

AUF DER FLUCHT GETRENNT / ON THE RUN

Abridged Version

Johanna Krapf

Translated from the original German by Catherine Sommer



Introduction

Auf der Flucht getrennt / On the Run tells the story of Joséphine Niyikiza and Désiré Nsanzineza: their childhood in Rwanda, their escape from the genocide there, their long journey through several war-torn African countries, and their new life in Switzerland. This book is the result of close cooperation between them and me, as for more than a year they entrusted their memories to me and I shaped them into this book. We talked about their most personal experiences, and discussed how to put these into words as if we had known one another for years. Yet it was in fact only this project that brought us together.

My plunge into Rwanda's history was a dive into cold water. I hardly knew the country and only what I had read in the newspaper. Although in the spring of 2014 the media had reported on the twentieth anniversary of the genocide in Rwanda, this was just an analysis of past history and, however tragic, soon had to make way for reports on more topical events. For me, however, it was impossible to look away again. I immersed myself in all the literature I could find about Rwanda and read novels dealing with the genocide so that I could sort out better in my mind the things that Joséphine and Désiré were telling me about. Suddenly, I saw Rwanda as a place filled with real people and their destinies. A wave of horrific images of the atrocities committed there overcame me and I had to learn to keep my head above water. How had Désiré and Joséphine survived, as victims of these appalling events, having to relive it all as they told me their story?

Developing a book is a creative process. It was only gradually, while I was writing, that a suitable format evolved for this story. And even as I revised the manuscript, I was uncertain whether it could ever be published in this form.

Moreover, when I began to write down the story of this family I became aware of different narrative cultures and traditions. For me, as a Swiss, verifying all the details and the chronology of a report is central. The African narrative culture, on the other hand, assigns different values to the accuracy and coherence of details, or the embellishment of events and experiences. Another challenge during the interviews was the language. Joséphine told me her story in German, which she now speaks fluently after spending ten years in Switzerland, but I was left to put her accounts into written form. Conversations with Désiré were in French, since his command of German is still too limited for him to be able to describe freely what he had lived through. This means that his chapters are based on my translations.

However, the challenges facing us were not only linguistic. When we tell our life story, we have to rely on our memory. This can sometimes play tricks on us and deform our recollections without our realising it. In addition, the psyche also affects our choice of

memories. There are moments when it bars our consciousness from remembering a particularly painful or stressful experience, or reinterprets it in order to protect us. And that is a good thing. A book project is no trauma therapy. Thus, when I felt that narrating certain events was too upsetting for Joséphine or Désiré, or that remembering them was stirring up feelings of fear or guilt, I stepped back. Have I, or the readers of this book, the right to know every tiny detail of their escape? I think not.

Joséphine, Désiré and I worked together intensively for over a year. We bonded over it and a strong relationship has grown between us. I would like to thank them for the great confidence they have placed in me and for everything that I was able to experience with them and learn from them.

Johanna Krapf

Family Nsanzineza-Niyikiza in 2015

Deep in the heart of Africa, just south of the equator, is the land of Rwanda. It's so small that it's hard to find on the map of Africa that hangs on the wall behind the large kitchen table of the Rwandan family Niyikiza-Nsanzineza. It is indeed a very small country, even smaller than Switzerland, although more densely populated.

The comparison with Switzerland is apt: it was nicknamed "African Switzerland" soon after it was discovered at the end of the nineteenth century because of its green hills, cows, snow-covered volcanoes and lakes. However, the way this Rwandan family is living today in Switzerland bears little resemblance to the childhoods experienced by Joséphine and Désiré in Rwanda. Today, their home is not a rural farm on a green hillside, but an apartment in a block in a small town like innumerable others in modern Switzerland. Yet a visitor to their apartment immediately feels the connection with Rwanda; African figurines of people and animals are scattered here and there.

The heart of the apartment, though, is the kitchen. Big pots of vegetables and meat bubble merrily on the stove, and the air is filled with the mouth-watering scents of roast sweet potatoes and manioc. Joséphine loves cooking, and it's very obvious that she enjoys all aspects of home-making, whether cleaning, washing or tidying up. The apartment reflects this, always spick and span and cosy. Is that because for so many years she and Désiré had no roof over their heads after they fled from the genocide in Rwanda in 1994, and had to survive in camps, on the streets or even in the jungle? Those who have never suffered such deprivation can scarcely imagine how precious a real home is or how good it feels to stand on your own two feet. As is now the case with Joséphine and Désiré. Since the beginning of 2014 they have not claimed any social support or benefits. It's also due to this hard-earned independence that they feel, on the whole, that they are well integrated and accepted in Switzerland.

Of course, this feeling of having reached their destination is subject to fluctuation, and of course there are differences in how each of them feels. Joséphine knew no-one in June 2004 when she landed in Switzerland with her baby. She had to find her way cautiously, step by step, in a totally alien society. One thing was sure: she wanted to stay. No question about that. Throughout the long years and weary process of integration, which is still not fully complete, she took a long hard look at her own history and gradually was able to deal with her experiences.

