Picking up pieces

The ICRC and Red Cross/ Red Crescent Societies around the world have an unending task to put together those scattered by the mayhem of war and natural disasters. PETER WILLIAMSON visited the Australian Red Cross and heard refugees tell their stories.

“On their way back the Croatians started shooting. My mother told my dad to run, but he didn’t want to run, and he stayed there. So he got caught, him and another three men. They kept my dad in the car, while they took the other three into the police station. And that was the last they saw him. It’s been ten years this month. The first of this month.”

Branka can recall every detail of what followed. “I was in the hotel playing with my friends in the corridor and one of the boys my age walked past and said: ‘They’ve taken your dad,’ and I said, ‘Yeah, right’. So I went into my room and my mum was crying and I said, “What the hell happened?” and she hung her head and started crying. I can play it over and over; every detail, what colour the blankets were, where she was, what she was doing. Everything, I was nearly nine.”

Every year tens of thousands of people go missing in wars. Almost all are civilians. Millions are separated from their families - driven from their homes, torn apart - mothers from children, men from their wives. And some are never found. Unanswered questions about lost loved ones haunt the victims of this misery for all of their lives. It is the job of the Red Cross Tracing Agency and Refugee Service to put back the pieces. Carolyn Jones and her team of four paid staffers and four volunteers in the NSW division are working on about 300 searches for missing people and about 200 messages at any one time. Nationally, the Australian Red Cross has handled 50,000 cases in its tracing services across all states, including 800 new cases and 1300 messages in the last year.

Branka remembers her old life, the life she had before the war, before the name-calling because she was a Serbian child in Croatia. “My brother and I would get up early, and go and feed the goats. My mum and dad would go and work the fields. We were friends with all the Croatians. They would come over and have dinners, everything.”

“When I was about seven years old, at school we used to get teased for being Serbian, and all that. It was really bad, but I can’t remember being fearful, or anything. But then I remember I came home one day, and my dad told us we had to pack up our stuff and go. So we did that, and we moved to Benkovac.”

“While we were still at home, before we ran away to Benkovac, I was sleeping in my clothes and shoes and everything, in case they attacked, and underneath the window we cleared the pebbles and the grass, in case the Croatians came. One time we went to my grandparents’ house, and my mum and my auntie took some guns that they had for hunting rabbits and things. They were patrolling, and they were so scared, just the two of them. The men were at work.”

“We were there a couple of weeks, and then they said it was okay, so we went back. Then a couple of weeks later, my dad said we had to go again. So we packed up. And I still remember one thing, me and my mum were packing my things in my bedroom, and I had one of my pictures in a frame, and I said ‘Mum, can I take this?’ And she said, ‘No, we’ll be back’. But we never did go back.”

Unable to return home, her mother eventually found refuge for the family in Australia. “My mum was going through the Red Cross, and trying to find my dad. And my cousins that stayed back as well. They tried to go through the government, but nothing ever came up. I think they have lost hope, because they call my dad ‘deceased’. And that’s really painful, because we haven’t lost hope.”

In Australia life has been hard for her mother, working to support her three children at school. Branka works, too, at weekends. The family, however, is unable to discuss their loss. The subject of Branka’s missing father is too painful. “My mum is just so strong, but I can’t talk to her about my dad. I will start crying before she does. It’s just difficult to talk about it. My sister, she was nine months, she hasn’t really seen my dad. We have just two photos left. And my brother, he doesn’t talk about it. Ever.

Frishta was 14 when she lost her family.

“My mother was a teacher and my father was a prosecutor, with seven children. We had a car and we had TV, everything, but this is what has happened - I have lost everything. The Mujahideen came, in 1994. Because our house was on a corner, and there were many groups in Afghanistan fighting each other, maybe seven, maybe nine,
and these attacked our house. They said they needed one
of our rooms upstairs in the corner, where they had a
view of the streets and they could control anyone coming
that way."

With the Mujahideen occupying their upstairs room,
Frishta’s house became a target for rival militia. When
the attacks came, the family would run to the mountain
behind their house, and hide among the rocks. “As soon
as it started we would run out. Always, when it started,
my father would say ‘Go, just go. Just rescue yourself’,
except my mum who would take the small children, and
when she was running, sometimes, she would take some
things to keep us warm. She was doing that, not my
father, not me, not my brother. In the morning, we
would meet after everything stopped.”

One night the house came under rocket attack and
was completely destroyed. The attackers were Shiite, and
Frishta’s family - her parents, two younger brothers and a
baby sister - being Sunni, were taken away. “All that night,
on the mountain, I was asking where is my family, and our
neighbours said, ‘Your mum is coming, coming, coming’. But
at five o’clock in the morning, when it was getting
light, they said, ‘Your family has died. That’s all. Finished.
All gone.’”

