

Maintain the Contact, seek the Missing

The Central Tracing Agency

The two principal tasks pursued by the Central Tracing Agency at the ICRC in Geneva are to maintain links between prisoners and their families and to trace persons who have disappeared or have been separated from each other as a consequence of various events (international conflicts, civil wars, internal disturbances).

At present, an index of 45 million cards is the Agency's chief working instrument¹. It enables it to deal with thousands of tracing inquiries submitted to it each year. It is thus, by carrying out for over a hundred years the useful task of ensuring contacts between persons separated by war, that the Central Tracing Agency has acquired its reputation.

In 1870–1871, during the Franco-Prussian War, the International Committee obtained from both belligerents lists of the wounded and prisoners taken by them. Next, at its request, the belligerents signatories of the Geneva Conventions authorized captives to correspond with their families. Receiving, checking, sending on these innumerable letters was but one more job of the Agency.

During the First World War, the Agency received up to 18,000 communications daily. These figures show how essential this undertaking had become, representing the sole link between thousands of persons.

At the beginning of the Second World War, the Agency received between 500 and 600 mail items each day; this average was to

¹ *Plate.*

reach the figure of 100,000 cases daily by the end of 1944. Thus for the whole duration of that war, 110 million letters, of which 30 million were civilian messages, entered and left the Agency's offices. At that time, resort had to be made to the services of 900 persons assisted by 300 voluntary workers (for Geneva Headquarters), who were also helped by 1400 persons distributed throughout Switzerland.

It is normal that in the past few years the Agency has attempted to modernise its methods of work. Thus since the last conflicts information received is now fed into the card-index by computer.

This new method gives remarkable results in tracing difficult cases. Whilst, previously, use was made solely of alphabetical and numerical lists, each case can now be classified according to different criteria: alphabetical, by serial number, by prisoner-of-war number or by rank.

Better identification, the elimination of errors due to the retranscribing of information, economy in personnel and speed in tracing are the principal improvements brought about by this system.

The work of the Central Tracing Agency today

The efforts deployed by the Central Tracing Agency are as great as before; to be convinced of this, it is sufficient to list its activities in 1970. Thus, from January to December, it received 45,316 requests and letters and sent 43,510 letters. It initiated 10,091 enquiries with National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, ICRC delegations, the International Tracing Service at Arolsen and various other competent bodies, and closed 10,661 files; positive results were obtained in 4,936 cases.

These figures give only a very relative evaluation of the work accomplished, since they represent more than just an exchange of correspondence. Every request coming in necessitates a thorough enquiry in the Agency card indexes, and every time a new case is dealt with, a new personal card must be entered. But as many requests do not concern a single person alone but whole family groups, the new entries must be multiplied accordingly.

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Some people may be astonished to learn that, for instance in Europe, the Agency is still carrying on an important volume of work (particularly in the German, Italian, Polish and Soviet sections) twenty-five years after the end of the Second World War. But these voluminous records are all the more valuable as those of some former detaining Powers and of countries to which prisoners belonged had been destroyed or scattered as a result of war. Moreover, frontier changes since 1945 and the political events of the last twenty-five years had brought about mass movements of refugees.

What part does the Agency play to help these displaced persons? In each case, it initiates enquiries in order to find refugees, either through the channel of information offices in the country where they first went and in the country where they settled, or, inversely, by starting enquiries with the aim of obtaining news of members of refugees' families left behind in their country of origin. Next comes a further humanitarian step: the reconstitution of the family groups, through the good offices of the Agency in co-operation with National Societies.

With regard to refugees, the Agency also assumes the role of adviser, and even intermediary, for the receipt of war pensions and (in co-operation with the International Social Services) allowances.

In other parts of the world, too, it performed useful work during 1970. One need only give as examples its enquiries on Egyptian, Israeli, Jordanian and Yemeni soldiers missing in military operations, civilians presumed to have been arrested and Palestinians and Jordanians who have disappeared without any further news after recent events in Jordan. In the Republic of Vietnam, the Agency continues to receive from the authorities information on the prisoners held by them. This information is at once recorded on tape and has permitted lists and cards concerning several thousand prisoners to be drawn up.