Désiré, on the other hand, wasn't first obliged to struggle to find a livelihood or fight to be recognised as a refugee, since he already had an official residence permit, category B, and the promise of a job on his arrival in January 2013. However, he was expected to fit

immediately into this very alien society and way of life. Joséphine's experiences during her process of integration were therefore of less use to him than one would have expected.

In addition, each of the children has had to find his own way. Whilst eleven-year-old Espoir has more or less grown up in Switzerland and had all his schooling here, his brothers Patrick and Joyeux had to struggle along on their own in Africa for almost two years. Consequently, when they came from Cameroon in the summer of 2006 to be reunited with their mother and little brother, who had become strangers to them, they felt completely disorientated. Nonetheless, in the meantime they, too, have adapted well. Sixteen-year-old Joyeux is still at school and eighteen-year-old Patrick has started an apprenticeship as a production engineer.

For Joséphine and Désiré, the highest priority for integration is a good command of languages. All speak German, but the common family language is French. And if Joséphine and Désiré need to settle an issue quickly, they will sometimes switch in mid-sentence to Kinyarwanda, their mother tongue. As this is a highly complex language, mastering it is practically impossible unless you live in Rwanda and are immersed in the language. Thus, for the boys living in Switzerland, French and German are more useful. Désiré, too, can express himself quite well in high German. That is no wonder, as even before he entered the country Joséphine told him on the phone that he would need German in the town of Jona and he began learning the grammar and vocabulary while he was still in Africa. However, at the moment he doesn't have the time or energy for study as he is working fulltime in a warehouse, getting up every morning at five for a ninety-minute commute.

Joséphine is also employed, partly because Désiré's salary wouldn't be sufficient to keep the whole family and also because she enjoys her work caring for the elderly. She is studying at the same time for the professional qualification of state certified nurse. Above all, the sons must not miss out, for they had to manage for such a long time without their parents: all three of them were without their father for more than eight years, and Patrick and Joyeux were also without their mother for two years, living with Désiré in the beginning and then alone in Cameroon. So Sunday is family day. Désiré often accompanies the boys to the sports ground, since all four of them share a passion for football and other games. And finding time to talk is also very important. The daily routine is carefully planned: who comes home when, who goes shopping, cooks, does the housework and the washing. The boys are not excused any chores: everyone does whatever he can and there is no need to nag anyone to do what is necessary around the house.

"We have good sons," say Joséphine and Désiré. "For that, and for being able to live here all together in peace, we are very thankful."

Joséphine's Childhood and the Flight to Bukavu

Joséphine's story:

I have no photos from my childhood. None of my mother, of my father or my seven siblings, none of myself or of our home – but deep inside I carry the picture of my extremely happy and carefree childhood in Rwanda. I see our large farmstead that my father had had built, nestling comfortably in the beautiful gently rolling hills. There I grew up with my parents, my sister who was four years younger than me, and three other youngsters. They helped in the fields and with the animals, with washing, cooking and cleaning, and they sat down to eat with us at mealtimes, lived with us and shared our lives, but they weren't actually related. However, my parents made no distinction between them and their own children. "Everyone is equal," they insisted. That's why it was so important for my sister and me not to appear different in any way from the other children in our village. On Sundays, for instance, we had to go to Church barefoot like them, although we could have afforded shoes.

I was born on 5 May 1980, the seventh child. My older siblings had all left home and some already had families of their own. My family home was in Western Rwanda, in a settlement consisting of many houses, a church, a primary school, a vocational college, a bank and a health centre. Our farm was made up of several buildings. Around a central courtyard were grouped a spacious house, a large kitchen wing, an annex, a laundry room and a barn. The family lived in the house and I had a room all to myself. The kitchen wing comprised several rooms and of course the kitchen itself, with a log fire. The annex was where we held parties. A rainwater collection system supplied water to the laundry and shower, and the barn housed the smaller animals – chickens, goats, rabbits and sheep. Beside and beyond these central buildings were the cowsheds and pens for the countless cows, fields and meadows, eucalyptus and cedar groves, and a vegetable garden lovingly tended by my mother, full of meticulously planted rows of aubergines and many other kinds of vegetables.

For my father a good education took top priority, and he often talked to me about how I had to be fully committed. Sometimes, I almost couldn't listen to him any more. Of course I knew how important it was. And anyway, I myself wanted nothing else but to be able to study. Naturally, my mother was also very supportive, but in our conversations she always stressed other aspects that were important in life. "We humans are like flowers: in the night, when it's dark, we rest, but when the sun warms us we open ourselves up to its rays. Yet we have no influence over its path. Nobody knows what tomorrow will bring. The future isn't in our hands. Everything might suddenly change. That's why you always have to do your best today. Only the present is sure for us humans. And don't forget: we are really only guests on this earth. Our true home is in Heaven. That's why I want to leave you with something

important, a key that will open the door to Heaven for you. This key is prayer. You must never lose it.”

