



Interview with Marie Ortholary an expert on ‘Family Tracing’ from the French Red Cross

How would you define the concept of ‘Family Tracing’?

The mission to establish family ties (rétablissement des liens familiaux /RLF, in French) is a statutory mission of the French Red Cross. It's one of the oldest actions of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. Its origins lie in giving support to families who are no longer together due to armed conflict and other violent situations. The RLF helps to restore or maintain the ties between family members and to clarify the fate of missing persons. Its scope of work has expanded over the years to that of natural or manmade disasters, and other situations requiring humanitarian response.

RLF activities are carried out across the world within the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, which is composed of family tracing services in 178 national branches of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, and 80 delegations of the International Committee of the Red Cross in countries in conflict.

The family tracing mission finds its legal basis in the four Geneva Conventions of 1949 and the additional protocols of 1977, of which France is a signatory.

- **What are the objectives of family tracing?**

The family tracing mission has four principle aims:

- Finding missing persons and letting their families know is our principle activity, accounting for 65% of our actions;
- Relaying family news through the Red Cross Messages service;
- Reuniting families and providing them with legal assistance to compile dossiers/files for family reunification
- Allowing the victims of war to assert their rights, or for Asylum Seekers to testify about their deprivation of liberty in their country of origin.



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- **When is family tracing carried out?**

When people have been separated from their loved ones following specific situations, such as:

- Armed conflict and other violent situations
- Natural or man-made disasters
- Population displacement, notably, international migration
- Other situations requiring a humanitarian response

- **What is the procedure in place to carry out family tracing?**

The French Red Cross' family tracing service carries out tracing abroad for an applicant in France, and tracing in France for an applicant abroad, thanks to the international network of families.

In the same way that an unaccompanied foreign minor can apply to find their family abroad, his or her family members can also look for them in France.

The application should be made by the unaccompanied foreign minor themselves, with the aim of finding their next of kin and restoring family ties.

An application for family tracing is accepted when all other previous attempts to re-establish contact have failed.

When an application concerns a member of family as defined by costume, the application must consist of the necessary elements in order to initiate, guide and deepen the investigation (last known address, exact circumstances for a loss of contact, etc.) These elements are set :

- either, by the ICRC for an investigation in a country in conflict;
- or, by the national societies of the countries in peacetime for an investigation in their territory, and, according to their legislation

- **How will we work on cases?**

Firstly, the information gathered from the form in the application form is cross referenced with information in different data bases:

- Data collected by the Red Cross, or the International Committee of the Red Cross in the country where the search is being carried out:
A list of; people who are unharmed, people who are deprived of their liberty, the deceased, and those who have made an application for family tracing.
- Lists of missing persons or lists of those who are unharmed and have registered on the familylinks.icrc.org website, during a catastrophe.
- Information shared by official institutions and other organisations.



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- Other data published in the media, or on the Internet.

When possible, the Family Tracing Service personally follows the application for family tracing by asking volunteers to carry out research in the zone where the person sought is supposedly living, or in places where information could be collected. This includes the following activities:

- Going to the last known address of the person sought.
- Contacting the kin and neighbours of the person being sought.
- Consulting institutions and organisations likely to have information.
- Visiting camps in which the person sought is likely to have lived in.
- Checking the records of hospitals, morgues and cemeteries.

The family tracing service can also send the query to state authorities who may be able to provide more information about the individual. However, this is only done with the consent of the applicant, and if it is in the interest of the person sought.

The service can also, with the consent of the applicant and if it's in the interest of the missing individual, spread information about the search – on television, in the press, on the radio (e.g. the BBC in Somalia), or on the internet, with the aim of contacting people who are likely to have information. Posters with the names or photos of missing persons can also be put up in key locations and mobile teams with megaphones can make announcements. Using the media for research purposes is a tool not currently used in France.

Furthermore, while researching in the concerned country, security measures are respected by Family Tracing volunteers and personnel. The contents of a family tracing file can only be passed on and exchanged within the International Network of the Red Cross by qualified and authorised Family Tracing personnel and volunteers. Over the course of the search only necessary information will be requested and shared.

- **What happens once the missing person has been found?**

Once the missing person has been found, they can give their consent or not to pass on their details to the applicant. Consent must be given in writing. Whatever the decision, it will be respected.



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- **Is there any monitoring procedure in place? An evaluation?**

Applications made by unaccompanied foreign minors are given priority treatment by the Family Tracing Service. However, the processing of the application is flexible and can last many weeks, months, or even years. This delay varies according to the means available to our counterparts in the field, the accessibility to the territory and the number of applications received at the French Red Cross headquarters and worldwide, and information gathered from the applicant.

It's difficult to estimate the success rate of family tracings. It also depends on the criteria mentioned above. Nevertheless, all bases are covered by our counterparts in the field to try and find the individual.

Throughout the process, the Family Tracing Service informs the applicant on the progress of their application. As a result, it is vital to inform the Family Tracing Service if:

- Contact details change (telephone number, address, etc.)
- The Unaccompanied Foreign Minor learns of new information that could be useful in the search.
- The Unaccompanied Foreign Minor manages to establish contact the individual/s via other channels.

Account of an applicant

“When the war started on the 8th August 2008 between Russia and Georgia, I was working in the orchard in Kekhvi, Georgia. My parents were at home at that moment [...] I then heard explosions and gun fire. I knew straight away what had happened” Giorgi, 16 years old.

The Family Tracing Service guided the minor through his application and helped him to gather the necessary information for research in the field. Once the information had been processed and analysed, his file was transferred to our correspondents in the field, in order to find the missing persons. The search is ongoing. As soon as the results of the investigations are known by the Family Tracing Service, the applicant will be informed of it immediately. To this day, the Family Tracing Service is waiting for a response from our counterparts.



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Good Practice

When an unaccompanied foreign minor wishes to search for their family, the social worker accompanying the minor, or the minor themselves, can fill in an application form for a family tracing request. However, it is strongly recommended that the unaccompanied minor, accompanied by a social worker, comes, if possible, to a local Red Cross Unit, who will transfer the query to the Family Tracing Service located in the French Red Cross' headquarters or directly to the Family Tracing Service.

Indeed, being able to talk directly with the beneficiary allows us to better document the query, and therefore, to multiply our avenues of research. This also allows us to reduce the delay between the first contact with the applicant and the sending of the query to the field.

About Marie Ortholary

After getting my degree in applied foreign languages, I obtained my first Master's degree in Humanitarian Management from the University of Paris XII. Working as a research officer for the Red Cross in France for five years I was able to complete my second Masters degree, on Defence, International Security and Crisis Management, at the Institute of International and Strategic Relations in Paris.



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