How to set up a tracing service

These tracing operations, which require much patience, exactness and attention to detail, are not undertaken within the Tracing

Agency alone in Geneva. It is in continual touch with National Red Cross, Red Crescent and Red Lion and Sun Societies, which work in close co-operation with the Agency as soon as they receive a file which concerns them.

The increasing number and variety of conflicts and of natural disasters (earthquakes, tidal waves, etc.) mean still more active work on the part of National Societies. These may be called upon to play a significant part in re-establishing and maintaining links between prisoners and their families, and in providing information on the plight of victims.

It is therefore advisable that, in peacetime, every National Society should have studied the basic organization of a tracing service which could be swiftly put into action when necessary.

With this purpose in view, the ICRC has just published a booklet prepared by the Central Tracing Agency, entitled: *How to set up a tracing service*.¹ It has been printed with an attractive red cover, and gives suggestions for simple and efficient working methods that can be adapted to different circumstances and that do not require costly equipment.

Of course, some National Societies have had considerable experience in the field of registration and tracing, and this booklet will not provide for them anything new, except possibly some suggestions tending to standardize, at the international level, ways of transmitting information. On the other hand, it is intended for those Societies which have not yet planned or organized this particular branch of their activities.

Readers going through its pages will get acquainted with the setting up of a tracing service. They will find out how to fill in descriptive identification cards concerning displaced persons, refugees, military prisoners or civilian detainees, how to keep each card up to date according to information coming in, and how to set up the card index which constitutes the foundation of the tracing service.

Numerous problems are mentioned concerning classification of cards. For example, it is stated that alphabetical as well as phonetic

¹ Available in French, English and Spanish from the ICRC, 7 Av. de la Paix, Geneva. Price 3 Sw. francs.

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classification must be considered, that it is sometimes necessary to make subdivisions in names going back to the grandfather or even to the tribe of the missing person.

Transcriptions of names belonging to different linguistic groups, lack of identity cards or birth certificates, these are some of the problems that daily crop up in a tracing service and to which the CTA booklet provides an answer.

Another section deals with its administrative organization within a National Society. Models of enquiry forms and of family message forms are added at the end of the booklet, which summarizes as follows the work of a tracing service:

- I. To obtain from the competent authorities (civilian or military) or from the Central Tracing Agency in Geneva, or, when possible, from the people concerned themselves all relevant information on the identity, state of health, place of residence or detention, death, etc., of persons who have been displaced, captured, reported missing, etc.*
- II. to classify the information thus obtained*
- III. to establish a card-index which will contain not only the information collected, but also requests received*
- IV. to follow up all requests for tracing information (from families, other National Societies, the Central Tracing Agency, or other bodies), by means of this card-index*
- V. to initiate all necessary enquiries if the card-index contains no information on the person who is being traced, or if the information is not complete or is out of date*
- VI. to ensure the forwarding of messages from relatives so that links may be re-established between people who find it impossible to correspond through normal channels.*

Interview and narratives

In the booklet just mentioned, the Central Tracing Agency suggests some simple working methods easy to carry out, but the work it accomplishes is often very complicated. A few examples

suffice to show this and to demonstrate the complexity of the tracing work undertaken under Red Cross sponsorship and the humanitarian value of the results. In addition, they reveal that enquiries demanding both patience and imagination are sometimes carried on for months or even years before achieving any result.

We give below extracts from an interview published in the Belgian Red Cross review¹ in which a former Belgian prisoner of war testifies to the effectiveness of the moral help given by the Red Cross to prisoners during the Second World War by transmitting news of their families and by seeking missing persons.

Do prisoners of war owe much to the Red Cross?

I would say yes, without hesitation, and I feel sure that I speak for my many fellow-captives. I owe my life to the Red Cross. Without it, worry, hunger and boredom would have ruined our health and we could not have stuck it out for five years.

But when you were installed finally in a camp, did you still benefit from Red Cross action?