Yes, my mother often spoke to me in this way, but I wasn't always receptive to her words. Sometimes, to be honest, she got on my nerves with her preaching. Stop that, Mama, I thought to myself, please don't go on and on! Why should I care about the present? I want to study. I want to be grown up and make my own decisions. However, I would never have spoken these thoughts out loud, for in Rwanda children aren't (or at least, at that time weren't) in the habit of discussing anything with their parents and would definitely never contradict them. Yet now, when I remember these conversations and look back to the outbreak of war, to the years spent trying to escape and my time in foreign countries, it was precisely these words of my mother that stayed with me day after day and gave me the strength to pick myself up when I was down. This is her legacy to me, and it's a holy one. Prayer is the source of life for me.

When war broke out I was fourteen, a teenager with the world at my feet. I dreamed of studying at the University and looked forward to a carefree future. But that remained a dream.

It was the end of the vacation. On the eve of my return to boarding school I went to church where I met my friends and sang in the choir. As we were leaving, one of the girls said to me: “You know what? Today is the last time I'll see you.” “Why do you say that?” I asked. She shrugged. “I just believe that we won't see each other again.”

Well, I wondered, was she joking? Or is it because I'm leaving in the morning to go back to school? Anyway I didn't think it was funny. “Okay,” I said and we hugged goodbye.

Next morning, my brother was going to pick me up. My bag was packed, my ID safely put away, everything ready for the journey. As always on my last evening, I went to bed with mixed feelings, a bit sad at saying goodbye to my family but also looking forward to seeing my school friends again.

Suddenly, I'm awake. Screams in the dark. I'm very cold. Everywhere men with machetes, massacring people. Run, run! I flee, without my bag, without my ID. Away from the blood, from the screaming. Alone, in my pyjamas. My brother hasn't come. Animals charge through the village. People dash here, there, aimlessly. Get away from here. Far away! Time stands still, I am numb, feeling nothing, understanding nothing, unable to think, like a broken-off branch swept away in the torrent of an unfettered stream of fleeing people. Away, anywhere, but away from here! Sometimes I was caught up in the rapids when the soldiers blocked the streets and asked for my ID. But somehow I managed to avoid the murderers, over and over again, like a thief who has to become invisible. Sometimes I found myself in the shallows and was able to sleep for an hour or two, hidden among corpses, motionless as if I were dead myself, until the current caught up with me again and the tide swept me away. Now and

then I bumped into someone I had known in a different world, who gave me something to eat or told me rumours about people who had been murdered. These stories often turned out later to be false, which was no wonder because the dead had mostly been mutilated beyond recognition. One time I came across a woman from my village, who gave me a cape because I was still dressed only in my pyjamas. And even my brother popped up briefly a few times but in the general chaos I lost sight of him again. We would have had to hold tightly to each other or tie ourselves together to avoid being separated.

I have no idea how long I was swept along in this flood of refugees, and I have no wish to remember the horror of the scenes I was confronted with, at least, not in detail: a mother who just dropped her sick child and ran, a murderer swinging a machete dripping with blood in his hand, a grandmother abandoned by her family, a man who didn't take care of his wife. Everyone simply wanted to save his or her own life, that was all that counted in this chaos. I, too, was driven on purely by the will to survive.

At some point I crossed the border into the Democratic Republic of the Congo and arrived in Bukavu. I have never seen any member of my family since. But in 2014, I found out that my younger sister survived and is studying in India.

In Buakvu I met Désiré. I knew him already as he used to attend the same school as my brother and came to visit us now and then. Moreover, during the last interrupted school year he had been my French teacher. As soon as I saw him in the place where all the refugees were rushing to, I heaved a sigh of relief; not because I wanted a steady boyfriend, but because with him by my side I was less likely to be carried off and raped. Girls travelling alone were regarded as fair game, and sometimes whole gangs of men would attack a woman. How could she defend herself? I needed someone to protect me. And so Désiré and I joined forces and supported each other. For purely practical reasons. We barely spoke about the situation and what we had been through. I was a little afraid that Désiré might think I was using him, and if so – would he abandon me? Whenever I apologised for seeking his protection he would say impatiently, “Stop that! We're helping each another.” It was better to say nothing and look out for one another. However, when I was talking to other people and Désiré wasn't there to hear me, I mentioned “my husband” as often as possible. “My husband has gone to get water,” or “My husband's on his way back now.” They needed to know that I wasn't travelling alone. Yet I frequently heard women say, “Oh yes, your husband. You know, he won't be any better than the rest. I know men. They take what they want from you, and then leave you.” I said nothing and thought to myself: What do they know about Désiré and me?

As time passed, a deep friendship grew between us.

Désiré's Childhood and the Flight to Bukavu

Désiré's story:

I was born on 1 May 1974. I was fortunate to have a sheltered childhood in a caring family, with my father, mother, brothers and sisters. One brother had already died. My father, a wealthy farmer, was highly respected in our village. Unlike other men who have to support two, three or even four families, he had only one wife. This enabled him to maintain his level of prosperity, so that our mother and we children didn't have to compete with others for his love and his money. He was always there for us.

