggling network in the city operated like a well-oiled machine: bringing people into the city, placing them on lists, taking people out on boats and organising the transfer of funds. A hierarchy within the smuggling network in Sabratha was established, with go-betweens, drivers and fixers all working together to sustain the lucrative business under the control of head smugglers.”* - *Ibidem*, page 16.



Ibrahim stayed for two weeks in a hostel in Tripoli with some “travelling companions”: *“It was important not to leave the hostel in order to avoid trouble. The hardest thing was that we were hungry, but at least we were free. We were put in touch with a guy responsible for organising our crossing from Sabratha. We paid him 200 Libyan dinars (130 Euros) but we never saw him again. One day, another guy came to the centre and asked to speak to the Senegalese. He looked at us from every angle, then he asked me if I was well treated, I answered that I wasn’t; he asked if I was in good health and I said yes. He said to the owner of the hostel: ‘It’s him I want. How much do you want for him?’ Then we left together. His name was Rachid. He took me to his home, or rather to a small room next to his house. He gave me something to eat and allowed me to wash. He dressed me from head to toe and I rested for four days. I found it weird... I was even scared... So he told me he had paid a lot of money to buy me and if I wanted I could work for him for two months and then we would be even...”* Ibrahim did indeed leave after two months, for Zouara¹⁰⁴...

Mohamed was separated from all his travel companions in Tripoli: *“I found another group... It’s better to travel in groups. There were seven of us. We met a guy who drove us to Sabratha, but on arrival we were kidnapped... Maybe we had been resold... Yes, there is a good chance that was what happened... There, we had to give 1,000 dinars (660 Euros) per person. Since I did not have any money I stayed in prison. The other six also stayed but managed to raise the funds after two weeks. When they wanted to leave the guards shot them. Five died right away. One did not die until the next day.*

I stayed there for five months, during which time I was tortured and beaten (he shows me many scars on his legs). I was not the only one, we were all beaten, injured, insulted... I ended up escaping but the guards chased me down the street and I only managed to get away with the help of a Tunisian, Habib, a nice guy who helped me and supported me. I worked for him, but freely, to make up for what he gave me each day and also to keep busy. From there I was able to call my family and they could call me too. I stayed with Habib for three weeks... He did not want me to leave and told me it was dangerous, but one night my younger brother called to tell me that my mother had just died... That’s when I decided to leave. There was nothing stopping me. In losing my mother, I lost everything. My father had died in 2003. Now my mother. I have no one else... In that moment nothing mattered anymore...” His friend Habib found a way for him to leave from Garaboli. It was there that he met Selim and they waited for two weeks before leaving early one morning.

¹⁰⁴ *“Sitting about 120 km west of Tripoli, Zouara is a home to the Amazigh minority. Given the proximity to the Tunisian border, the people of the city have been involved in cross-border smuggling, mainly in fuel and food, for a long time. In the years following 2011, they shifted to people smuggling using existing fishing boats. When conflict broke out in 2014, the security situation descended further into chaos, the security vacuum further emboldened the criminal networks in Zouara, which became the lead hub for people smuggling in Libya. The city’s smuggling business peaked between 2014 and 2015. However, residents of the city, horrified by the sight of the dead bodies of refugees and migrants increasingly washing up on their shores and the illicit business for which their city had become notorious, started to mobilise against the smugglers. On 27th August 2015, a boat with some 500 refugees and migrants capsized just five nautical miles off the shore of Zouara. While 197 people survived, the majority drowned, with 183 bodies being recovered from the coast in the two weeks that followed. This tragedy was the last straw for the residents of Zouara, who went out onto the streets to protest, calling for an end to the smuggling business in their city. Local security officials responded by arresting three people accused of being smugglers responsible for the 27th August incident. During this period, there were also a number of attacks on smugglers by masked men from a group that formed to combat the smuggling networks in Zouara. As a result, the smugglers left Zouara. However, since the demands from those seeking a way out of Libya remained high, many of those organising and profiting from the business simply relocated to the next coastal city to the east, Sabratha” - Ibidem, page 16.*



Souleyman met up with his friend Ousman again in Zaouia. Once again the victims of extortion, and without money, they were imprisoned for another five months. The most cruel and degrading beatings were part of the daily routine of the forced labourers: *“One day, without any explanation, the guards shot several prisoners. Ousman received several shots in both legs. He lost a lot of blood during the night and died early in the morning... I stayed close to him all night. I saw him die without being able to do anything for him... I was just relieved when he stopped breathing... I cried for my friend Ousman... He was such a good friend...”*

After this Souleyman decided to flee. He met a man called Saylor, who offered him some work to pay for his passage. On the day Souleyman was supposed to sail, the man demanded more money. Back to square one for the second time. It was third time lucky. As they boarded the boat, having first made the 134 passengers undress, Saylor asked Souleyman to put out his hand “to give him one last memory” and he stuck the blade of his knife into his palm...

We will hear about Enzo’s arrival in Tripoli a little later...



DIFFERENT AXES AND MIGRATORY ROUTES TO LIBYA AND ON TO EUROPE

For West Africans, the main entry points are:

- The Nigeria-Niger border for migrants from Nigeria or Central African countries
- The Burkina Faso-Niger border for people from Burkina Faso, Ghana, the Ivory Coast, Mali, Senegal, Guinea
- The Mali-Niger border for those coming from Mali by Yassane (Ayorou) in northern Niger

The itineraries are organised around three key stages:

- Agadez is the meeting point for migrants waiting to leave for Algeria or Libya
- Dirkou is the mandatory gateway to or from Libya and an alternative gateway to Algeria
- Arlit is an official crossing point and a clandestine entry route to Algeria

Regarding the axis Agadez-Dirkou, the routes are as follows:

- North-East / East (to Libya): Agadez - Dirkou - Siguedine - Dao Timmi - Madama (border post) - Tommo - (Al Quatrun - Sabha in Libya)
- North-East / North-West (to Algeria): Agadez - Dirkou - Siguedine - Chirfa - Djado - Djanet (Algeria)

Regarding the Agadez-Arlit axis, the routes are as follows:

- North-West / North (to Algeria): Agadez - Arlit - Assamakka (border post) - (In Guezzam - Tamanrasset in Algeria)
- North-West / North-East (to Algeria): Agadez - Arlit - Tchingalen - Adrar Bous - Tchibarakaten-Djant (Algeria)

For Eritreans, Ethiopians and Somalis, the route is:

- Sudan - Chad - Niger (Agadez) - Libya

The Syrians go through Jordan and Egypt. Entering Libya at Solloûm, they follow the coast to Tripoli.

Migrants from Asia (mainly Pakistani, Bengali and Bangladeshi) often arrive by plane to Egypt (Cairo) or Libya (Benghazi or Tripoli)



THE STORIES OF WOMEN

Portraits

Abi, the child from the streets (Nigeria)

Abi turned 18 a few months ago. She is from Nigeria. Second to last in a very big family, she left home with her older sister when they were 14 and 16 years old because there wasn't enough money to feed them all. They lived on the streets and managed as best they could to survive. In March 2015, her sister decided to try her luck in Europe on the advice of a friend. Since then Abi had heard from her less and less, never knowing where she lived or what she did for a living. It was always her sister who called her.

In the neighbourhood where Abi did odd jobs to try to get by, a store keeper she knew suggested she meet his nephew who knew somebody, who knew somebody else, who was planning to go to Europe. After that everything moved very fast. The nephew made all the contacts and paid in advance, telling her she would reimburse him once she arrived and settled in Italy. For her safety, he suggested she travelled with his aunt. The following week he drove them to Kano¹⁰⁵ where a chauffeur was waiting to escort them to Tripoli. They left on 3rd July, 2016. Abi felt her life was changing and she was excited to go and surprise her sister...

Efe, the naive (Nigeria)

Efe is 30 years old. She left four months ago, on the advice of a friend who had supposedly recommended her as a housekeeper to a rich Tripolitan family. She reached Kano where a group was preparing to depart for Tripoli. There were only young women escorted by "a light-skinned man" (most likely Libyan). When they arrived in Tripoli they switched "guides" and Efe understood that they had just been sold; she then made the connection with the stories of human trafficking that she had heard: *"I always thought that these stories were the exceptions and, most of all, that it only happened in the circles of prostitution. I did not think it could happen to any woman... at least I never thought I could get caught up in it."* At this point she began to understand the magnitude of the trafficking: *"The light-skinned man was just a transporter who came to receive the delivery of the merchandise for a boss in Libya - and the worst thing is that this boss was Nigerian!"*

Yasmine, such a young girl (Ivory Coast)

Yasmine is 16 years old. She is from the Ivory Coast. Her father was killed by rebels. He was an important representative of their village. *"We are Dyulas, one of the most important ethnic groups... There are the Bétés, the Baoulés, the Peuls, the Malinkés... I do not know what sets us against each other but at any rate the confrontations are bloody. There were often deaths in the towns and the villages. Nobody was safe and the police were not able to maintain order. So with my mother's blessing, my uncle, decided to leave*

¹⁰⁵ In the north of Nigeria, towards the border with Niger



the country to go to Europe. I left with my aunt, my uncle. We crossed Mali, then Niger, without a problem. After that it was terrible..."

While the men give details about their journey but remain discreet about what had happened to them personally, the women who can testify describe in detail everything they were subjected to and let their emotions out.

One night, my watch was between 2am and 4am, with Francis and Kate*. After making the rounds of the different decks to make sure that everything was calm, and everyone was as comfortable as possible, we came back to sit on the bridge. The women's shelter was packed. Most of them slept up against each other, crushed by fatigue and emotions. Abi was sitting in the entrance watching the sea break against the bridge. She didn't ask for anything. Her body was just there, hunched over on itself. Our eyes barely met but that was enough. I went and sat beside her and we stayed there for a long time without moving, shoulder to shoulder. I felt her sagging against me. I remained still so as not to scare her off until she said: *"Ma' I'm cold."* I wrapped her in a survival blanket.