“I was crying, and my brother was very, very young.
I was fourteen. People said you have to go with your
neighbour. Because we were from another group, Sunni,
we couldn’t go and talk with other groups because [their
militia] would take us as well. After thirteen days, my
neighbour took us to Pakistan. Me and my two sisters,
and my brother. I was the oldest.”

The bus trip took three days, with a fourth spent at
the border, waiting. They finally crossed into Pakistan and
got to Rawalpindi. Frishta had sent a message to her
uncle in the USA to say what had happened; he sent her
some money, but there was no further contact. She had
to grow up fast. Living with neighbours from Kabul, she
realised that she must contribute to the upkeep of the
brother and two sisters. She found work teaching lan-
guages to people up to 20 years older than her, and she
gave the money to her neighbour to help pay for food.

She was assessed by UNHCR and, together with
her younger brother and sisters, eventually resettled in
Australia. Her six years in Pakistan were very hard and
Frishta chooses not to speak about some of the things she
endured. “I had many responsibilities, myself. I had to
work; my neighbour was very good to me, but I realised
that I had to contribute something. I had to go and do
something, because no one could be expected to have
four people extra in their house. When I was 16 or 17,
they said to me, ‘You should get married, maybe someone comes from overseas like Germany’, but I said ‘No’, I would do anything for her, but I would not do that. Because I had promised myself that I will not get married until I knew if my parents were dead or alive.’”

Putting one’s life on hold is common to victims of war. Apart from the pain and grief of loss of one’s home or loved ones, it is tremendously disruptive to one’s life. Branka speaks of the impact on her schooling: “I went to Year 1; Year 2, I started, but the war happened and I didn’t finish; Year 3, I didn’t go. Year 4, I started in Benkovac, but bombs were falling everywhere so I didn’t finish Year 4. Year 5, I didn’t go, too - I was supposed to go when I came here [to Australia], but they put me in Year 6.”

Not all cases are about missing people. At least some of them are about setting the record straight.

Adele contacted the Australian Red Cross to throw some light on her own background and the story that her mother told her before she died. Adele’s life was scarred by war before she was even born, in Reutlingen, Germany, in 1946, just after World War II. She had severe health problems as an infant, while her mother and stepfather were trying to emigrate to Australia.

“The ships were already waiting. If you were married couple, you could come over on a £10 package. And well my mother grabbed the first fellow she could get, and he had no idea that she already had a child, which was me. She never told him. The sole purpose of marrying him was to get on the ship, come into Australia.”

They were refused passage because the authorities knew of the sick child her mother intended to abandon in Germany. They had to wait another two years before the three of them were given passage to Australia. At the age of four, Adele was put into Saint Theresa’s Orphanage, in Essendon, Melbourne. “They just forgot about me. I was there until I was eight years old because in the Polish orphanage, you can only stay there until eight years of age.”

Adele was fortunate to be put in the care of Mother Theresa. “She was one of the most beautiful people I have ever known. She had 85 children at the orphanage, and each one of those children was loved. I was a very shy little girl, but I was very artful with my hands. And what I didn’t have, as far as love was concerned, was replaced by my Good Lord who certainly gave me something whereby I could entertain myself by making things with my hands.”

One night, when Adele was seven, Mother Theresa, was killed in a fire. Adele was watching as it happened. “I cried and I cried and I cried. I cried for three weeks. My heart broke for this lady. It was my mum. She was the only mum I ever knew. She taught me everything I know.” Three weeks afterwards, she had to leave the orphanage because she had reached eight years old. Adele was devastated, but before she left was given a gift - Mother Theresa’s piano accordion.

Adele’s mother still refused to take her daughter back - and Adele did not see her for the next thirty years - so she found herself working in the laundry run by the Good Shepherd Convent in Abbotsford - “the biggest hell that God ever put on Earth.” She found comfort in music and, on the strength of her accordion playing, won a scholarship to a private school. She says, “I do believe that there are some sorts of spirits out there that look in and looked after me”.

Many years later, she was living in Healesville and received a call from the federal police. They asked her if she was familiar with the name Ljubica Bozic? Adele said that she thought that was her mother’s maiden name. The news was that her mother had only weeks to live; she had cancer of the colon. As her mother lay on her deathbed, Adele tried to make her peace with the woman who had rejected her. She also sought information about her background and her father. Her mother said, “Only God knows who your father was. I was raped by man after man after man.”