My parents had a good relationship and took their educational responsibilities very seriously. At least once a month, sometimes every weekend, they sat down with us at the table to talk about the week just finished and consider the week to come. We were called into the room – all together when we were small, one by one later on from about grade 4. We told them about important things that had happened, what we had achieved and where we had failed. These talks continued throughout my youth. Of course, my parents adapted the way they talked to us according to our age. When I was small, it wasn't unusual for my father to punish me if I was naughty, and not only by telling me off but also with a cane: five strokes on my backside. Yes, he was very strict but never harsh. Later on, his advice was more and more important to me: "You must respect everyone" or "If you want to be a man you will have to work hard." I shall never forget my father impressing on me, when I was about in eighth grade: "It won't be long till you are an adult. Remember, you have to persevere even when life is tough. Never ever give up, don't get discouraged, or you'll never amount to anything." And my mother told me: "My dear boy, we expect you to be successful – make an effort, do it for me." When my parents praised me I was happy, and when they scolded me I took it as encouragement to do better. Their words always gave me strength and courage.

Yes, I felt safe and secure in my family and on our farm. We had a few cows, sheep, and goats that we children had to look after. We also had to help with the work on the farm from when we were small. Why not? It was an excellent preparation for life. And sometimes there was time for fun, like swimming in Lake Kivu, close to our farm. We would leave the animals to themselves for a while and jump into the water, although it was sometimes pretty dirty, especially after heavy rain had washed the muck from the villages into the lake. Then my parents forbade us to swim for fear of our becoming infected by some kind of disease. As well as swimming, we also enjoyed fishing. This all stood me in very good stead many years later ...

There was never any question, either for me nor for my parents: I would go to school, and afterwards I would study, even though that meant that I – and with me, the entire family –

had to convert to the protestant faith and my father had to go specially to market and sell some cattle in order to pay for my tuition. But he didn't see that as a sacrifice. On the contrary, my success would be his success. However, the support from my family obliged me to do my very best. But that was my wish, too, since the older I got the more clearly I knew that I wanted to be an engineer.

At the time that war broke out in Rwanda I was living with a friend in the small town of Birambo. I had, of course, heard about the disputes between the rebels who wanted to overthrow the government and the President's army. The radio was full of reports on the fighting. But I didn't have time to bother with that, and anyway – what did all this business somewhere up in the north of the country have to do with me? Better to ignore it and get on with my own life and not lose sight of my personal aims and ambitions, I thought, young and carefree as I was.

I had last visited my family, who lived further down in the southern part of the country, at the end of April 1994. Like me, my parents weren't too concerned by the political situation and they, too, hoped matters would soon settle down. So we said our goodbyes as usual and I went back to my studies. I had no inkling that I would never see my father again.

However, the longer the hostilities went on the more difficult it became to ignore them and I could no longer overlook the constantly increasing number of people fleeing. Day and night they rushed through our town like hunted animals, fear written on their faces, and no time to answer our curious questions. We just caught a few words here, a horrific report there: "Machetes, guns" – "Women dragged off and raped" – "Corpses by the roadside" – "Hideous!"

Whenever my friend and I wanted to find out more detailed information, we went to a centre where young people used to meet to talk and discuss whatever was going on. Just as we did on that unforgettable afternoon. It was three o'clock, but this time everything was different, and all the people gathered at the meeting point were panicking. I realised that they weren't running away from localised spots of bother in the capital city of Kigali, but were fleeing from a war that seemed likely to spread to the whole of my country. And I was in the middle of this. If I wanted to stay alive, I would have to flee as well. Now! At once! My friend and I didn't go back to our apartment. I had only a flask of water with a stopper, and the shoes and clothes I stood up in. At that time, I still clung to the hope that the situation would soon calm down and allow me to pick up my everyday life again. That wasn't to be. I left behind not only my few possessions but all my hopes and dreams and plans for the future. Forever.

My friend and I fled head over heels but without knowing who or what we were running from, nor where to. On the second day we were stopped at a road block. "Come with us, we can use you!" said the fighters. They wanted to arm us with machetes and cudgels, and force

us to join them in hunting people down and murdering them – what a nightmarish idea! I managed to keep cool at first as we faced these bloodthirsty men, but my friend protested loudly: On no account would we fight with them! They should let us go, at once! At that, one of them drew his revolver and fired. My friend collapsed, shot in the leg. I tended the wound as well as I could, and at nightfall we attempted to escape together. I tried to carry him, or at least support him, but he was too heavy and I couldn't manage. Then he said, "Leave me here. I'll be all right. You'll have to go on alone. Go on, get off!" I never saw him again.

From that moment on, it was only a matter of survival. I took the next step, then the next, with no goal, no hope. I saw terrible atrocities in this time, inhuman things that the people of Rwanda did to one another – countless senseless, godless, heedless, heartless – random acts that I can't bring myself to speak of. Everyone seemed mad. They were no longer human beings but remote-controlled robots with machetes, robots with guns, robots with cudgels. I don't want to remember them.

God was with me. I survived. Somehow. Thankfully, I was able to refill my water-flask at wells and springs, but I found hardly any food. Whatever was growing in the fields wasn't edible in a raw state: manioc, sweet potatoes, yam roots. Now and then I was lucky and came across a piece of sugar-cane that I could suck on. When night fell I lay down and tried to sleep a while, wherever I happened to be. And at some point – time was at a standstill – eventually I crossed the border between Rwanda and Congo-Kinshasa. And in Bukavu I met Joséphine.