As I have said already, sometimes a simple gesture is enough to deeply upset the survivors on the *Aquarius*. Kindness probably seems unreal after what they have endured. Sitting next to each other once more, Abi settled herself firmly against me and started to tell her story. It was long, precise and rolled out in one go, without a single pause for breath. As she told her tale she hunched over, swaying back-and-forth, and ended up curled up in a ball with her head on my knees. I don't know which one of us was rocking the other. What I know is that my watch had long finished when she finally went to sleep and the lights of Trapani were dancing on the shore nearby...

"I will never be able to return home..."

"The crossing of Niger went without a hitch, but everything changed in Libya..." A few hours after crossing the border, in the middle of the desert, their chauffeur was stopped by the Asma Boys and shot dead right there. Abi and her aunt started screaming in terror. One of the men punched and kicked them. They were both raped by two other men. They were then bundled into a 4x4 and taken to the next town where they were sold to the owner of a brothel and then separated.

At first, Abi refused to prostitute herself but she quickly realised she was risking her life by doing so. *"He took me to the top floor, got undressed and because I was refusing to sleep with him he pushed me onto the floor and beat me with his belt, he then kicked me all over... He took out a knife and slashed me... Then he raped me... On both sides. I stayed there for several days but I do not know how long exactly... I know that he left and came back... I heard the door... I didn't feel anything anymore... He came back with other men... I think I passed out... I do not know how long all of this lasted... When I woke up, for a few seconds I did not know if I was dead or alive. And then the pain suddenly hit me... It tore through my tummy and then I understood that I was in hell. I cried... I so wanted to go back home, to see my mother again... But at that moment I realised there was no chance of going back. I also understood what must have*



happened to my sister and why she never gave me a number to reach her... If my family back home learns what has happened to me it would bring such shame upon them... So I will never be able to go back home...". Seething with rage, she made up her mind a few days later: she would earn the 1,500 Libyan dinars (1,000 Euros) to be freed...

“This is pretty much what happens to all the women...”

Efe, who had heard Abi’s story last night, came to see me a little later in the morning to tell me her story: *“What the young girl told you last night is pretty much what happens to all the women...”* When they arrived at the gates of Tripoli, Efe and her group were stopped by the police and taken to the big prison called Grey Garage. The detention conditions were terrible: *“It was dirty and very noisy. We could hear people screaming in pain. There were dead people lying on the floor... At any rate, they weren’t moving... Sometimes prisoners had to take them to another room but we did not know what the guards did with them. Once there was a couple. The guards raped the woman in front of everybody and they sat her husband on a chair and made him watch. They put a gun to his head and hit him with the butt if he tried to turn his head away. It was the same day they transferred us to another prison. They pretended we were going to cross the sea by night. But instead they took us to Zaouia, one of the worst prisons. When we arrived the guards had shot some men. They were lying in pools of blood on the floor. Some were already dead. Others died during the night. It was terrible. I stayed there for one week. Then we were taken to a house to wait until nightfall and then at 1 o’clock in the morning they pushed us into the boat. We had to take off our shoes before getting in. Any possessions we had were taken from us. And that’s how we left... I would be too ashamed to go back home too after all of this.”*

Human trafficking for the sex trade

The importance of the cultural mediator

The cultural mediators on board the *Aquarius* act not just as translators but also as interpreters, because they decode the ethnographic elements for us. Sarah* was one of them. Originally from Nigeria, she was really put to the test during her mission for DWB, because many of her fellow countrymen cross the Mediterranean. It was not unusual to see her moving around the ship followed by a swarm of young Nigerian girls. Other than the fact that she was a role model, they could also confide in her about the violence they had suffered, in their own language. But it was with the silent ones that Sarah especially excelled.

She would start her long-winded speech something like this: *“Girls, I know what I’m going to tell you probably does not concern you but I want you to listen to me anyway, so that you can tell all your friends...”* And then she would explain to them what some men did to seduce and deceive the most vulnerable among them, dangling in front of them the fabulous work opportunities in Libya or Europe, which would free them and their families from poverty for good. Sarah told them also about the “Madames”, the purveyors in charge of escorting them on their journey, or of greeting them in Italy to arrange the next stage... It was difficult for these young girls and young women to accept the idea that their “boyfriends” or their nice



“Aunty”, sometimes the only person to have given them any attention at all, could have deceived them like this. It takes time to sink in but we don’t have much time on the *Aquarius*: just a few hours if we transfer the survivors to another ship, or a day and a half if we take them to Italy.

Either way, this circuitous way of approaching the matter worked well, at least for some. For example, after four rescues, we arrived in Italy with 678 people on board. Of the 160 women rescued, three of them knew they were pregnant. Just a few hours before disembarking, nine girls told Sarah they believed that they were victims of human trafficking. Marina, the midwife, told me later, after gynaecological examinations, six of them were carrying the child of their “boyfriend”. Abi too was pregnant and she was perhaps also infected with sexually transmitted diseases, like so many of these young girls. They are not given any means of protection under the pretext that their clients would refuse to use them.

Organised prostitution networks

To say that organised crime in general, and human trafficking in particular, take a heavy toll on women is an understatement, and young Nigerian women are particularly exposed¹⁰⁶. *“Of the 5,346 Nigerian women who arrived in Italy this year we estimate that 80% were victims of trafficking”* declared Federico Soda, the Director of the coordination bureau of the IOM for the Mediterranean in Rome¹⁰⁷. Some of them have amassed huge debts to come to Europe because it is, in their opinion, the only way to escape poverty and to help their families back home. Sometimes voodoo is involved. Precious tells how her mother’s neighbour dragged her to a sorcerer: *“He killed a chicken and poured its blood on my head and then he told me that, if I didn’t do exactly what this neighbour said, I would die and my family too. So when this neighbour told me to go with her sister, I left...”* They are therefore particularly vulnerable and exposed to the risk of human trafficking for sexual exploitation purposes. If, after many years, they manage to pay off their debts, they are free to lead their lives as they wish, but because it is so difficult for them to find work in Europe outside of the prostitution network, they end up organising the very trafficking of which they were once victims. The young women in the cities are certainly more likely to suspect that there is a risk of being sexually exploited when they arrive in Europe than those living in rural areas. However, many of them do not realise how bad the conditions will be.

The IOM is one of the international agencies we work with when we are disembarking survivors, if we suspect that some have been subject to human trafficking.

Abuse, sexual violence, organised gang rapes ...

That day, on the main deck of the *Aquarius*, there was a whole bunch of young people, boys and girls alike, who chatted and laughed happily. You could almost believe that they had made it without being subject to

¹⁰⁶ IOM, n° 23, 2006, Migration, Human Smuggling and Trafficking from Nigeria to Europe - in the Migration Research Series, Geneva: <http://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/mrs23.pdf>; and UNODC Human trafficking and smuggling of migrants: <https://www.unodc.org/nigeria/en/human-trafficking-and-smuggling-of-migrants.html>

¹⁰⁷ IOM “Survey on the prevalence of trafficking and exploitation in the Mediterranean”, published online on 8/12/2016



the horrors of Libya, or at least had, at their young age the psychic plasticity which allowed them to bounce back; something to do with resilience... And then somebody tells a story about macaroni. Well, at least that's the word I understand in the middle of their exchange in a language foreign to me. This is the dish served in many detention centres in Libya. It is a memory often mentioned by the survivors: a meagre ration, barely cooked and unsalted, served as if to dogs, at best every 24 hours. The word had an immediate effect on Yasmine and she started crying: *"Everything these men did to us, everything they did to us."* Her friends gathered tightly around her. They surrounded her with their bodies, their arms, their words. They cradled her... I let them do it and remained available, neither too close nor too far. If they need me, they will know where to find me. A little later, Yasmine's friend leads her to me: *"She wants to tell you Ma..."*

From the country of the Dioulas to Sabratha...

"...After arriving in Libya it became dangerous. Everywhere you had to hide to escape the rebels. We moved in groups, with our Black brothers, to try to protect each other. We were always asked for extra money so that we could move from one stage to the next. They beat some men. They shot others. They were not dead but they were left there, like that. We saw dead people on the side of the road, they were left there, like that, without a grave.

We went all the way from Agadès to Tripoli in fear. We had very little to drink and even less to eat. At Ben-Walid we were arrested by the rebels, who wanted to separate us from the men, so the men intervened. The rebels fired. My uncle was killed. Some women escaped but others were caught, including my aunt. I managed to hide. Then I saw a taxi driver who did not look mean. He looked generous. So I went to ask him for help...

He took me to a ruined house, put me in a room where he locked me up for several days. I do not know exactly how long but not more than a week... He forced me to do all kinds of things... Sometimes he just asked me to touch him... Sometimes he wanted to sleep with me... he went away then he came back... he started again... Sometimes I pretended to be unconscious... He gave me a little to drink and eat... Then he started again... And one day he forgot to lock the door, so I fled. I found brothers who took me into their group to protect me. We left through Sabratha..."

Yasmine's story is unfortunately not uncommon. A trip without problems is the exception, not the rule, so much so that many survivors have incorporated all these crimes into some kind of normality: *"Oh yes, that's life when we go on an adventure"* Yasmin's brothers say, when she describes what she has been through...

In its report from January 2017 to March 2018 entitled "Desperate Journeys"¹⁰⁸ the High Commissioner for the UN Refugee Agency denounces rape and other sexual violence against migrant women (and migrant men) and illustrates its document with a number of testimonies that complement those collected aboard the *Aquarius*.

¹⁰⁸ UNHCR, "Desperate Journeys", <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/63039>





UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS¹⁰⁹

A quarter of the passengers who come aboard the *Aquarius* are minors: babies, sometimes just a few days old, not to mention the three who were actually born on-board; children and adolescents who have already lived several lives, before they arrive on deck. They have experienced all the extreme situations that their elders told us about in the previous chapters: thirst, hunger, as well as beatings, fear, terror. Like their elders, they saw suffering, heard screaming. They felt their parents falter; some watched them die. They had seen dozens of dead bodies, on the roadsides, in the camps, in the boats. A hand sticking up out of the water... just a hand... it's a drawing that we see often. The children who board the *Aquarius* are those who have "succeeded"; they have made it through hell. But there are the others, those whose families will never see them again, because they are dead or because they have been kidnapped and/or sold to armed gangs or various networks including the prostitution networks, along the way...

