

Setting up a Tracing Service

What are the functions 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the card-index contains no information on the person who is being traced, or if the information is not complete or is out of date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.

I. Collection of information

The tracing service must endeavour to gather in the shortest possible time from appropriate bodies all information that may be necessary for replying to requests for news submitted to it.

Nature of information to be obtained :

- a) in the case of displaced persons and refugees (mass movements of inhabitants following disasters and military or political upheavals)

Surname :

First names :

Place and date of birth :

Previous domicile :

Present address :

Maiden name and surname of wife :

Names of children :

Are the wife and children at present living together with the head of the family ?

State of health :

- b) in the case of military prisoners, internees or civilian detainees

Military prisoners

Internees or civilian detainees

surname

surname

first names

first names

first names of father *

first names of father

place and date of birth *

place and date of birth

rank and serial number

profession

previous domicile

date and place of capture

date and place of capture or
arrest (on what charge)

place of detention

place of detention or imprisonment

state of health

state of health

Military prisoners

place and date of entry into hospital

transfer to another place of detention

death : place, date and cause of death

place and date of burial

date of release

family address *

* (subject to article 17 of the Third Geneva Convention, which provides that prisoners may refuse to give information on their place of birth and family)

Internees or civilian detainees

place and date of entry into hospital

transfer to another place of detention

death : place, date and cause of death

place and date of burial

date of release

family address

(for women, indicate date, place of birth and name of children born during the mother's detention)

(The National Society's tracing service may find it well worthwhile to carry out itself the registration of displaced persons by training suitable teams at the collecting centres to fill in descriptive identification cards containing the data listed above.)

Note. Descriptive identification cards made out for persons displaced owing to natural disasters are to be filed in the tracing service's card-index. This does not apply to capture cards filled in by military prisoners and internment cards entered by civilian internees; these must be sent direct to the ICRC Central Tracing Agency.

II. Methods for classifying information received in the form of lists of names, individual reports, notices of death, etc.

Each document must be marked by the tracing service with a reference number.

For instance, a simple method would be to mark the document with the letter R (= record) followed by a serial number.

The first document will be marked R 1
The tenth document will be marked R 10
The ten-thousandth will be marked R 10.000,
and so on...

Where a document consists of a list of several pages, each page will be marked with a subsequent serial number.

Example : — supposing the tracing service gets a three page list, this being the 4,999th document that has come in since the service has started operating. This list will be marked as follows :

page 1	No. R 4999
page 2	No. R 5000
page 3	No. R 5001

If, for example, this 3-page list is followed by an individual note, it will be marked with the next number, i. e. R 5002.

Note : for the method to be used in recording **replies** received to **individual enquiries**, see page 21, duties of secretariat.

After having recorded incoming documents, the tracing service must take care :

- a) to **register them** : the date, origin, number of persons mentioned and the category to which they belong must be indicated;
- b) to make **copies** or **photocopies** of them, with the object of supplying the Central Tracing Agency (at the ICRC) and the Protecting Power with one, in the case of those persons for whom the ICRC and the Protecting Power are concerned.

- c) to record on individual cards the data found in the documents (see instructions on how to fill in cards, page 12).
- d) to classify documents in the records department (if possible, after they have been bound).

Departments of the tracing service whose function it is to register, list and transmit copies or photocopies of incoming documents to the ICRC Central Tracing Agency, Protecting Power, etc. must have available :

- a typing pool
 - a) to type out copies
 - b) to copy out the information in the documents onto the cards
- photocopying equipment.

The tracing service may have to acquaint persons living in the same country with news about relatives of theirs who may have been rescued from natural disasters, or with information transmitted to it from the ICRC Central Tracing Agency about any of its nationals who may have fallen into the hands of the enemy, without waiting for requests to be received from these relatives.

These «spontaneous» messages may be transmitted on the basis of cards made out according to incoming documents. The date when a message has been sent must be entered on the cards which are then returned to the card index.