On the run

Désiré's story:

We left Bukavu, I don't know when, and our Odyssey began: months of trekking through the jungle. Again and again, we fled from the rebels, and even the pygmies who lived in the jungle could be dangerous to us. Understandably, they felt threatened by the murdering hordes and the starving refugees who invaded their forest, and sometimes they attacked, often with arrows dipped in snake venom that caused fatal injuries. But Joséphine and I were spared yet again. At times the pygmies even gave us food. We didn't care if it was meat from snakes, elephants or monkeys, as we were often close to starvation. It was also the pygmies who showed us the intricate paths through the undergrowth where we were safe – or at least, safer – from the armed men who were after us.

Day by day we moved on, following hidden paths, often disorientated, sometimes going in circles. From time to time we came across abandoned pygmy settlements, where we desperately searched for something, anything, to eat, but in most cases other refugees had already eaten or taken away anything edible. It took little to satisfy us: a ripe mango under a mango tree was wonderful. An unripe mango: great! Finely sliced and cooked, it assuaged our hunger. Once, we were really lucky. We came across a huge grove of wild papayas, with masses of ripe fallen fruit sending out fragrant smells. At last, we could eat till we were full. But we couldn't stay in Paradise forever. As we feared being surprised by our pursuers we had to move on after a few days and again feed on some strange-looking fruit we found lying on the ground. Before we ate them, we inspected them carefully. If animals had nibbled them, we could assume that they were edible. If they appeared untouched, we avoided them. Mostly. Sometimes indeed we had no choice and had to taste them or die of hunger, even if they caused vomiting and diarrhoea. Yes, we ate almost anything. Even electric fish, the Nile pike, although we knew that these could be risky. Pregnant women, for example, should never touch these fish.

When night fell or we were simply too exhausted to go on we looked for shelter and a place to sleep. We swept aside the undergrowth, wet dead leaves and brush, spread our tarpaulin that we had kept from the refugee camp in Bukavu, and tried to sleep. One morning when Joséphine awoke, she felt something lying beside her, snuggled up close. She sat up and saw an enormous live snake that had crawled in between us, probably looking for a warm dry place after all the rain the previous day.

Even in the jungle we weren't safe from the armed hordes. They were scattered everywhere, and attacked anyone who crossed their path. They abducted and killed the men and raped the women, before the very eyes of their families. But God stayed with us. Also when we had to cross a river. It was not very wide, just a few hundred metres, but Joséphine couldn't

swim and we had no boat. What were we to do? We collected dry leaves and piled them onto our plastic tarpaulin, which was about three metres across, turned the edges in and tied them together to make a kind of air mattress. Joséphine lay down very carefully on this. I jumped into the water and started swimming, pulling the “dinghy” with Joséphine on it behind me. It took me hours swimming against the strong current before I finally reached the other shore.

And so we continued, right across Congo-Kinshasa and into Congo-Brazzaville. There, at last, in the town of Ouessou in the far north of the country, we felt safe, and there we settled down.

A New Home in Ouesso

Joséphine takes up the story:

We started to put down roots in Ouesso. We lived in a small house, earned our own income and made friends. Désiré went fishing and I sold the catch. What I couldn't sell in the market I offered as street food in the evening, as tasty dried fish or fish sauce. I bought manioc bread to go with it and so I became a kind of "fast food" seller. People enjoyed my fish but they kept asking me why I didn't have any meat on my stall, for instance crocodile, wild boar or gazelle. Okay, I thought, that's easily fixed, and so I bought meat from the market in the morning, cut it up, cooked it, and sold it in the evening. But oh dear! My customers brought it back after they had tasted it at home, saying they couldn't eat this, it had no flavour. Hmm. How was I to get a more intense flavour? I had no idea, so I went to the other women who were selling meat, paid them a few compliments and asked casually in passing, "That tastes fantastic. How did you do that? What spices and herbs did you use ...? How long ...?" Soon I had discovered all their tricks without having to ask anyone for a recipe. I found out that the meat needed to be marinated overnight, rinsed off next morning, marinated again and only cooked after several days. No sooner said than done, and my meat was hugely popular.

Now I spent my days at the market selling fish, and in the evening I offered Congolese fast food: fish sauce, meat and different delicacies such as a kind of doughnut that I fried myself. In addition, I acquired a standing order from the Army to supply food to the soldiers. Several times a day I delivered dried fish and other sorts of food by the crate load. Either I took the food to the camp myself in a wheelbarrow, or the soldiers picked it up. I was earning lots and lots of money. Of course, Désiré was also very busy, going fishing, transporting people and goods over the Sangha River as a "water taxi", and dealing in petrol and fuel. Gradually, Désiré and I built up a wholesale business with an ever-widening network. The locals were amazed at our success. "Rwandan people are tough," they said, admiringly, "tougher than we are!" Unlike us, they were caught up in their everyday routines and fearful of investing time and money in a new project or doing business with the military. Political confusion had made them wary, if not paralysed them. We, on the other hand, had nothing to lose.