When they arrive on the *Aquarius*, the babies cry, the little ones are distraught and worried. The brief seconds of transshipment, when they are separated from their mother or father, are appalling. They scream and struggle. They take a long time to calm down. After a few hours, most find the cheerfulness and curiosity of their age. They explore their new playground and it is hard to keep track of our little pirates of the Mediterranean! But, at night, other stories are told, cried and screamed... Some of the mothers are too exhausted to listen to the complaints of their children; others will not take care of them. Each of them has too much to do to recover themselves, so, rescuers, photographers, seafarers and medics sing, dance, draw or play around on deck until dad or mum is able to take over again...

¹⁰⁹ This refers to children and teenagers who are not accompanied by their parents or usual legal guardians as they are called in some countries.



One day we rescued from one of the crowded boats a 10-year-old boy, travelling alone with his very young siblings. This little “head of the family” is rather an exception; many of his peers, just two or three years older than him, travel alone. These are the much-publicised Unaccompanied Foreign Minors (UFM) or Isolated Foreign Minors (IFM), whom we prefer to call simply children and adolescents travelling alone, to emphasise their vulnerability due to the lack of parental protection. In 2016, all three charities - SOS MEDITERRANEE¹¹⁰, DWB¹¹¹ and UNICEF¹¹² had the similar figures on the numbers of unaccompanied children:

for every 10 minor migrants, 9 of them are alone

It is 4am and I am doing my rounds on the decks. A young boy, curled up under a ladder, is shivering. It's Sélim, whose “adventure” we followed in the previous chapter. I wrap him in a survival blanket, hold him close and rub him to warm him up. I don't think it's just the cold that makes him tremble... He lets me do it, a little surprised, even stupefied: *“...It's funny that you take care of me like that... Nobody ever did that for me...”*

Sélim went from disappointment to dismay during his 10-week trip, which included a month in a Libyan prison: *“...I did not think that human beings could subject other human beings to such horrors... That's why I cannot sleep... I see so many things in my head, I hear so much screaming... I can't get over it... So when you take care of me like that... I was not used to it before my journey... but now...”* Sélim does not finish his sentence.

Youssef turned 17 and a half. He lived with his parents and siblings at his grandfather's farm in The Gambia. His high school was too far away, so he had to leave the farm to be nearer school. He went to school from Monday to Friday morning and returned home to work on the farm at weekends. Youssef really wanted to continue his scientific studies, but it was impossible for his parents, who wanted to help their child but could not afford to. Youssef decided to go to Europe to try to win a scholarship that he would repay while working in the host country. He thought that he would be able to send money to his family so that his brothers and sisters could also continue their studies...

While Youssef already understood the inequality of opportunity in the world, he also had the same interests as any other teenager: football, music, video games... but in two months of travel, the world as he knew it blew up in his face. Youssef was thrown into a world of barbarism and it will take him time to recover... if he ever does: *“I have always tried to believe in life. I am a believer, that's what helped me in moments of doubt where I did not want to continue. I've seen and suffered too much on this trip, things I never could have imagined... Wherever you are in Libya, you're never safe. Anything can happen to you, without*

¹¹⁰ Of the 12,087 people who have been rescued by the *Aquarius* since 7th March 2016, 83% are men, 17% women, and 25% minors, of whom 21% were unaccompanied. Figures from the management of SOS MEDITERRANEE, 26/01/2017

¹¹¹ According to DWB, in December 2016, *“16% of those who arrived on Italian soil were children and 88% of them were alone”*, Ten things to know about the crisis in the Mediterranean, published on 2/12/2016 on the DWB French website (msf.fr).

¹¹² According to UNICEF, *“Out of 10 refugee and migrant children arriving in Europe this year via Italy, more than nine are unaccompanied. UNICEF warned that they face increasing threats of ill-treatment, exploitation and danger of death”*: Unaccompanied minors, dangers at every step: Unicef.fr, published on 14/6/2016



reason, any time...” Youssouf cannot stop talking, he unburdens himself as if telling the tale would help him to get the horror out of his head. *“They brought women. There were girls, girls even younger than me... They raped them in front of us and we had to watch. Their fathers and brothers were there. Those who moved, or tried to intervene were killed on the spot. They pulled me out of the group, with another guy my age, and they wanted us to rape a woman. I refused. I would rather have died than do that. So they hit me in the head. I fell. They kicked me and beat me with iron bars. I do not know why they did not kill me. There were some who were held at gunpoint if they did not do it. So...”* Other young people had gathered in silence, then the tongues began to loosen. There were about 20 people around us now, from Cameroon, Ghana, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Nigeria, who all wanted to report the abuses they had suffered.

On another day, a group of young people, Francophone this time, settled around me. Many came from a neighbourhood in Daloa, a town in west-central Ivory Coast. They had ties to nothing and no one in this country which had thrown them onto the streets, some at a very young age. The gang had become their only family, so they had left together. But they had no idea what they would go through. For the most part, forced labour in the fields, without pay and with barely enough to eat.

Many spoke of “propositions” of a sexual nature, pointing out to the others that they had refused. But were they all really able to refuse? They all testified to losing friends on the way, whether they had been kidnapped, locked up elsewhere or separated when the boats were launched...

A few days later, in a corner of the aft deck, a young boy sits alone and looks around, as if he is surprised. Kwamba is 14 years old. He is from Cameroon. He travels alone. His parents are dead. That's why he decided to leave, because he would have become a burden if he had stayed with his uncles and aunts. *“I was afraid to die tonight...”* he says about his time on a makeshift boat. He cannot say anything more. He stares straight into my eyes and turns his head towards the open sea. Again, he looks at me. I see he's trying to tell me something, but no more words come out and I do not insist. It's already a big enough deal that he can say he was scared... We both remain silent and then Enzo approaches and that's when he told me about his “adventure”. As a result, Kwamba was able to recover slowly. Over the three-way exchange, he says that his passage through Libya was fast and that he was protected by his brothers of colour, so he was not abused *“except for some hits with sticks”*. Yes, we have reached the point where we consider that being beaten with a stick is a mere trifle given the horrors suffered by Black men, women and children in Libya...

Brahim is 12 years old. He was on the boat on which only 25 people survived. He left home alone to *“go on an adventure”* too and *“made friends on the way”*. Since his arrival on the *Aquarius*, he has been unresponsive, staring into space, as if he was still in the rubber dinghy. He will stay like that for several hours. I do not ask him anything but keep an eye on him. When I come back to see him at nightfall, I ask how he is doing and he tells me: *“I was in the boat where there were 99 dead. I know you brought the dead people aboard. I would like to know if my friends are among them, or if they drowned.”* With the help of his neighbours on deck, he makes me a list of nine young people. For each of his friends, he describes



the clothes they were wearing and any distinctive features they had. We compare the information he gives us at length with Dr. Sarah*. After checking, we are able to identify each of the dead but none of Brahim's friends are on board. So they all drowned...

I could go on and on with the testimonies of children and teenagers who, like Selim, Youssouf and the young people of Daloa, like Kwamba, Brahim and Yasmine, who we met above, were all forced out of childhood long before their time.

Girls, with few exceptions, remained quieter than boys... but we know that in Africa, which has become a significant source of human trafficking victims, women account for 70% of this traffic. These girls, young boys and teenagers represent two thirds of the children who are victims of sexual exploitation and forced labour¹¹³... And the worst part is that Europe does not give these children any additional protection, as numerous reports and articles have documented.¹¹⁴

“CROSSING THE SEA: IF YOU'RE SCARED, YOU DIE...”

Crossing the Mediterranean was a step in the journey most travellers dreaded. Some dreaded it so much they decided against attempting it altogether. And yet, as Abdoulay says: *“The only risk I saw in this trip was the water, when in fact it was the smallest risk...”* Most of the survivors would agree with him.

It has only been a few hours since we rescued Abdoul-Rachid and his “adventure buddies”. We are all leaning on the guardrail looking at the horizon, waiting to know if we will go back to Italy together when he says: *“They launched us out to sea around 11pm, telling us that we would be in Italy in two or three hours. By around 1am, we had run out of petrol and we lost the telephone signal. We were lost and drifted for hours. There were 120 people in the boat and in order not to sink we had to look out for each other... We had only God to help us. Nobody slept out of fear of falling into the water... In fact, we all thought we were going to die... There were many moments when I regretted leaving home. I missed the warmth of my family... But it was important to dismiss these thoughts... I am convinced that there is strength deep in every human being. It's something like that that keeps him going. If he does not have it, he dies...”*

Moussa is sitting with his friends on one of the lockers on the port deck. Under these circumstances and in these conditions, two days and two nights are enough for bonds to form. *“Come Ma’, you said you were the writer of the boat. I would like you to write the story of my friend Sila... When I think of my friend Sila... Peace be with his soul... It's so terrible what happened to him. Throughout the journey it was he who helped me never to lose hope.*

¹¹³ UNODC, Global report on Trafficking in Persons. New York, UNODC research, December 2016, page 1:

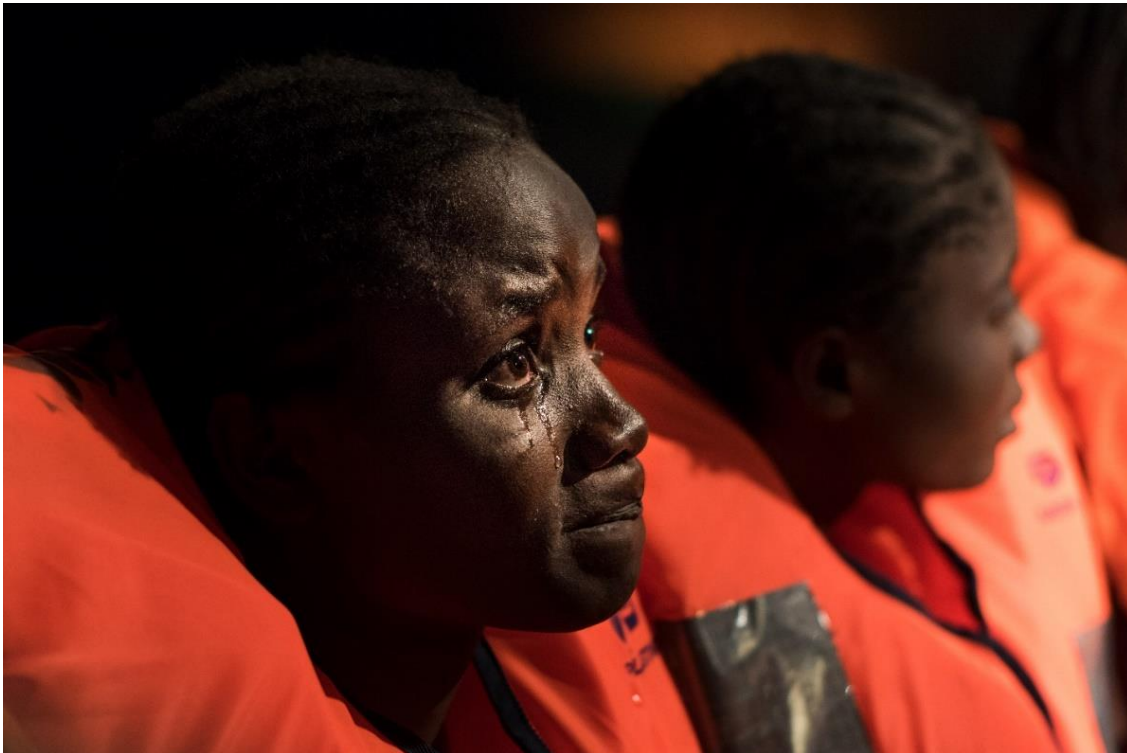
http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/glotip/2016_Global_Report_on_Trafficking_in_Persons.pdf

¹¹⁴ <https://www.savethechildren.it/sites/default/files/files/rapporto%20young%20invisible%20enslaved%20DEF.pdf>, 28 juin



He said to me: 'Why did Allah lead us here to leave us when he knows why we left? He knows we left to help our families live better. If we die, many lives will be endangered... Have faith my friend. God is great. We must endure, we will get there'..."

Moussa then described the condition of the people sitting around him in the boat. All of them were hungry and cold. Most were suffering from seasickness because the waves were so big. Over time, some of them started to give up and slide to the bottom of the boat. Moussa's friend was one of them. *"In the boat, we both had a stomach ache. He had swallowed water and diesel. I held him to the end, I did not want to fall asleep and leave him, I wanted to stop him from completely slipping to the bottom of the boat..."* Moussa is silent for a long time, leaning his head against the side of the boat. I can see that he is clenching his teeth but the tears finally flow. Sitting beside him, Henri, his companion in these harsh times, turns his head. He too is crying. Moussa continues: *"He vomited on me. He crapped on me. I held his hand because we were scared. And now he's gone and I'm alive... You see, last night I woke up, startled. I thought we were still on that boat. When I looked around, it felt strange. When I close my eyes, I see my friend. But even if I have my eyes open, I see him too..."*



Henri takes his turn: *"It's true Ma', we all thought we were going to die. I too was scared for my little brother. He had swallowed a lot of diesel and salt water. He did not respond anymore. When the helicopter came to pick him up last night I thought I had lost him. I thought he was dead... How was I going to tell my parents? Thank God, he's better..."* Henry falls silent again and stares at the horizon.

Sarah lost her daughter at sea. In their boat seven women died. *"I could not help her... She was beautiful you know... You have children? ... Yes, so I do not need to tell you anything more... You understand..."* Sarah is right, there is nothing more to say. No words can express what she feels. She takes me in her arms



and squeezes me hard... Honestly I do not know which one of us is holding the other... She spends the entire trip sitting on a bench on the aft deck in the midst of the hubbub of all the youngsters. She looks around constantly, takes care of all the young people around her. She gives advice, comforts, mediates for them and yet she is absent from the world. She still smiles, but with a fixed smile, a smile that does not reach her eyes.

Enzo is one of those who had made several attempts to cross the Mediterranean: *“When we arrived in Tripoli, we were taken to the privateer who took us to the coast at Sabratha at night. My first attempt to cross was in October: 165 people in a rubber boat. The boat started to take on water very quickly. We drifted from midnight to 6am. We were saved by a fisherman who took us back to the beach, but an hour after arriving on the shore we were shot at. There were 13 deaths: 10 women, a boy and two babies. Some fled but there was a small group who wanted to get the bodies onto the beach and at least say a prayer, since we could not take them with us. My friend Mireille was among the dead... She was my friend... I loved her so much, Mireille...”*

The women who remained in the boat were burned by diesel and water. They had to be carried because they could not walk. A car arrived and we asked for help. The driver made a phone call and a bus picked us up. We were taken to the first centre for a week and a half. It was an official Detention Centre to Combat Illegal Migration (DCIM), supported by the European Union... I recognised the acronym with the stars on the sheets, beds, blankets. And the DWB team came to see if we were sick or injured.” But the prisoners preferred to be silent rather than expose themselves to the reprisals of their guards.

“Then we were transferred to a big prison. There, we were treated like slaves. People were dying every day of hunger. We received a piece of bread and a glass of water every 24 hours. There were people who went crazy. They babbled things that made no sense. We knew we had to do something if we did not want to die there so we decided to organise our escape. Five of us were killed. We were able to reach a smuggler who brought us to Tadjourah. There, we were locked up all day and we boarded a boat at night. Those who did not want to come anymore because they were afraid were beaten. One of the guys wanted to undress us. His sidekick prevented him. We left at midnight.”

Zeinab, like Brahim, was part of the boat where 90 people drowned. She is the only woman who survived. She is 19 years old. Trapped in a forced marriage for years, Zeinab decided to flee the abuse her husband subjected her to. She left with Fatiah, her friend, who planned to join her husband who had arrived in Italy last summer: *“From the start, people said we could not leave in this boat, because the engine made a funny noise and there was water in the bottom. They were beaten and thrown in. We could not turn back. We left in the night, around midnight or 1am. There was a lot of wind. The water was rising higher and higher. The people in the boat were scared. There were some who shouted, others who called to God. The men said not to move so as not to overturn the boat. This lasted for a long time, maybe two or three hours, I do not know. Then the waves grew stronger and the boat capsized. Most of us did not know how to swim. The boat was pushed by the wind. People clung to each other. Everyone was shouting. The boat drifted*



further and further. I do not know how I managed to catch up with it. I do not know how to swim. Some of the men managed to right the boat and climbed back in it, but they stopped others from climbing in. The two women you showed me in the photos earlier, they had managed to get in, but the men pushed them back into the water. That's why they drowned and when I managed to hang on to the ropes, they pushed me away too.

Then the rescue boat arrived and they threw us life jackets. Again, the men did not want us to catch any. So I held onto the back of a boy in the water because he had a life jacket and we were picked up.” Zeineb told me her struggle in one go, without any emotion in her voice. She was not afraid, because in order to survive, you have to block out your emotions. “If you're scared, you die,” she adds. Her face is closed. Her muscles tensed. I do not know how she found the strength to tell me all that. Like all those whose journey has been murderous, she sees the faces of the people drowning around her. Whether she closes her eyes or not, she hears them shouting their last words... “Now I cannot look at the sea.” And indeed, she did not leave the shelter once but remained curled up during the entire trip. In addition to the sea, if she had ventured out onto the deck at any point she might have run into one of the men who had tried to drown her and had drowned others...

EUROPE, LAND OF PROMISES...

We cannot stress enough that Europe is not the favoured destination of displaced Africans. As research into migratory flows by the Mixed Migration Centre (MMC)¹¹⁵ shows, their primary destinations are countries neighbouring their own. Paradoxically, the main countries of origin of migrants (Ivory Coast, Guinea, Senegal, Burkina Faso and Nigeria) are also important host countries for African migrants. As explained by Amélie Gatoux, project leader of MMC West Africa: *“if we look at the migratory flows heading north, it is important to note that, when asked, less than half of the West African migrants planned on reaching Europe as their final destination. They aimed to stop in Algeria, in Morocco or in Libya. Because it is cheaper, easier, it is possible to find work and because the diaspora is already set up there.”* Sonia Joly, head of MMC North Africa, confirms that Libya is perceived as a destination rather than a transit country: *“Libya has always been a host country to seasonal migration from countries in the southern Sahel. In the last 30 years we have seen a more general movement from the whole of Africa, with many migrants who have actually settled in the country. It is worth noting that, in the past, Libya was a rich country and that Mouammar Kadhafi's policies were open to immigrant workers. After the revolution, migration policies were stricter but the demand for labour remained high, mainly in the construction and service sectors.”*

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) has estimated that there are between 700,000 and a million refugees and migrants in the country¹¹⁶. Among them, 7,100 migrants are currently detained in the

¹¹⁵ Created in February 2018, under the wing of the Danish Refugees Council (a Danish humanitarian NGO which helps populations in war zones), to provide continuous monitoring of population movements on the African continent. The study was presented in an article by Médiapart on 17th August 2018 : https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/international/160818/l-europe-n-est-pas-la-destination-privilegiee-des-migrants-africains?page_article=2

¹¹⁶ <https://www.iom.int/fr/news/lorganisme-des-nations-unies-charge-des-migrations-oim-ameliore-les-conditions-de-vie-des>



27 detention centres managed by the Directorate for Combatting Illegal Migration (DCIM*)¹¹⁷. These figures do not include all the people detained in the non-official centres run by militias, human traffickers and/or private individuals... Numerous reports, articles and documentaries have exposed the terrible conditions in these centres¹¹⁸.

This explains why a large proportion of these migrating people find themselves backed up against the sea and choose to flea Libya, rather than actively choosing to cross into Europe.

Approaching the Italian coast is always an important moment for the survivors on board the *Aquarius*, whether they chose to come to Europe or were forced to do so. They have risked so much, and dreamed of this arrival for so long... Their faces are serious and their eyes are glued to the bright lights of the coastline that appears at dawn. We prepare our passengers as best we can to what awaits them in the immediate future, upon their arrival at the port. For the rest of the sailing, we do not say much, except that the trip is far from over... In time they will discover that, whilst on the *Aquarius*, they were recognised as singular beings; courageous, worthy, with dreams and ideals. In certain parts of Europe it will not be like that...