Wireless messages may be broadcast by the tracing service to relatives on national territory, if thought to be expedient. But this method, which may appear advisable at first sight, if it is desired to send news swiftly to persons who cannot be reached by post, has some disadvantages. Reading out long lists of names over the radio may often lead to mistakes arising from uninformed listeners' not catching correctly the proper names they hear. Frequently, there is confusion resulting from homonyms, while messages picked up by people who listen to the radio and then pass them on to others by word of mouth, are invariably distorted in some way or other.

How to set up a card-index

A tracing service is essentially based on the card-index. The success of all the work undertaken by such an office in fact depends on its being perfectly organized.

The various problems involved should now be examined in greater detail.

The tracing service will draw up **individual cards based on information** contained in different lists and in all kinds of documentation reaching it. It will do the same as regards facts given in the **enquiries** submitted to it.

The information card must **differ** from the enquiry card in **colour**.

Cards used should be thin, of post-card size (10 cm × 15 cm) and easy to handle and place in cardboard or metal boxes arranged on shelves.

Boxes should be provided with a movable label on which will be inscribed in large print the first one or two letters of the surname at the beginning of the box, as well as the first one or two letters of the last surname filed at the back of the box (for rules on the alphabetic and phonetic filing of names see pages 16 to 20).

Care should be taken not to fill the boxes entirely, in order to leave sufficient space to enable cards to be consulted and new ones to be added.

How to fill in a card

a) information card :

An individual information card must be the **summarized** but **strictly accurate transcription**, of all information contained in the document received and relating to a person. It should also give the reference No. allotted to that document

(Example : see bottom of page.)

A card must thus be drawn up for each person mentioned in the document in question. If it contains the names of a hundred persons, 100 individual cards must be drawn up, each giving all details relative to the person concerned. The cards must be meticulously checked.

Date of drawing up card
and typist's initials

Ref. No.
of document

NAME (in capitals) first names (small letters) :

Place and date of birth :

Father's first name :

Nationality :

(For military personnel) : Serial No. — rank and unit :

(For civilians) : occupation :

Date and place of capture :

Detaining power :

Prisoner of War No. or Civil Internee No.

Place of detention :

State of health :

Address of next of kin :

Date and source of information :

Similar procedure must be followed as and when new documents are received. The name of a person may appear in several documents. There must therefore be several cards drawn up in that name; they must subsequently be collected in the card-index in a single bundle, and held together by a clip.

Care must be taken not to record on a single card information from different sources and dates, and which appear at first glance to concern the same person. In fact, in view of the many cases of homonyms that arise the system of the single individual information card often leads to considerable confusion, difficult to unravel and with unfortunate consequences.

b) Enquiry card :

Similarly, enquiries must also be transcribed on cards bearing an enquiry reference number : **E** followed by a serial number with mention of follow-up action : (see page 21.)

Example : (see bottom of page.)

Date of drawing up card and typist's initials	Ref. No. of file
NAME (in capitals) first names (small letters) :	
Place and date of birth :	
Father's first name :	
Nationality :	
(For military personnel) : Serial No. — rank — unit :	
(For civilians) : occupation :	
Date and source of last information :	
Date of enquiry — Name, first name and address of person making the enquiry :	
Date of reply : (give a summary of the reply) *	
Initials of person examining the case :	

* In the same way, all further information (sequel to operations, of whom enquiries made, communication of result) must be noted on the card.

How to file cards in the card-index

Before making a detailed study of the rules for filing in alphabetical or phonetic order (see pages 16 to 20) one should examine the operations incumbent on the staff working the card-index.

a) preliminary sorting

Cards for filing first undergo preliminary sorting which consists of arranging them in the alphabetical order of the first three letters of the surname.

b) filing of cards in the card-index

If the card-index comprises several hundreds, if not thousands, of boxes, each staff member will be assigned a pre-determined number of boxes for which he will be responsible (viz. boxes from A to B, C to D etc.). He will file the cards into these boxes in alphabetical or phonetic order as instructed (see pages 16 to 20). However, if on filling a new information card, he finds that there already exists an enquiry card for the same person, he must take it out and send it together with the information card to the secretariat to deal with. The same procedure must be followed, if a new enquiry card is already preceded in the card-index by an information card. **Any card removed from the index must be replaced** there temporarily by a **marker card**.