Meanwhile, we had moved out of the small house that a friend had found for us, into a bigger house where we had a bedroom and living room all to ourselves. That was super! We could cook outside, first with wood and later, when we had enough money, with charcoal. We were living here when I first became pregnant. Patrick was born in June 1997. After just two days in hospital. I returned home, thankful and happy, with my healthy little boy.

Oh, how I missed my mother then. She would have been a tremendous support to me at that time, with all her experience. But I was alone, having to figure out things for myself.

Two years after Patrick, in May 1999, Joyeux was born. Once again, I had an easy birth and was able to go home very soon where I had a nanny and a housemaid to help me.

We had now been living in Ouessou for three years. We were a proper little family, although I was not yet twenty and Désiré was only twenty-five years old. We supported one another and worked hand in hand, something that is not at all standard practice in Africa.

We felt fine. We had moved once more and now lived in a spacious house with a large warehouse for our flourishing business. Everything was running smoothly – except for feeling deeply homesick, especially Désiré. And now the civil war in Rwanda was over, he saw no sense in remaining in a foreign country any longer.

Désiré Returns to Rwanda

Joséphine continues:

So Désiré returned to Rwanda to find out if we could build a new life there as a family, while I stayed alone with the children near the Rwandan border, managing as best I could. Often months went by and not a word from Désiré. How would he have communicated, anyway? We had no mobile phones. I was all the happier when he visited us – three times altogether. And I could make good use of the little bit of money he brought me. I didn't know how he earned it. He never said, and I never asked. That wouldn't have been acceptable. On his second visit he stayed with us for about a month, the next time it was not quite so long. He was still driven by the hope of being able to find a livelihood for the family in our home country, but he had had to admit that it was much more difficult than he had expected. And I, who could do nothing except wait, doing nothing, just had to grin and bear it. I had adjusted to my new life. I knew a lot of nice people, could communicate with them in their dialect and felt at home in a free church congregation. Nevertheless, I missed Désiré badly, especially in December 2003 when I gave birth to Espoir. Fortunately, I again had an easy pregnancy and no complications at the birth, but I was tormented by not knowing where Désiré was.

Then, all of a sudden, there he was in front of me. But was this the same Désiré who had set off full of zest and energy to prepare for the family to return to Rwanda? His eyes were dull, no longer bright and shining, he had a deep gaping wound in his leg and open gashes on his back showed he had been beaten. But most of all, his soul was deeply wounded and he was completely insecure. Little by little, I eventually learned that he had escaped from prison where he had been tortured. Never, never again, did he want to go back to Rwanda.

Yet we couldn't stay in Congo-Kinshasa, so near to the border with Rwanda, because Désiré wasn't safe there. We had to leave, as quickly as possible. Once again, just like nine and a half years before, we were homeless and penniless, but this time with a difference: we were responsible for three little children. Fortunately, the Jesuits came to our aid. They made sure that Désiré's wounds were treated by medical staff who also gave him the necessary medication. And as soon as he was better, they got us air tickets to Cameroon. But even there, the peace we were looking for would evade us.

Yaoundé: Attack and Family Split

Désiré tells the story:

For a good two months we lived in a small house in Yaoundé, the capital of Cameroon. Then we heard that a Rwandan man had been attacked by other Rwandans. So when I was woken up by yells in the middle of the night a week later, it was instantly clear to me that they were after me, a wanted man, because I had escaped from prison in Rwanda six months earlier. Is it any wonder that I fled like a bat out of hell? There was no point in shouting for help, as in Yaoundé nobody cares a damn about screaming neighbours. And if I had stopped to waken Patrick and Joyeux, who were sleeping in the same room with me, and taken them with me, I wouldn't have been fast enough to escape. Also, I was confident that the children were not in any danger. Thank God, in that assumption I was right: when I returned next morning to check on the family, I found Patrick and Joyeux still fast asleep among smashed pieces of furniture, apparently unaware of the attack. However, Joséphine and Espoir, who had been sleeping in the other room, had vanished. I woke the boys up and we started our search. For hours on end, I asked everyone in the neighbourhood but no-one could help. The police made no effort, as I would have had to bribe them first and I had no money. Finally, I had to admit that I had lost Joséphine and Espoir.

Joséphine continues:

That day of the attack in Yaoundé, in the spring of 2004, is burnt into our memory forever. It was in the night or early hours. I was suddenly awoken by the sound of voices and screams, just like it had been in Rwanda. My head was pounding. Blindly, I grabbed Espoir, who was asleep next to me, and anything within reach, and scrambled out through the window at the back of the house. I had only one thought: get away! I ran and ran, and when I thought I was far enough away I sat down to catch my breath. I was cold. I pulled myself together and raced to the Mission station. I banged on the door, and when it opened I squeezed through into the yard without waiting for an invitation.

“What’s the matter? What do you want here?” the white man asked me.

“Attack!”

“Who’s attacking?”

“No idea, I don’t know the people.”

“Were you alone with the baby, or was anyone else there?”

“Yes, my husband and our other two boys.”

“Have you ...? Did you ... ? Can you ... ?”