As Adele bathed her mother, she noticed marks under her arm. “I asked my mother, what’s that? I had seen that sign before. It was a swastika and ‘LBor96’. It took hours, but then she told me.” Adele’s mother’s parents had owned a hotel in Yugoslavia, and on the night she was taken by the Gestapo, her father and four of her seven brothers were gunned down, in the hotel. She was put in a cattle track and sent to Germany. Many of the prisoners died along the way.

“Something inside me was certain ‘No, it’s not’. And you’re the one that told me. God love you, Carolyn! I mean, okay, I can understand her rejecting me. I can understand, because I would have been a continuous reminder of how I was conceived. But, I am loving this woman now, spiritually.”

Putting on her mother’s Slavic accent, she repeats the story: “‘You know, Adele, I was working in an ammunition factory in Germany and I was picked because I was very smart. I was in university and I spoke languages - French, Hungarian, Yugoslavian, German - very good German.’” Her mother told her that she became a sexslave for the Germans.

After her mother’s death, Adele sought information on the meaning of her mother’s tattoo. Journalists at the German magazine Der Spiegel told Adele that the tattoo under her mother’s left arm meant she was a member of the SS, not a slave.

Carolyn Jones interrupts her to expand on the news on her case: “I will just clarify for you, Adele, the International Tracing Service in Germany, which has all the wartime records, told us that there are records in there, in their vaults and their files, that confirmed that she is reg-
istered as doing forced labour.”

“She IS registered?” Adele said as the implications sank in. “So she was registered in the files as a forced labourer?”

“Yes”.

“Oh, God love it! Who found that out?”

“You know, when we started the trace, we wanted confirmation from the Red Cross in Germany…”

Adele interrupts: “So she wasn’t an SS? So she was a ‘Lebensborn’ woman*. Oh God love it! Oh Jee … Oh, Carolyn, I’ll tell you what, you’ve made me really so pleased about that!”

Adele’s relief is palpable. “I was told she was in the SS! That’s what I was told! Darling heart, you’ve got no idea what’s done to me. Now, I can really grieve for my mum. You see, to be an SS is a choice you made - like to be a terrorist. But something inside me was certain ‘No, it’s not’. And you’re the one that told me. God love you, Carolyn! I mean, okay, I can understand her rejecting me. I can understand, because I would have been a continuous reminder of how I was conceived. But, I am loving this woman now, spiritually.”

“You know, I was holding my breath? Because, had you even told me that my mother was a Gestapo or an SS, and was part and parcel of killing the Jews … Look, I would have thought, well, okay, now I’ve prepared myself for that and I would have said, ‘That’s my mother, but I’m not my mother’s child’. Because I do know the difference. I could not do that, but for you to tell me my mum was a slave … my God, can you imagine? … Just try to step in her shoes. Brothers shot dead on the stairs. I mean, if you had any emotion, then, God, you would have gone numb. You wouldn’t have known what love was. You see, all I can do at my age, 55, is sing the blues, honey, and boy can I sing the blues.”

I am surprised to learn that the Red Cross still gets many cases from World War II. Carolyn Jones says that a lot of people try to trace relatives as they near the end of their lives. Cases such as that of Adele’s mother may also lead to claims for compensation, although these are not determined by the Red Cross. There seems no end to the conflicts giving rise to new disappearances, new streams of refugees, and new searches for loved ones. The main communities using the tracing service in New South Wales are Afghan, Iranian, Iraqi, Polish, Russian, Somali, Suda-

The job inevitably confronts great sadness, but Carolyn says: “This job is wonderful, especially when we find a case where relatives are still alive. But success varies from case to case. Success may be the client being able to say, ‘My father’s dead’, and there is thus a resolution.”

Frishta’s neighbour went from Pakistan back to Afghanistan to sell up, hoping to move to Europe. Amazingly, Frishta’s father was selling vegetables in a market, and saw the neighbour after seven years. He had no idea that the neighbour had cared for his four children during this time, or that they were still alive. Frishta’s father then went to Pakistan to see how they were, but on arrival, he was told they had gone to Australia. They gave her father the phone number in Australia. He called Frishta in Australia, but Frishta could hardly believe it was her father’s voice. She thought someone was joking with her. It was the first time she had heard his voice in over seven years.

Frishta’s father returned to Afghanistan to fetch the rest of his family. On their way back to Pakistan, they were robbed and Frishta’s telephone number was taken, too. The neighbours had left for Tajikistan and Frishta’s parents thought that there was little hope of finding their children again. After a few months, Frishta was becoming desperate at not having heard from her father again. She contacted the Red Cross, and a trace was begun. Her mother, meanwhile, had contacted the Australian High Commission in Pakistan, and the Red Cross was able to contact her through them. The Red Cross then assisted Frishta’s parents, brothers, and sister, in their quest to gain residence in Australia, under the family reunion programme.