The marker card, a cardboard rectangle (12.5 cm × 5.5 cm), must be placed **vertically** in the filing box so that it is higher than the other cards and can be easily found when the bundle is re-inserted after the case has been dealt with by the secretariat. On the marker card essential facts must be recorded: surnames and first names, date and place of birth, reference number, date of card's removal.

Tracing in the card-index

Enquiries for news (letters, telegrams etc.), first of all sorted by the secretariat which underlines the essential facts in pencil, are then passed on to the tracing team at the card-index.

This tracing must be carried out thoroughly and systematically. If the result is negative this should be indicated on the enquiry before returning it to the secretariat.

If, on the other hand, a previous enquiry card, or information card, is found in the card-index, the card (or bundle of cards) must be removed after replacement with a marker card (see page 14) and must be attached to the new enquiry which is also to be returned to the secretariat to be dealt with.

When dealing with the case the secretariat must take care to draw up an enquiry card with an E. No., or if this already exists, to complete it by adding items figuring in the new enquiry, and making sure to indicate what follow-up action has been taken over the enquiry (communications, enquires etc.).

The secretariat must then return the cards to the card-index for immediate re-filing.

Rules for filing

Which system of filing should be used, **alphabetical or phonetic**?

The purely alphabetical system is obviously the simplest method to teach non-specialist staff. This consists of taking account of the respective alphabetical order of every letter in the names and first names, according to the method employed in preparing a dictionary or a list of telephone subscribers.

To train those not familiar with filing, they should at first be made to sort cards in alphabetical order of the first three letters of the names, then of the first four letters, etc., until they are able to arrange cards in the alphabetical order of all the letters of the names and first names concerned. They should be allowed to insert cards in the card-index only when they no longer make errors in sorting: **a badly filed card is a card lost.**

By following this alphabetical order, all cards with the same surname (spelt identically) and sub-divided in the alphabetical order of the first names, will be filed in sequence, e. g.

Cards relating to all persons called

DURANT Adolphe will be filed before those of
DURANT Albert, followed in turn by
DURANT Armand.

Within this sub-division by first names, there will be a **second sub-division** based on **age**. Thus all those called DURANT Adolphe will in their turn be filed by age, the oldest at the top, viz:

DURANT Adolphe, born 20. 8. 1930
before:

DURANT Adolphe, born 31. 10. 1931

It must however be pointed out that, in practice, the **system of filing strictly in alphabetical order has its drawbacks**. In fact, it quite often happens that the name of the same person is, by error, spelt in several ways. Because of these divergences there is a risk of filing separately, in places possibly very far from

each other, cards referring to the same person but each one with an apparently different name.

To avoid such drawbacks, should the system of entirely phonetic filing be adopted?

This system, which takes into account **only the sounds** of which a name is composed, and **not of its spelling**, would be ideal if it did not demand highly specialized staff.

It is therefore better to apply only **alphabetical order**, as a basis, and introduce a certain number of **groupings** for names most prone to errors in transcription.

For example :

- a) PERRAUD, PERRAULT, PERREAU, PERREAUT, PEROZ, PERROT, PEYRAUD, PEYROT = **could be filed together under PERRAUD.**
- b) MAIER, MAIR, MAJER, MAJR, MAYER, MAYR, MEIER, MEIR, MEJER, MEJR, MEYER, MEYR = **under MAIER.**

In the space in which the cards would automatically have been filed alphabetically with the names respectively of PERRAULT, PERREAU and PERREAUT etc., a rectangular piece of cardboard (different in colour from the information and enquiry cards) should be inserted. It should have the following indications in large print :

PERRAULT see PERRAUD

etc.