I don’t know what else he asked me. I can hardly remember the rest of that awful day. A native housekeeper looked after us, made me tea, gave me something to eat and showed me to a room where Espoir and I could sleep. She also went to our house to look for Désiré,

Patrick and Joyeux, but the place was deserted, the door wide open, and nobody in the neighbourhood would admit to seeing a man with two little boys.

I was empty, numb, devoid of feeling, taking nothing in. A robot. Only the will to survive and the overwhelming need for safety drove me on. When the missionaries suggested that one of them might take me and Espoir with him when he went home on furlough, I had no objection. I didn't ask the name of the missionary or where he was going, I just wanted to get away from there. I was in a trance. And so it happened that some time later – days? weeks? – I found myself again in a plane. It remains a mystery to me how the missionary managed to get tickets for Espoir and me, to get us through passport control and into the plane. I had no papers, no passport, no visa. I have only the vaguest memories of the trip to the airport, checking in and even of the flight.

Désiré: A Slave in Chad and Flight to Nigeria

Désiré's story:

Now, all of a sudden, I was solely responsible for Patrick and Joyeux. It was down to me to care for them and, at the same time, to earn enough money to keep us all. I looked for work and finally found a job as a driver for a wholesaler who needed someone to transport salt, rice and oil to northern Cameroon. We had a room at the home of the storekeeper and while I was away he and his wife looked after my boys. Between trips, I had a couple of days off in Yaoundé which I could spend with Patrick and Joyeux.

In December 2004 I set off once again in my truck, but soon I began to feel unwell. I forced myself to keep going until eventually I collapsed. I had no idea of what was happening to me and around me. I lay in the cabin of the truck with a high fever, drifting in and out of consciousness, until another driver noticed me and informed my boss who immediately sent a replacement driver to recuperate his truck. Yes, only the truck: I was left behind half-dead in a hut on the parking lot. In the end, a man – I presume he was the village chief – had me brought to his house where he took care of me. Yet even after several months I could scarcely stand on my own two feet. I was getting desperate. Would I ever regain my strength? When would I see Patrick and Joyeux again?

Then, one day towards the end of 2005, a stranger spoke to me. He was from the neighbouring country of Chad. He explained that I had been given the wrong treatment, that I wasn't suffering from malaria nor from food poisoning, as I had been led to believe, but from typhus. He promised he could cure me, but I would have to go to Chad with him. Hope began to flicker in me once more. So at the end of 2005, the man from Chad heaved me into the back of his pick-up like a sack of potatoes, and drove me over the border to Bol on the shores of Lake Chad. There he found me a place in a huge room where a lot of other sick men were lying on mats, one with a broken leg, another with a wound on his arm. Apparently, the man was a healer and running his own kind of medical centre. And indeed, under his care, I gradually recovered and after about a year I was finally completely healthy again. However, now came the catch: he demanded that I repay him by working for him, since I couldn't give him any money for my treatment and care. He took me to an island on Lake Chad where I and two other men were kept like slaves.

Escape? Sure I was racking my brain, but in vain. It was too far to swim to the other shore, and the only links with the mainland were the boats of the freelance fishermen and fish dealers from Chad who of course couldn't take us with them. Employees of our "boss" brought food to us three slaves, usually rice and couscous, and collected the fish we had caught, gutted and smoked. My life on the island revolved around fish, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. At night I went fishing, and during the day I had to keep the fire

going, fetch new wood, and pack the gutted, dried and smoked fish in large baskets. It was a twenty-four-hour workday, with no more than a catnap when I was able to sit by the fire during the day. We had no house or hut, no bed, no toilet, no privacy – nothing but the pressure of supplying fish, day in, day out. Every week, every month, endlessly – until the summer of 2008.

It was a hot summer, hot and dry, many of the Chad fishermen took a summer break, and life on the island calmed down. It was easier to hide away. However, fishermen from Nigeria started to come around to get fish from us, as their waters were fished out. So I asked one of them to let me escape to Nigeria on his boat. There, after months of working for his brother in exchange for helping me escape, I broke at long last free again and was then able to make my way to Lagos, the biggest city in Nigeria, where I immediately embarked on the search for my children.

First of all, I tried to contact the keeper of the store where I had left the children, but the telephone number was no longer valid. I needed to find someone who could get me the current phone number, and by a miracle I did find a man who went looking for the storekeeper in Yaoundé for me. Success! He brought me the phone number back with him. Right away, I called but it was the storekeeper's girlfriend who answered. She said I should wait till evening. Only a few hours till I could try again, but they seemed the longest in my whole life. Then, at last, I got through to him.

"Hello, Désiré here. I'm the father of Patrick and Joyeux. How are they?"

"Désiré? I thought you were dead!" answered the storekeeper.

"Where are the children?"

"Well, they were here, but it was such a nuisance. The little one kept getting sick, and had problems all the time with his teeth. That was no good."

"So what happened?"

"I passed them on to my cousin. "

"Where are they now?"

"They were too much for my cousin, so she turned them out onto the street."

"Onto the street? What happened to them then?"

"No idea. Sorry."