Frishta tells me about her family’s arrival in Sydney. “My sister cleaned the house, everything was ready for them to come. Then they called Anglicare to come, because I had no car to go to the airport. And when we were going, and that plane was coming, even the bus driver, he was crying. He said, ‘I will put on the music if you don’t stop crying’. He was crying, the social worker was crying, everyone was crying, but it wasn’t sad crying, it was beautiful.”

She shows me a picture of her family - all nine of them, reunited at Sydney Airport, just two months ago. Her father looks 60, but he’s only 48. He was impris-
on the children. But she has her father, and her mother, all of them, embarking on a new life in Australia.

Two days before we met, Frishta got engaged to an Afghan man in Sydney. She has applied to enter a university next year. Her parents are learning English. They are regaining their health, and they say that they are in “paradise”.

Adele is waiting to hear the outcome of the second part of her trace in Yugoslavia. She hopes that she may have uncles and cousins. She is putting together pieces of her past, and, coming to understand her mother’s hell, and how this led to her mother to put her into an orphanage. Perhaps, some day, she will make contact with family she does not yet know she has. Adele says to me, “Make sure that the story will have a conviction that’ll make anybody, next time they look at themselves in the mirror, say who am I? Who could I be? What if? And don’t pigeonhole me, mate! Maybe I have got more genes of a very brave family called Bozic.”

Branka is still waiting, hoping for her father to be found. I think of her words: “Now, I can’t bear to think about it any more. Every day it’s in my face, any incident that happens around the world, like in Africa or in Afghanistan, or in Kosovo, it just brings it back. I just want to push it behind me; I just can’t bear it, but it’s always there.”

“I only became involved with the Red Cross this year, because I’m sick of it and I really want to do something. I just realise, now, it’s been more than half of my life.

“I wish I could get in there myself, and look in all the prisons. But I don’t have much power to do anything. My uncle knows a number of Croatian people that we lived next to, and he has tried to call them and find out what happened. But it’s all hush hush; they can’t talk about it, because they’re afraid someone is listening, and they can’t say anything.

“I’d like to go back to where I lived and visit and just see the place. My mum won’t let me, because people know me because of my surname, and because of what happened to my dad. My house isn’t there anymore. I know it was bombed, but I’d like to go. Some people who go back say you can’t recognise anything. Even the graves are gone.”

The trace for Branka’s father began in 1994, in Yugoslavia, and like many other cases that were started overseas, it was transferred to Australia. Picking up a list of missing people from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Carolyn Jones starts talking about the vast numbers of people still missing. “From the Bosnian war, for example, there were over 20,000 people missing and they have resolved less than 3,000. It is the same with the other sectors, like Croatia. Every six months we get an update, and it’s really hard to tell people that there is no more news on a particular case.”

The tracing services are free of charge and are provided to families separated by war or natural disaster. The Red Cross or Red Crescent societies in many countries have limited resources, so it is difficult to apply pressure to speed up the searches. In Ukraine, for example, each caseworker has a load of over one thousand cases, and 30 new cases are received daily.

The method used varies from country to country, and depends on the type of records available to the Red Cross. The Australian Red Cross uses public records such as the Electoral Roll, telephone directories, registers of births, deaths and marriages, and contact with community groups. In Germany, there are very extensive historical records relating to the use of forced labour and the concentration camps. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) also has its own records relating to visits to people in prisons, detention, war zones, and its work with refugees over many years.

The process of tracing is necessarily bureaucratic. The Red Cross must maintain neutrality at all times and, just as importantly, must be seen to be neutral. It has to work with all parties to a conflict, and negotiate access to prisoners, to people, and even to the records kept of human movements, deaths, and imprisonments. Carolyn Jones explains: “They [the ICRC] may be working, for example, with the Serbian authorities and the Croatian authorities, to uncover graves or get access to prisons. However, in all conflicts, each side wants to know what has happened to their own people, but they may try to cover up anything that they have done to others, which isn’t helping to get answers for the victims’ families. It’s difficult because it’s such a slow process.”

I ask Branka how she feels about the possibility that her father has not survived. After ten years, she has not given up hope: “I would rather not know anything, than know that he is not alive”. The trace remains open; there is still a possibility that an answer may be found.

* The Lebensborn Project kidnapped children and “racially good” young women from Eastern occupied countries. The plans were to raise the children as Germans and to use the women to breed young Germans fathered by SS members and to be raised with SS indoctrination in selected Nazi families.