In the camp, the Belgian and International Red Cross took over. I take back what I said before; it was after we were finally installed in camps that our morale was really saved. The beginning of any captivity is terrible. Then you get used to it. In the early days the confusion is made worse by apprehension for one's family, not even knowing where they are, whether they have fled, whether they are in Belgium or France or England, or even whether they are still alive; not even knowing whether the old homestead is still standing. And then, when the first Red Cross cards arrive they bring joy to the camp. In spite of their compulsory brevity, they reassure the prisoners cut off from the world, allaying their fears and giving them hope. I think that the existence of the Red Cross would be justified just by these cards and telegrams, so small yet abundant in comfort. Blessed be the postcard which crosses all barriers, fronts, censors and prohibitions, and survives the ups and downs of war, thanks to the moral authority of the Red Cross.

Did the Red Cross continue delivering mail?

Later on the mail—one card a month—was handled by the Germans, as they were occupying our country. The Red Cross kept sending news to comrades whose families were living in countries which were not occupied. Then for all of us the Red Cross cards

¹ See *Interview*, Brussels, 1970, No. 7-8.

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came again on their mission of mercy, as they did at the start; that was after the invasion and the German withdrawal from Belgium. At that time the usual mail service was again interrupted and we were as worried as we were in 1940. The devastation was even worse in 1944. Again the Red Cross cards gave us reassurance about our families. Who can say how this card posted in Brussels reached Pomerania in spite of the Allies' incessant air attacks on convoys and towns. But it did get through!

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Below we narrate some daily experiences of the Central Tracing Agency, chosen from among the most significative of the last ten years.

In the summer of 1970, the Central Tracing Agency received an enquiry request from a woman of Polish origin concerning her brother, missing since 1942. Both had been deported from Poland that year and then had got separated from each other.

The woman subsequently married a Frenchman and, having gone with her husband to France, now lives in the "département" of the Ardèche.

The Agency at once sent out an enquiry to the International Tracing Service's offices of the ICRC at Arolsen (ITS). All archives concerning concentration camps are centralized at the ITS. Not long after, it received a reply from the ITS from which it learnt that the missing person was also living in France, in the "département" of the Meuse.

After having conducted further investigations in order to obtain the brother's exact address in that "département", the Agency was able to supply the information to his sister. She found again in this way her long-lost brother, of whom she had lost all trace for twenty-five years, and who was dwelling, unknown to her, in the same country, only some 300 kilometres away!

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In February 1967, Claudio V. and his brother Antonio, both resident in the USSR, asked the Central Tracing Agency to seek their sisters Trinidad and Gloria who had been evacuated to France during the Spanish Civil War. At that time they had lived in Bilbao where

their father was a house painter. This was the only information they were able to supply.

From this, after years of searches, the Spanish Red Cross found that the two sisters were again living in Bilbao. One was married and had two children. In addition, the enquiries revealed that another brother was alive and that the father, a widower, had remarried and had two children by his second marriage.

The ICRC immediately conveyed this information to the Alliance of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies of the USSR and, thirty years after having been dispersed, the family was able once again to renew the links which events had severed.

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This is the story of Miss Z., a Vietnamese girl, who gave birth to a boy, the son of a French serviceman. When she left her country to work in New Caledonia, she was not able to take her child with her and left him in the care of his grandparents at Haiphong, in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.

The years passed and she never despaired that her son should join her in her new home. Thus it was that a request was sent to the Central Tracing Agency to lend its aid. The steps taken were long and devious, several National Red Cross Societies were approached by the Agency which, from its Geneva office, organized the voyage, and at last they managed to re-unite the family after many obstacles had to be overcome and after a long period of time had elapsed. The boy was first entrusted to the Red Cross of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam; he was accompanied to Phnom-Penh, where he was taken charge of by the Cambodian Red Cross, duly warned of his arrival by the Central Tracing Agency. From Phnom-Penh he continued his journey on to Bangkok, and then, by plane, to the place where his mother was waiting to greet him.

All the necessary entry papers, including the authorization from the appropriate authorities for his entry and stay in New Caledonia, had had to be obtained beforehand.

It was in 1962 that the Central Tracing Agency had received the mother's request, and it was only in 1964 that it was possible to close the file with the entry: " Pierre safely arrived at destination ".