Amani*, another cultural mediator, had a lovely ritual of his own: just before the landing, he moved from deck to deck, unfurling a map of the Central Mediterranean and showing the survivors the beaches of the Libyan coast where they had set out from, where they had been rescued and where they would be arriving in Sicily. From there, he introduced them to Italy, the first European country they would step foot in. It was a very moving moment, where each passenger silently measured the path they had travelled, and perhaps recalled some of their experiences along the way... We repeated these explanations in English, French and Arabic. We then explained the various sanitary and customs procedures that awaited them. Georgia, on the other hand always insisted that when they arrived, they should also be assisted by a cultural mediator who would explain the administrative procedures they needed to go through in order to stay in Europe...

Given all the procedures at the docks, disembarking always takes a long time, often as much as ten hours. This period gives rise to many significant conversations.

During one of the trips, in the midst of the buzzing life on the decks of the *Aquarius*, a man had caught my attention. Everything about him reminded me of *El Desdichado*, “*the dark, the widowed, the inconsolable*” from the sonnets “*Les chimères*” by Gérard de Nerval, the one who held inside “*the black sun of melancholy...*” All of us on board know that some people can be in shock, we also know that those who are silent and isolated need to be watched especially carefully. As this man avoided all contact, I kept an eye on him during the two evenings and the day we spent together.

¹¹⁷ Ibidem.

¹¹⁸ <https://www.msf.fr/actualites/libye-une-situation-intenable-dans-des-centres-de-detention-surpeuples>
<https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/MDE1975612017ENGLISH.PDF>
<https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/N1711623.pdf>
CNN documentary November 2017



Although he always refused everything, I continued to offer him a blanket, a bottle of water or biscuits, but without insisting. It was just a way to be there for him, to let him know that I saw him...

On the morning we were to disembark I sat at the top of the ladder of the starboard deck, facing the docks. I was not doing anything in particular; I was just there, maybe for the last time, to answer questions from passengers waiting to set foot in Europe.

That morning the man I had been keeping an eye on for two days, seemingly in vain, came deliberately to sit next to me, smiling at me: *“Salam aleikum Myriam¹¹⁹... I'm Firaz...”* He began to speak as if we had known each other for a long time, showing me the buildings on the Pozzalo wharf: *“It's funny, these buildings are exactly like those we left in Libya ... I hope that behind these walls, things will be different...”* Then, without warning he took out his phone and showed me the pictures of his house in Aleppo. I should say the “ruins of his house”, because it was just a heap of pebbles and dust... He told me snippets about his family before confiding his fears: *“I'm a little afraid about how I will settle in here. It's a new birth since I lost everything ... I was warned that it would be a long time before I get the chance to travel legally... I'm afraid I won't be able to cope with it... Do you know how long it takes...? My family is in London, I'd so like to be with them. I would be more patient there... I could become someone again... I'm like my house, a ruin...”* What could I say to Firaz? That he is “lucky” that the war in Syria is “fashionable” nowadays? That he might be able to get refugee status more easily than others? It would have been cynical, inappropriate. And yet anybody who works in the humanitarian world knows this: some conflicts are “sexier” than others, then it changes...

The day we disembark, questions pop up in everyone's minds. I remember particularly well the last landing I took part in just before Christmas. We had about 700 people on board, which meant that the procedures were going to take a long time. So I sat on the foredeck and then walked from one group to another, juggling between French and English, slipping some Arabic words here and there for those who did not understand what was being said. But above all I listened to them:

Amadou: *“Should we tell them Ma', what happened to us on the way? Afterall, it was quite something, you know! If they send me back to Libya, I'd rather kill myself...”*

Lamine: *“I was doing sports studies at home, but I am ready to wear the colours of the country that will help me become a professional athlete!”*

Entekele: *“And if they have not finished the interrogations tonight, where are we going to sleep, Ma'? Will we stay on the ship one more night?”*

Racine: *“Do you think we can call our homes tonight? It's been so long since I left, my mother must think I'm dead... This is the first time I cannot wait to hear her shout at me!”*

Yakhoub: *“Is there a Facebook page Ma', so we can update you?!”*

¹¹⁹ Marie is Myriam in Arabic



Meanwhile, on the aft deck, the passengers were leaving the ship, 10 by 10 or 20 by 20. Last handshake: fist against fist, fist against heart.

On the wharf, whatever the port, the scenes are always the same: the survivors of the Mediterranean wait in single file, in confined spaces, marked out with posts and chains, standing only to move from point A to point B. Doctors in white coats check these new arrivals. Further down the line, the police take pictures of them. In the midst of all this, the bustle of the Red Cross volunteers, in red and white. Volunteers from other NGOs are busy too: one gives out shoes, the other one bread, and another just a smile or a kind word... These outraged citizens come to help because they feel that their states have failed to perform their duties, because they reject speeches that get bogged down in politico-economic issues, because to each of them a human being is a human being and must remain at the heart of our concerns. Until June 2018, mass arrivals took place daily in Sicily. The crisis situation continues, and without such volunteers, the system would collapse. Each one of them on this dock does what he can without any resources, while other agents profit from the system and get rich, having managed to become essential in the control of migration.

The landing on 17th June 2018 in Valencia was a memorable one, notably for the huge support from volunteers. After the closure of the Italian and Maltese ports the *Aquarius* along with the *Dattilo*¹²⁰ and the *Orione*¹²¹, finally reached the end of their nine day Odyssey at sea. On arrival 2,300 people had turned out to welcome the 630 survivors¹²². Each passenger and each family who set foot on the Spanish quay were greeted with applause and warm words and immediately looked after by doctors and translators (Arab, French and English). In addition to the engagement of the Red Cross and other associations, bus drivers¹²³ came to help on their day off, transporting journalists and volunteers between the ships and rescue tents and taking the survivors to different locations¹²⁴.

Disembarking the dead

We want to end this book by mentioning those we have accompanied to Europe without their knowledge: the deceased. Their disembarkation differs considerably from one port to the next. In one port, five bodies are stacked up haphazardly in two mortuary vans, like any old bags, while a poker-faced parish priest blesses “the load” and mumbles his prayers and onlookers on the dock pinch their noses. In another port, 22 coffins have been lined up on the dock to receive the corpses of those who drowned, and volunteers lay a flower on each of them.

¹²⁰ Ship belonging to the Italian coastguards

¹²¹ Ship belonging to the Italian Navy

¹²² <http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20180617-aquarius-bateau-rescapes-dattilo-entree-port-valence-migrants>

¹²³ https://www.huffingtonpost.fr/2018/06/17/a-valence-ces-conducteurs-de-bus-ont-sacrifie-leur-jour-de-repos-pour-aider-au-debarquement-des-migrants_a_23460960/

¹²⁴ To the city hospital (the pregnant women), the Centre in Chestre (for the men) and to the centre in Castellon (for the 123 minors).



Once more, Max expresses the anger we all feel: *“I have tremendous respect for those who have survived this journey. And (...) I feel a deep anger at the idea of using death, or the risk of dying, as a deterrent to those who want to cross the border. This is unacceptable.*

*We cannot use the sea and the threat of death to manage migratory flows. Any society which defines itself as modern cannot accept this. The sea does not differentiate between economic migrants and refugees, between those for whom it has been decreed that they deserve to come to Europe and those who do not... This is unacceptable! But Europe is merely sitting back and contemplating the situation. For me, it's horrible and it's even more horrible than watching people die in front of me in the boats.”*¹²⁵



¹²⁵ Interview of Max by Mathilde Auvillain, “The sea does not make the difference between economic migrants and refugees”, in the SOS Méditerranée Logbook, 17/01/2017, <https://www.sosmediterranee.fr/journal-de-bord/portrait-max-avis>



CONCLUSION

On 9th December 2015, the organisation SOS MEDITERRANEE unveiled a project to charter its first search and rescue vessel, the *Aquarius*. February 2016 marked the start of operations of this huge civic venture and in that first year the rescues took place unhindered. The Italian and Maltese Coordination Centres actually coordinated the search and rescue operations and rapidly gave us a “safe port” to disembark the survivors. On most occasions, we went to Catane. If either the infrastructure or the personnel at Catane were unavailable, the furthest we had to go was to the north of Sicily, to Reggio de Calabre or Palermo. The teams we liaised with at the Coordination Centres were professional and committed to playing their part, and acting in the best interests of both the survivors and the rescue teams. At that time, SOS MEDITERRANEE received strong support and numerous European institutions and politicians paid tribute to our endeavours.

The geopolitical context began to change in 2017 when Italy, supported by the European Union and the United Nations, signed an agreement with the Libyan government with the aim of externalising migration issues. Thereafter, obstructions to rescue operations became frequent.

In 2018, Italian ports were closed to the rescue NGOs, who were subject to relentless smear campaigns, as well as being undermined in the political, judicial and administrative arenas of several European member states. The rescue vessels of the different NGOs were repeatedly blocked in port, one after another, for anything from a few days to several months. The *Aquarius*, which had become a highly visible symbol of civil resistance, was no exception. As a result, on 31st December 2018, SOS MEDITERRANEE was obliged to terminate the charter of the vessel and suspend operations. Political motivations had taken precedence over respect for human life, fundamental principles and values as well as over human rights, international humanitarian law and international maritime law. This led to fewer migrant crossings in 2018, but many more deaths¹²⁶.

The teams working for SOS MEDITERRANEE and its partner, Doctors without Borders, were already under intense pressure before the additional complications of 2019. Whilst maritime law was being steadily undermined in the Central Mediterranean and the rescue capacity was dwindling, the European Union decided on 27th March 2019 to suspend the maritime activities of Operation SOPHIA¹²⁷, which had enabled the rescue of over forty five thousand people.

