

# Overachieving Jewish med student to compete at the Summer Olympics

**Debra Nussbaum Cohen** June 11, 2021



In 2016, Andi Murez was inducted into the Southern California Jewish Sports Hall of Fame. (Courtesy photo)

Andrea Murez is likely the only Olympic swimmer competing in Tokyo this summer who is also halfway through medical school. Murez, universally known as Andi, is 29 years old, nearly 6'1" and grew up in Venice, California. She made aliyah in 2014 and for the second time will be competing in the pool as part of Team Israel.

Though she is the third generation of her family to distinguish herself in the water, she hardly took to it like a fish. Her paternal grandfather, Joe Murez, swam in the Danube River in pre-Holocaust Austria. Nazis would come to the river's edge waiting to beat up swimmers because they were Jewish, she recalled him saying. Murez spoke with the Forward from Tenerife, a Canary Island off the West African coast, where she was training with 20 other swimmers from around the world.

At age 3, while grandfather Joe tried coaxing her into the pool, "I only wanted to stand on the stairs," said Murez. Idolizing her older brother, Zak, who is three years her senior, at age 7 "I wanted to do junior lifeguard camp," like he was. "It took me three tries to pass the qualifying test, which was swimming four laps under a certain time."

At the end of junior lifeguard camp, the siblings asked older lifeguards if there was a local swim league and were referred to a Santa Monica team. For the first several years “all we would do is scheme and complain, trying to get out of swim practice,” she recalled.



Andi Murez at the World Championships in Budapest in 2017. (Courtesy photo)

That all changed when Murez was 12, changed coaches and began to enjoy her time in the water. And realized that despite getting off to a slow start, she had talent.

Her swimming talent was recognized when Murez won nine medals – five gold and four silver – at the 2009 Maccabiah Games in Israel. Returning to the Maccabiah Games in 2013, she won five gold medals and two silver, setting more Maccabiah swimming records and winning the Games’ Most Outstanding Athlete Award for Women.

Murez competed at the Maccabiah again in 2017, winning a gold medal in the 100

meter freestyle and setting a new Games record for her winning time of 1 minute 59.80 seconds in the 200 meter freestyle.

After finishing high school, Murez went to Stanford University, where she majored in biology and swam competitively. She graduated in 2013 and then, wanting to continue swimming, surveyed the options – which included joining a professional swim team. She had visited Israel before, and has some distant relatives of her father’s there. “Everyone in Israel was very welcoming and it seemed like a great opportunity.”

So Murez moved half a world away from the life she’d known in California. “It was a great decision to move far and become part of a new culture,” she said. She initially decided to focus on training and skipped learning Hebrew in an intensive course known as *ulpan*, but Murez has since made strides.

She lived at Wingate, Israel’s athletic training center, for three years. Swim friends would invite her to their homes for Shabbat, when the training center would empty out.

## ***Passing the competition and her medical exams***

She was the first Israeli woman to qualify for 2016's Summer Olympics in Rio. Sick with sinusitis, she didn't perform as well as she had hoped to, and had to withdraw from the backstroke and 200 meter freestyle events as she tried to recover in time for the 50 meter and 100 meter freestyle heats. She came in 30th place in the latter race.

After competing in Rio, she moved to Tel Aviv to start medical school at Tel Aviv University's Sackler School of Medicine. Murez completed the first two years of the program and then took a break to return to the pool and begin preparing for the Tokyo Olympics. She passed her first medical licensing exams and this fall plans to begin two years of clinical rotations in hospitals around Tel Aviv. Ultimately, Murez said, she wants to go into sports medicine or perhaps pediatric psychiatry.

Today, having taken an intensive *ulpan*, "my swimming Hebrew is very good. My day-to-day Hebrew is okay," Murez said. "If I need to call about an electrical bill, I can."

Murez is a bit disappointed that COVID-19 restrictions mean that she likely won't be allowed to tour Japan after the closing ceremony. She is focusing on doing well for Team Israel in the water and giving little thought to what shape her future swimming career may take.

Today, she noted, there is more opportunity for professional swimmers than there was in the past. "Now the age range is getting older. There's more opportunity to make a living at it," Murez said. "The International Swim League just completed two seasons. You can make money and travel to competitions with sponsors."

"It's hard to say if Tokyo will be my last Olympics," Murez said. "I'm pretty focused right now on swimming and school, but in the future I hope to marry and have a family. I'm still swimming because I like the challenge. I just want to see how far I can get and how far I can improve."