Before making such groupings, it is necessary to make a close study of the phonetic similarity of certain names. **The responsibility for drawing up grouping rules for each language will be entrusted to those possessing a very thorough knowledge of that language.**

Should it be difficult to make such groupings, it might be sufficient not to take into account, in the alphabetical filing, **double consonants** or **double vowels**, e. g. :

ROSSI and ROSI, filed together under : ROSI.

GOOSARD and GOSSARD, together under : GOSARD.

As regards first names, the tracing service must take care to hand over to those working at the card-index and the secretariat a list of all first names in use (with their respective diminutives) and, if necessary, together with their translation in various foreign languages (those of any enemy country, or of countries with which the tracing service has the closest relations).

There are some countries where surnames do not exist. People are designated by their own first name, followed by the first name of their father and grandfather and possibly by the name of the tribe to which they belong.

In cases of this sort, cards should be inserted in the following order:

First sub-division: the first name of the person;

all cards with the same first name, e. g. ALI, will be classified together, but will be subject to a

second sub-division: the father's first name;

example: all cards of ALI son of MAHAMMAD will be put together, but ALI son of MAHAMMAD will be filed before ALI son of OMAR;

third sub-division: the grandfather's first name;

example: ALI son of MAHAMMAD grandson of MILAD will be classified before the ALI son of MAHAMMAD grandson of SULIMAN;

fourth sub-division: (if necessary): the tribes name;

example: ALI son of MAHAMMAD, grandson of MILAD of the EL-GEDEID tribe will be filed before the ALI son of MAHAMMAD grandson of MILAD of the EL-GHEIZAF tribe.

Within this filing by alphabetical order of first name, first names of father and grandfather etc., a further subdivision will be made of homonyms according to age (see page 16).

Other difficulties

- a) in certain countries the spelling of names may vary,
- b) names belonging to one linguistic group can be subject to alterations when they have to be transcribed in characters of another language group,
- c) persons concerned may come from regions not having registry offices. They will therefore not be in a position to confirm their date of birth, which will multiply the number of homonyms which will not be distinguishable on the basis of age.

When such difficulties arise, the card, if necessary, should be drawn up in several copies for filing in separate card-indexes:

- the first copy will be filed in a card-index with **names and first names in alphabetical order;**
- the second copy in an index arranged with **military serial numbers in numerical order;**
- the third copy in an index arranged with **prisoners' and internees' numbers in numerical order;**
- the fourth copy in a card-index sub-divided according to **tribal membership.**

The tracing service will probably have to deal with persons of **various nationalities.**

In this case, it will be necessary to draw up **separate cards for each nationality.** It is in fact extremely difficult to file in one and the same card-index, names of very diverse origins, **each linguistic group requiring filing rules adapted to it.**

If a person's nationality seems to be in doubt, the card (information or enquiry) should be in several copies. Each copy

should be filed in the respective card-indexes of the various presumed nationalities and should mention in the margin the card-indexes concerned.

If necessary a card-index for stateless persons will be maintained.

How to deal with cases

The tasks defined under points IV and V (see page 5) are the responsibility of the secretariat of the tracing service. If its work develops on a large scale, the secretariat can be sub-divided into several sections. As required, this sub-division can be made by geographical sectors, or even according to cases dealt with (military, civilian internees, displaced persons etc...).

The secretariat's task is as follows :

- a) to receive and examine enquiries, to draw up statistics, and then to pass them on to the card-index for the necessary tracing; *
- b) next, to communicate the information obtained from the card-index;
- c) should information be lacking or be considered out of date, to open enquiries with the appropriate bodies (whose reply will also subsequently be transmitted to the enquirer);
- d) to draw up the enquiry card (or complete the previous enquiry card) indicating follow-up action;
- e) to transmit messages.

It should be noted that it is for the secretariat to allot the **enquiry reference number E**, followed by a serial number (see page 13), which will be **put on the enquiry card as well as on the file**. The file containing the enquiry and copies of all communications or enquiries made by the secretariat must be classified in numerical order in the archives of the tracing service. Replies to enquiries must also be inserted in the files with the appropriate references of these files.