¹²⁶ <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/mediterranean> (18/01/2019) “The death rate has climbed in the Central Mediterranean, mainly between Libya and Italy / Malta. Last year one person died for every 42 who managed to cross the Mediterranean according to the United Nations High Commissioner (UNHCR). From now on, one death is registered for every 18 survivors.” https://www.lemonde.fr/a-bord-de-l-aquarius/article/2018/09/14/le-monderemonte-a-bord-de-l-aquarius_5354923_4961323.html.

¹²⁷ The EUNAVFOR MED, also known as Operation *Sophia*, was a military operation launched on 18th May 2015 by the European Union as a common security and defence policy to prevent migrants from attempting to cross the Central Mediterranean, but which no longer had any vessels from the spring of 2019. The operation ceased on 31st March 2020 to be replaced by the Operation *Irini*.



European financial support of the Libyan “coastguards” and the sudden transfer of the coordination of rescues to Tripoli led to more than nine thousand people being intercepted in the Central Mediterranean and sent back to the Libyan camps; i.e. back into the vast network of human trafficking which is so widely documented.

Whether the NGO vessels are at sea or not has never influenced the decisions made by people living in this hell¹²⁸. What difference does it make whether you lose your life in a Libyan camp or at sea? All the survivors agree on this point. Those who regularly accuse the NGOs of aiding the work of the human traffickers and encouraging the “migrants” to undertake their perilous journey across the sea must surely realise that their theory of the magnet effect carries little weight... It was therefore imperative for SOS MEDITERRANEE to find a new vessel and to return to its search and rescue operations as soon as possible.

After eight long months spent locating and then equipping a new vessel, the *Ocean Viking* set off from Marseille on 4th August 2019. It is a cargo ship similar to the *Aquarius* but more modern, more powerful and most of all flying a Norwegian flag which would, we hoped, be better able to resist European pressure than Panama had been. The *Ocean Viking* began its search and rescue operations in a context where even the obligation to come to the assistance of people in distress at sea was no longer automatically respected. Indeed, merchant vessels, as well as military vessels, are less and less inclined to come to the aid of people in distress because of the high risk of being blocked at sea, being refused a port to disembark the survivors, of being faced with endless paperwork issues¹²⁹, and worse, of ultimately being obliged to seriously breach international maritime law when they receive the formal order to take the people they have rescued back to Libya, which is anything but a “safe port”.

However, in that same summer of 2019, after months of deadlock, several EU member states began to discuss a temporary mechanism for disembarking and allocating the people rescued in the Central Mediterranean between the states. This Franco-German initiative led to a promising declaration of intent signed by Italy, Malta, France and Germany. In September 2019, for the first time since the closure of all Italian ports in June 2018, an Italian port authorised the *Ocean Viking* to dock. The rescue NGOs began to hope that a real, reactive and lasting allocation system would resolve the issues of disembarking the survivors in a “safe port”.

Unfortunately, this trial phase never materialised into a formal agreement and the number of occurrences of ships having to wait at sea multiplied, irrespective of whether they were humanitarian, merchant or military vessels. Negotiations had to be conducted on a case-by-case basis and became more and more laborious. The previous records of time spent waiting at sea were broken. Several Captains were obliged to declare a “state of emergency” because of the tense situation on board their ships as a result of the uncertainty and anguish. Both 2018 and 2019 were treacherous years in the Central Mediterranean.

¹²⁸ <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/mediterranean>

¹²⁹ cf the reprisals the Panamanian flag administration were subjected to



The following year, 2020, will be remembered for an event that affected every citizen around the world: the global COVID-19 pandemic. It caused serious difficulties in access to medical and logistics services in most countries, as well as totally disrupting the maritime sector: it was impossible to change crew; ports were closed; boats, survivors and crew were in quarantine, and so on. During the first wave of coronavirus in March, all Schengen member states decided to close their borders for a period of at least 30 days. This was the most extreme measure taken by all member states in an attempt to contain the global pandemic. A state of emergency was declared and/or health measures were put in place in most countries including lockdown.

In a decree published on Tuesday, 7th April 2020, the Italian authorities announced that their ports could no longer be considered “safe” because of the coronavirus. In other words, the humanitarian search and rescue ships were no longer authorised to disembark people they had rescued from the sea in Italy until at least 31st July 2020, the date initially announced as the end of the state of emergency, but which could also be extended. Less than 24 hours after the Italian announcement, the Maltese government followed suit announcing that migrants could no longer disembark in Maltese ports. These decisions were against international maritime law...

The pressure of the pandemic on societies around the world was unprecedented. It was unprecedented for the maritime world in general and for the crews of search and rescue ships in particular. During the first wave of the pandemic in Europe, almost all search and rescue NGOs operating in the Central Mediterranean put their activities on hold and remained in dock. The situation was the same for the *Moonbird* aircraft belonging to Sea-Watch and the *Colibri* belonging to Pilotes Volontaires, which were similarly grounded due to the difficulties accessing European airports. It was in this context, and with differing opinions on how to restart operations, that in April 2020 DWB decided to withdraw from the partnership with SOS MEDITERRANEE.

Several weeks later the *Ocean Viking* started up its search and rescue operations once more, with its own medical team. On board procedures were made more complex by the need to wear face masks and comply with protective measures and imposed quarantines before and after each return to port or setting sail. On 22nd July 2020, the *Ocean Viking* was detained by the Italian authorities in Porto Empedocle in Sicily, on the pretext that they had transported too many “passengers” on-board, without the required certifications, which implied that they had been transported in unsafe conditions... Equating “passengers” on a ship with people who have been saved from drowning is surely a distorted interpretation of the maritime legislative framework. SOS MÉDITERRANÉE, along with the owner of the vessel and the flag administration, did everything possible to meet the requirements of the Italian authorities and make the required costly modifications to the ship. The *Ocean Viking* was released by the Italian maritime authorities five months later, on 21st December 2020, during a final inspection. At the beginning of January 2021, the SOS MEDITERRANEE crew will head out to sea once more and be able to resume their search and rescue operations in 2021.



It would seem that the objective had been achieved: towards the end of 2020, when a second lockdown had been declared, the *Ocean Viking* was prevented from saving people in distress at sea for a period of five months. This detention represents just another phase in the relentless harassment and disruption of sea rescue NGOs since 2017; the *Ocean Viking* was not the only vessel to be subject to such impediments¹³⁰, as evidenced below:

Ocean Viking ([SOS MEDITERRANEE](#)): detained in Porto Empedocle, Sicily

Open Arms ([Open Arms](#)): docked in Palermo, Sicily

Astral ([Open Arms](#)): docked in Badalona, Spain

Sea Watch 4 ([Sea Watch](#)): detained in Palermo, Sicily

Sea Watch 3 ([Sea Watch](#)): detained in Burriana, Sicily under a detention order from ITCG

Mare Jonio ([Mediterranea](#)): heading forward in Venice, Italy

Aita Mari ([Salvamento Marítimo Humanitario](#)): docked in Pasaia, Spain

Alan Kurdi ([Sea Eye](#)): detained in Olbia, Sardinia

Louise Michel ([MV Louise Michel](#)): detained in Burriana, Spain - blocked by an administration issue

From February 2016 to December 2020,
SOS MEDITERRANEE's search and rescue teams
spent as much time blocked in port by the Italian authorities
as they did on rescue operations at sea.
Despite this, over the same time period,
the crews on board the *Aquarius* and the *Ocean Viking* saved
thirty one thousand seven hundred and ninety nine people from drowning.

People drowning in the Central Mediterranean is no longer front page news, but it still happens regularly and the number of people attempting the crossing shows no sign of abating. On the 2nd October 2020, the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) called for “*urgent action to address the dire situation of migrants attempting to cross the Central Mediterranean Sea in search of safety in Europe*”, as well as the urgent need to “*tackle the shocking conditions they face in Libya, at sea, and - frequently - upon their reception in Europe.*” The press release mentions “*serious allegations of failure to assist people in distress at sea and possible coordinated push-backs that should be duly investigated.*”

Over the last five years, SOS MEDITERRANEE has remained resolute. Even if the impediments are more and more frequent, more and more severe, SOS MEDITERRANEE is still here, in France, Germany, Italy and Switzerland.

¹³⁰ https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/online_update_june_2020_sar_vessels_table_2.pdf



Today more than 800 volunteers and thousands of European citizens on land support¹³¹ the search and rescue teams at sea. The cause that unites them is very simple: reaching out to those in distress at sea.

The day when the European States deploy proper, sustainable rescue measures adequate for dealing with the tragedy taking place, SOS MEDITERRANEE will be able to withdraw from the Central Mediterranean search and rescue zone. Sadly, on 31st December 2020, we are not there yet.

<https://sosmediterranee.com>



¹³¹ 90% of SOS MEDITERRANEE's funding comes from individual donations



ANNEX 1: LIST OF INTERVIEWS

Date of interview	Firstname / Alias	Age (in years)	Sex	Country of Origin
15/11/2016	Adama,	20	M	Burkina-Faso
	Mouctar	21	M	Guinea-Conakry
	Sélim	17	M	Guinea-Conakry
	Zeineb	19	F	Mali
	Abdoul-Rachid	18	M	Senegal
16/11/2016	Mambie	18	M	The Gambia
	Moussa	19	M	Ivory Coast
	Henri	18	M	Cameroon
	Esi	25	M	Senegal
	Fatima & Ismaili	30 ?	F + M	The Gambia
	Brahim	12	M	?
23/11/2016	Nazif & Ahmad	30 ?	M + M	Togo
	David	41	M	Nigeria
	Djena	29	F	Cameroon
	Adèle	25	F	Cameroon
	Christelle	30	F	Cameroon
	Sarah	40 ?	F	Nigeria
24/11/2016	Sofiane	42	M	Cameroon/Niger
	Osei	31	M	Ghana
29/11/2016	Firaz	30 ?	M	Syria
	Fadaa & Khalil	28 & 24	M + M	Palestine
	Wajdid	30 ?	M	Tunisia
	Ibrahim	19	M	Senegal
	Mohamed	22	M	The Gambia
	Youssouf	17	M	The Gambia
03/12/2016	Kwamba	14	M	Cameroon
	Yasmine	16	F	Ivory Coast
	Enzo	19	M	Cameroon
05/12/2016	Souleyman	19	M	Senegal
	Precious	17-18?	F	Nigeria
	Dr Sara & her husband	24 & 28	F + M	Sudan
11/12/2016	Abi	18	F	Nigeria
	Efe	30	F	Nigeria
	Nnenna	28	F	Nigeria
12/12/2016	Abdoulay	38	M	Ivory Coast
	Abel, Binian, Meron, Fozi, Ermial, Terlu	23	Group of M	Eritrea
	Mamadou	19	M	Guinea-Conakry
	Lamine	18	M	Senegal
	Amadou	18	M	Senegal



The names and details (places of origin, studies...) of all those who have shared their stories, both adults and children, have been changed in order to respect their privacy and protect them.

These interviews were indirect and conducted on request by the survivors at the time and in the format which suited them best (one to one - face to face or side by side - or one to one but surrounded by a small group), in English or French, according to their choice, and without a translator, which did exclude anyone who didn't speak these languages.

The interviews lasted between 30 minutes and 2 hours.

There are more stories from men than women and children as these last two groups are looked after by DWB in the shelter. I gave priority to the fact that the women could express themselves in their mother tongue with the cultural mediators.



ANNEX 2: ORGANISATIONS

DCIM: The Directorate for Combatting Illegal Migration was created in 2012 to oversee the official detention centres in the country managed by the Libyan government in the fight against illegal immigration. Europe contributes to the finance of these centres *“for the (Libyan) authorities to acquire control over the land and sea borders and to combat transit and smuggling activities. The EU remains committed to an inclusive political settlement under the framework of the Libyan Political Agreement and to supporting the Presidency Council and the Government of National Accord backed by the United Nations. Where possible the EU and Member States will also step up cooperation with and assistance to Libyan regional and local communities and with international organisations active in the country.”* (Article 5 of the Malta Declaration of 03/02/2017).

CROSS: Centre Régional Opérationnel de Surveillance et de Sauvetage (Regional operations centre for maritime surveillance and rescue)

Danish Refugees Council: is a private humanitarian organisation, founded in 1956. They assist refugees and the displaced, protecting them from harm, safeguarding their legal rights, and empowering them towards a better future both inside Denmark and in conflict zones around the world. (<https://drc.dk/>)

Human Rights Watch: international non-profit making organisation for the defence of human rights founded in 1978 (<https://www.hrw.org>)

JRCC: Joint Rescue Coordination Centre for air-sea rescue based in Tripoli

MRCC: the Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre, based in Rome, is responsible for co-ordinating all search and rescue operations which are brought to their attention. The alerts can be made by the people in distress themselves, by a surveillance helicopter, a coastguard or any other vessel. As they have visibility of all maritime traffic, they are responsible for assigning the rescue mission.

The **EUNAVFOR MED**, also called **Operation Sophia**, was created on 18th May 2015 as one element of a broader EU comprehensive response to the migration issue, which sought to address not only its physical component, but also its root causes as well including conflict, poverty, climate change and persecution. The core mandate was to undertake systematic efforts to identify, capture and dispose of vessels and enabling assets used or suspected of being used by migrant smugglers or traffickers, in order to contribute to wider EU efforts to disrupt the business model of human smuggling and trafficking networks in the Southern Central Mediterranean and prevent the further loss of life at sea. It was suspended on 27th March 2019. (<https://www.operationsophia.eu>)

Frontex is an institution of the European Union which was created on 26th October 2004, by a decree of the European Council under the name *“European Agency for the Management of Operational*



Cooperation at the External Borders of the Member States of the European Union". Its mission is to coordinate and assist the member states in the surveillance of the external borders of the European Union and in the control of illegal immigration in the member states. It also serves to compile data and information in these domains and analyse risks at the borders. Frontex was already in charge of the Operations "Aeneas" and "Hermes" on the Central Mediterranean migratory routes. These operations ended respectively on 30th September and 31st October 2014. In November 2014, the European agency launched Operation "Triton", also on the central route, the most frequently used according to reports at that time (over 170,000 migrants arrived by that route in 2014). "Triton" took over from the two operations mentioned previously and the Italian operation "Mare Nostrum" which ended on 31st October 2014.

MOAS: Migrant Offshore Aid Station is an international humanitarian organisation founded in 2013 in Malta in response to the Mediterranean maritime migration phenomenon and is now dedicated to providing humanitarian aid and services to the most vulnerable people around the world. (www.moas.eu)

IOM: the International Organization for Migration is based in Geneva and was established in 1951. IOM works to help ensure the orderly and humane management of migration, to promote international cooperation on migration issues, to assist in the search for practical solutions to migration problems and to provide humanitarian assistance to migrants in need, be they refugees, displaced persons or other uprooted people. (<https://www.iom.int>).

UNODC: United Nations Office on Drugs & Crime

UNHCR: United Nations Refugee Agency



ANNEX 3: CREW MEMBERS

Aquarius

Alexander, Ship's Master (Belarussian)
Alexander Ship's Master
Alexander, Second Mate
Andréas, Chief Mate (Greek)
Ebenezer, Seafarer (Ghanaian)
Francis, Qualified Seafarer (Ghanaian)
Krisman, Chef (Philippino)
Rabbi, Cook (Ghanaian)
Ralph, Qualified Seafarer
Richard, Seafarer (Ghanaian)
Olegssander, Chief Mate
Sergeijs, Chief Mate
Wojciech, Ship's Master

DWB (Doctors without Borders)

Aloïs, Project Manager (France)
Amanuel, Cultural Mediator (Swedish)
Angelina, Midwife
Anje, Medic (German)
Christopher (known as Ferry) Project Manager (Dutch)
Georgia, Advocacy and Testimonies Officer (Italian)
Helmi, Nurse (Dutch)
Jonquil, Midwife (Scottish)
Kate, MSF communications officer (South African)
Marina, Midwife (Japanese)
Sarah, Cultural Mediator (Dutch)
Sarah, Medic (American)
Tashan, Nurse (Franco-Canadian)
Tim, Nurse (American)
Shaun, Logistician (Australian)

SOS MEDITERRANEE

Andreas, Seafarer, Rescuer (German),
Anthony, Seafarer, Rescuer (French)
Antoine, Seafarer, Rescuer then SOS MEDITERRANEE France Sea Rescue Coordinator (French),
Basile, Seafarer, Rescuer (Swiss)
Baptiste, Seafarer, Rescuer (Swiss)
Brigitte, Seafarer, Rescuer (French)
Christina, lookout, Rescuer (German)
Dragos, Seafarer, Rescuer (Romanian)
Edouard, Seafarer, Rescuer and MSF Logistician (French)
Iasonas, Rescuer (Greek)
Klaus P., Treasurer of SOS Méditerranée Germany



Kristin, Journalist (German)
Laurin, Photographer (German)
Loïc, Seafarer, SAR Coordinator (French)
Mathias, SAR Coordinator (German)
Mathilde, SOS MEDITERRANEE France Communications Officer,
Max, Seafarer, Deputy SAR Coordinator, SOS MEDITERRANEE France SAR Coordinator Manager (Irish)
Nick, Seafarer, SAR Coordinator (Franco-British)
Nico, Seafarer, SAR Coordinator (Italian)
Stéphane, Seafarer, Deputy SAR Coordinator then SOS MEDITERRANEE France Sea Rescue Coordinator (French)
Tanguy, Seafarer, Deputy SAR Coordinator (French)
Théo, Seafarer, Rescuer (French)
Thomas, First Aider, Rescuer (German)
Viviana, Rescuer (Italian)
Waldemar, Seafarer, Rescuer (German)



ANNEX 4: NGO RESCUE SHIPS

OPERATING IN THE MEDITERRANEAN IN THE SPRING 2017¹³²

Vessel Name	Flag State	Name of the NGO	NGO Nationality	Comments
<i>Iuventa</i>	The Netherlands	Jugend Rettet	German	
<i>Minden</i>	Germany	Life Boat	German	
<i>VOS Prudence</i>		Doctors without Borders	Belgian - Brussels	
<i>Bourbon Argos</i>	Luxembourg	Doctors without Borders	Belgian - Brussels	May 2015 to Nov 2016
<i>Dignity 1</i>	Panama	Doctors without Borders	(Spanish - Barcelona)	
<i>Le Phoenix</i>	Belize	MOAS	Maltese	The Topaz Responder (Marshall Islands) was no longer operating in the spring
<i>Astral</i>	United Kingdom	Proactiva Open Arms	Spanish	
<i>Golfo Azzurro</i>	Panama	Proactiva Open Arms	Spanish	NB : this ship was first used by the Dutch NGO Boat Refugee (Dutch) operating in 2016
<i>VOS Hestia</i>	Italy	Save the Children	British	
<i>Sea Eye</i>	The Netherlands	Sea Eye	German	
<i>Sea Watch 1</i>	The Netherlands	<i>Sea Watch</i>	German	
<i>Sea Watch 2</i>	The Netherlands	<i>Sea Watch</i>	German	
<i>Aquarius</i>	Gibraltar	SOS MEDITERRANEE & Doctors without Borders	French Dutch - Amsterdam	(Source : Italian Senate, May 2017, from the sources of Italian coastguards)

OPERATING IN THE MEDITERRANEAN IN THE SPRING 2018¹³³

Vessel Name	Flag State	Name of the NGO	NGO Nationality	Comments
<i>Sea Watch 3</i>	The Netherlands	Sea Watch	German	
<i>Lifeline</i> (ex <i>Sea-Watch 2</i>)	The Netherlands	Lifeline	German	Blocked in Malta from Jun to Nov 2018
<i>Aquarius</i>	Gibraltar, Panama then Liberia	SOS MEDITERRANEE & Doctors without Borders	French Dutch - Amsterdam	
<i>Open Arms</i>	Spain	ProActiva Open Arms	Spanish	
<i>Astral</i>	United Kingdom	ProActiva Open Arms	Spanish	Sailing ship not operating in winter
<i>See Fuchs</i>	The Netherlands	Sea Eye	German	Blocked in Malta from Jun to Nov 2018. Ceased operations
<i>Sea Eye</i>	The Netherlands	Sea Eye	German	Blocked in Malta in Jun 2018
<i>“Professeur Albrecht Penck”</i>	Germany	Sea Eye	German	Launch was planned Nov 2018 but was waiting for a crew
<i>Mare Jonio</i>	Italy	Mediterranea	Italian	Started operations in Oct 2018, accompanied by the sailing ship <i>Jana</i> for a 2 wk mission and then the <i>Burlesque</i> for another mission

¹³² <https://club.bruxelles2.eu/2018/06/n63-la-presence-des-navires-des-ong-au-large-de-la-libye-saluee-encouragee-puis-vilipendee-et-refusee/>

¹³³ Ibidem



ANNEX 5: GLOSSARY

Accommodation ladder: A portable flight of steps down a ship's side.