* Replies to enquiries will follow the same procedure.

a) examination of the enquiry

Examination of enquiries arriving in the form of long and confused letters slows up the work. The tracing service will therefore find it useful to make available to enquirers (at the branches of the National Society or in post offices) **ad hoc** printed forms for completion. By way of example, see Appendix A, showing an enquiry form concerning a civilian to be traced.

b) communications

Too much emphasis cannot be laid on accuracy in the communication of information. Should the information in one's possession be considered unreliable and the concordance between the information and the enquiry raise doubts because of incomplete facts, one must not fail to formulate reservations in order to draw the enquirer's attention to this.

If the enquiry which has been followed up emanates from a body such as a National Society or the Central Agency in Geneva, all the information collected must be communicated, even if at first sight it seems of little value. Even a fragmentary piece of information could be a valuable link in carrying on tracing and could, by cross-checking, help to throw light on the fate of a missing person.

Should one have to make a large number of communications of the same type, it would be advisable to make use of printed forms comprising the essential headings of the communication.

c) opening enquiries

When addressing requests for enquiries to the appropriate authorities, to the Central Tracing Agency of the ICRC or other tracing offices, the secretariat must take care to **provide precise and complete details** on the person to be traced, and should see that such information is formulated clearly and concisely.

If necessary, the work can be rationalised by using forms printed for cases of a current type. The model shown in Appendix B is

given as an example (form of request for enquiries relative to military personnel reported missing or captured).

When an enquiry is addressed to a civilian, the message form shown in Appendix C. should be used.

Transmission of family messages

Though prisoners of war and civilian internees have the right to exchange mail with their families, this is rarely the case for civilians **not** interned wishing to correspond with their relations who are also **not** interned, but from whom they have been separated as a result of military or political events which have led to a break in postal communications.

It would be inhuman to leave such persons deprived of news of their kith and kin.

National Societies therefore consider it their duty, whenever circumstances permit, to undertake the transmission of family messages, by making use of the form recommended by the ICRC (see Appendix C).

Headings can be translated into the languages used.

The National Society must, if required, have a sufficient number of such forms printed and supply them to its local branches.

Enquirers should fill in message forms at the central or local headquarters of the National Society. Care should be taken that **the text of the message is of a strictly personal and family character**, set forth clearly, **without allusion to military or political matters, otherwise it is likely that the message will be held by the censors of the sender's or of the addressee's country.**

If, because of current events, the National Society of the country of despatch has no possibility of routing messages to their destinations, it should send them in folders grouped together to the

ICRC which will see that they reach the National Society of the country of destination.

The latter, after getting in touch with the recipients and asking them to complete the reverse side of the form reserved for replies, will be responsible for returning these «reply messages» to the ICRC which will send them back to the enquirer through the National Society.

Important remark

Should it not be possible to reach the addressee, the National Society of the country of destination will have to open an enquiry on its own account in order to discover his new place of residence, or to obtain information concerning his hospitalization or possible death. The result of the enquiry will be put on the reverse side of the message form which will be returned to the National Society of the country of origin through the intermediary of the ICRC.

In view of the fact that the transmission of messages often results in the opening of enquiries into the fate of the addressee, the National Society should entrust its tracing service with centralizing, examining and routing these messages.

As we have already mentioned on page 23, the use of the family message form is recommended when an enquiry should be addressed to private individuals. The tracing service can complete it in the following manner :

Under the heading «enquirer» — indicate the enquirer's name and address, adding : «through the tracing service of . . .»

In the space for the message — (for example) «We are in excellent health but worried about you. Are you still living at the same address? Will you have to return to hospital?»

Under the heading «addressee» — the name and address of the person to whom this «enquiry message» is addressed.

The addressee can reply on the reverse side of the form and the tracing service will thus be in possession of a handwritten reply (written by the person being traced in his own handwriting) which will thus reassure the enquirer.