Bridge: control room from where the ship and communications are managed. On the *Aquarius* the bridge has an external platform on either side from which the Captain performed certain manoeuvres in port and from where the lookouts scanned the horizon. The bridge of the *Ocean Viking* gives visibility through 360°.

CPR: Cardiopulmonary resuscitation is a last resort intervention, for when a person is not breathing. It combines chest compressions with artificial ventilation.

Daymark: an Aid to Navigation, the daymark is an unlighted fixed structure equipped with a dayboard for daytime identification. It provides information to guide the mariner.

Drill: exercise or training session

Flag: a *flag*, in maritime terms, refers to the flag of the country a vessel is flying and under whose laws the vessel is registered or licensed. It is deemed the nationality of the vessel. The flag state has the authority and responsibility to enforce regulations over vessels registered under its flag, including those relating to inspection, certification, and issuance of safety and pollution prevention documents. A vessel cannot sail without such a flag. For regulations see the 1958 Geneva Convention and the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (Montego Bay, 1982).

International waters: any body of water situated beyond 12 nautical miles from the shoreline - outside the territorial waters of a state. Not subject to the sovereignty of any State. (1 nautical mile = approximately 1850m)

Life raft: is a self- inflatable emergency evacuation device. It is usually used by ships in case the crew and passengers have to abandon the ship. The *Aquarius* was equipped with small emergency life rafts that could be embarked on board the rescue boats, ready to be deployed at any time in case of a critical rescue.

Mess: dining room.

Monkey Island: the highest deck on the *Aquarius*, located above the bridge. A common name on ships.

MRCC (Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre): an RCC dealing with maritime SAR incidents.

RCC (Rescue Coordination Centre): a unit responsible for promoting efficient organisation of SAR services and for coordinating the conduct of SAR operations within a SAR region.

SAR: Search and Rescue

SAR Coordinator: Person in charge of the management of the mission for SOS MEDITERRANEE. This person is regularly on the bridge, together with the Captain, to oversee the operations, to take decisions, to coordinate the teams and other assets and to communicate with the SAR authorities.

SAR Zone: Search and Rescue Zone

Shelter: on the *Aquarius* this was a covered area located near the clinic used as a retreat and safe space for the women and children.



FURTHER READING

Legal framework for sea rescues

Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment Art. 3 (1984): <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/ProfessionalInterest/cat.pdf>

Regulation UE 656/2014 (Sections I1, I2, I3, I4, III10, III7, III9):

<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32014R0656&qid=1610288300584>

European Convention on Human Rights (1953) Art. 13, 2, 4 (Protocole 4):

https://www.echr.coe.int/Documents/Convention_ENG.pdf

Global Maritime Distress and Safety System (GMDSS) Manual (Section 10.2.3 Search and Rescue Information):

<https://www.navcen.uscg.gov/?pageName=GMDSS>

IAMSAR Manual (Section 2.3 Rescue Coordination Centres):

<https://www.imo.org/en/OurWork/Safety/Pages/IAMSARManual.aspx>

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966): Art. 6 Right to Life, Art. 7:

<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CCPR.aspx>

Resolution MSC 167 (78): Sections 3, 5 & 6; Some comments on international law:

<https://www.refworld.org/docid/432acb464.html>

Resolution MSC A.917 (22): Guidelines for the Onboard Operational Use of Shipborne Automatic Identification Systems (AIS) (Section 21):

[https://www.navcen.uscg.gov/pdf/AIS/IMO_A_917\(22\)_AIS_OPS_Guidelines.pdf](https://www.navcen.uscg.gov/pdf/AIS/IMO_A_917(22)_AIS_OPS_Guidelines.pdf)

International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue (SAR) (1979), Chapters 1, 2 & 3:

<https://www.imo.org/en/OurWork/Safety/Pages/SARConvention.aspx>

International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) (1974), Regulation 33, 7:

[https://www.imo.org/en/About/Conventions/Pages/International-Convention-for-the-Safety-of-Life-at-Sea-\(SOLAS\),-1974.aspx](https://www.imo.org/en/About/Conventions/Pages/International-Convention-for-the-Safety-of-Life-at-Sea-(SOLAS),-1974.aspx)

The 1951 Refugee Convention Art. 26, 33:

<https://www.unhcr.org/1951-refugee-convention.html>

UNCLOS (United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea), Art. 101, 110, 17, 18, 24, 25, 27, 28, 33, 3, 58, 87, 90, 95, 96, 98:

http://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/unclos_e.pdf

Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Art. 13, 14, 9:

<https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/index.html>

Web Resources

- **SOS MEDITERRANEE** website, blog & glossary of terms

<https://sosmediterranee.com/>

<https://onboard.sosmediterranee.org/>

<https://onboard.sosmediterranee.org/terms/>

- The website of the Mexican photo-journalist, **Narciso Contreras**, who investigated from February to June 2016 into the conditions of migrants detained in prisons and retention centres in Libya, as described by our witnesses. He won the Carmignac Photojournalism Award for his photo exhibition “Libya: a human marketplace”.

<http://narcisocontreras.photoshelter.com/>

- CNN documentary “**Libya Slave Auction**” by the journalists Nima Elbagir, Raja Razek, Alex Platt and Bryony Jones which won the Television Trophy in the 2018 Bayeux Awards :

<https://edition.cnn.com/2017/11/14/africa/libya-migrant-auctions/index.html>

- The website of the photographer **Samuel Gratacap**, whose photographic project and documentary began in 2007 in a detention centre in Marseille for migrants without identity papers. His objective was to understand the political and geographic situation at stake through direct contact with those suffering the consequences.

<http://www.samuelgratacap.com/fifty-fifty>

<https://www.foam.org/museum/programme/samuel-gratacap>



- The **Konbini** website and the documentary “*Boza*” about the rescue of migrants in the Mediterranean
<http://www.konbini.com/fr/tendances-2/exclusif-decouvrez-documentaire-a-bord-de-laquarius-navire-sauve-migrants/>
- The website of **Levi Westerveld**, who proposes a study of the cartographic representations of migratory tragedies in the Mediterranean Sea.
<https://visionscarto.net/ceux-qui-ne-sont-jamais-arrivees>
- **Malta Declaration by the members of the European Council on the external aspects of migration: addressing the Central Mediterranean route**
<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2017/02/03/malta-declaration/>
- **Oxford University’s Border Criminologies website: “Outsourcing European Border Control: Recent Trends in Departures, Deaths and Search and Rescue Activities in the Central Mediterranean”**
<https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/research-subject-groups/centre-criminology/centreborder-criminologies/blog/2018/09/outsourcing>
- **Human rights Council website: Opening statement for the 39th Session of the Human Rights Council by Michelle Bachelet, High Commissioner for Human Rights since the 1st September 2018.**
<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=23518&LangID=E>

Reports from international organisations

Amnesty International: “Libye, un obscur réseau de complicité”, 2017.

<https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/MDE1975612017FRENCH.PDF>, Décembre 2017

INFOMIE :

https://www.infomie.net/IMG/pdf/childfriendly_information_for_children_in_migration_roundtable_conference_report.pdf.pdf, 2018

International Organization for Migration (IOM) : “Marchés aux esclaves en Libye”, in

<https://www.iom.int/fr/news/loim-decouvre-des-marches-aux-esclaves-qui-mettent-en-peril-la-vie-des-migrants-en-afrique>. Publié le 11/04/2017.

IOM : “Migration, Human Smuggling and Trafficking from Nigeria to Europe” in the Migration Research Series,
<https://www.iom.int/fr/news/sondage-de-loim-sur-la-prevalence-de-la-traite-et-de-lexploitation-dans-la-mediterranee>, 8/12/2016

IOM : http://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/uam_report_11812.pdf, 2018

Save the Children:

<https://www.savethechildren.it/sites/default/files/files/rapporto%20young%20invisible%20enslaved%20DEF.pdf>

United Nations - Security Council:

<https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/N1711623.pdf>

United Nations: <https://migrantsatsea.org/2017/06/14/un-report-documents-extensive-and-grave-human-rights-violations-by-libyan-coast-guard-against-migrants/>

UNHCHR (the High Commissioner for the UN Refugee Agency) : “Detained and Dehumanised” (Détenion et dés-humanité), published on 13th December 2016

UNHCR: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/65086>, 2018

UNHCR: “Rescue at Sea: A guide to principles and practice as applied to refugees and migrants”



https://wwwcdn.imo.org/localresources/en/OurWork/Safety/Documents/UNHCR-Rescue_at_Sea-Guide-ENG-screen.pdf

UNHCR, “Desperate Journeys - January 2017 to March 2018”, April 2018

UNICEF: <https://www.unicef.org/coronavirus/niger-returning-home-isnt-option>

UNODC (United Nations Office on Drugs & Crime): Small Arms Survey and US Institute for Peace

UNODC: <http://www.unodc.org/nigeria/en/human-trafficking-and-smuggling-of-migrants.html>

Books on the subject

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The translation of this book from French to English has also been an international venture, undertaken by three volunteers who each wanted to help highlight the humanitarian disaster playing out in the Central Mediterranean.

The First Edition was translated by Kidan Afessa, an Ethiopian woman, who spent time studying Geopolitics and International Relations at The Toulouse Institute of Political Studies.

The Second Edition was translated by Alison Trenary, a British woman living in Toulouse and working in aeronautics. And the editing/proof-reading was performed by Annabelle Love, a freelance journalist based in Scotland, UK.



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