The connection was interrupted. I recharged my phone card and tried again, but this time he didn't answer. I tried again and again, until he finally picked up the phone and promised to check with his cousin. I was to call him again three days later. I felt paralysed as time passed, but then reached him again three days later.

"Where are my children?"

"Gone! My cousin couldn't look after them any more, but maybe somebody picked them up from the street. Or maybe not. Leave me in peace." And he hung up. I was seared with pain

and my eyes were dim with tears. Then I pulled myself together. I enquired with the police in Cameroon, but they knew nothing, cared less, and did nothing. I was desperate.

Joséphine's Arrival in Switzerland – A Long Wait for Asylum

Joséphine's story:

The plane landed and the missionary accompanied me into the airport building, where he gave me a bundle of papers. He said he had to get his car and asked me to wait until he came back. I never saw or heard from him again. I remain puzzled to this day, wondering why he never contacted me again. I would like to know who he was and why he did all that for me. It bothers me even now that I have never been able to thank him. Unfortunately, it isn't possible to look for him, as I can't say whether he was young or older, because at that time all white people looked the same to me.

There I sat in the airport with baby Espoir in my arms, and waited. Espoir cried and I was tired. Finally, an official - a security man, or perhaps he was a policeman – came up to me and looked me over.

“What are you doing there?” I replied that I was waiting for someone.

“And what's all that?” he pointed to the bundle of papers. I gave it to him, thinking he might have been sent by the missionary to collect me. The official looked at everything very carefully.

“Who is the father of this baby? Is that the person you're waiting for?”

“No,” I said, “My husband isn't a white man.”

*But the baby is mixed race?” he asked.

“No.” I should point out that African babies have a lighter skin when they are born and during their first few months.

The official looked disbelievingly at me and Espoir. Finally, he told me to follow him and took us to a building at the airport where there were a lot of other people from all over the world. “Strange,” I thought. “Where am I?” For the first time it began to dawn on me that, wherever I was, it wasn't Africa. But I felt no emotion at this thought, no surprise or fear. I was inwardly paralysed and functioned like a puppet. Someone said: “Follow me.” I followed. Someone said: “You have to be registered.” I was registered. And still I was waiting for the missionary to turn up. Perhaps the people here were his guests? Perhaps he had to look after all these people and didn't have time for Espoir and me? Perhaps I had stumbled into a wedding party?

A kind woman who spoke to me in a language I didn't understand took my soaking wet, screaming Espoir from my arms and bathed him in a wonderful, sparkling clean bathtub. He liked that and he kicked his legs, chortled and laughed. It did me good to see him happy. Then another woman asked me in French if I had clean clothes for him and when I told her I had none, she asked me to go with her, assuring me that Espoir was in good hands. So we

went and found him a few things. When we came back I could hear him laughing from a long way off. Now an African spoke to me in an African language I understood. "Where are you from?" and when I told him, "Rwanda," he replied, "Rwanda? With the Hutu and Tutsi? What are you? Hutu or Tutsi?"

"I'm Rwandan," I said.

"Yes, but, Hutu or Tutsi?" He added that he knew all about the genocide in Rwanda. All the world knew about it. And he kept badgering me, "Come on, what are you?"

"Do you know what," I said firmly, "Leave me alone. I'm Rwandan."

Meanwhile I was hungry. I had been given a voucher for a meal, so I went to exchange it and found that in the place where the other people had exchanged theirs, everything was now closed. "Funny," I thought. "It's still daylight. What time is it?" I looked around me and saw clocks everywhere, so many clocks all at once! And they all said the same time, 21:30. Were they all wrong? At 21:30 it should have been dark for some time. Back with the other refugees I asked the African why I couldn't get anything to eat although it was still light.

"It's late, we aren't in Africa here!"

I felt as if I had been struck by lightning. Désiré and my boys, where are they? But I just said, "Okay" and tried not to show how much his answer had upset me. "And by the way," he added, "When they interview you, and ask you where you are from, be sure not to say you're Rwandan." I replied that I had already been interviewed and he just laughed. "You really have no idea, you don't know the time of day, you think you are in Africa, you think you've already been interviewed. You'll soon find out what a proper interview is."

"And what is it?"

"At an interview, you have to explain exactly where you come from, why you have fled, and so on and so forth. But be careful. If you are Rwandan, you mustn't tell them your real story, because they don't like your lot. People from Rwanda aren't allowed to stay here. They are afraid of you, you might be a murderer and trying to bring the Hutu-Tutsi conflict here."

"Afraid – afraid of me?"

"Sure! If they discover you're Rwandan, you'll be back in Africa in a flash!"

Back in Rwanda, Cameroon or Congo-Kinshasa? Cold horror seized me. And all through the following night I was haunted by worry as to how I should reply to the questions at the interview.

"Liars never prosper," my mother had always said. "People from Rwanda are deported," the African had warned me. I was torn. Finally, I decided to tell a half-truth. I would say I was Rwandan, but I wouldn't tell the story of my escape. I prayed, "Please God, stay by me as You have always done up to now."

As expected, I was soon taken off for my interview to a room where a number of people were sitting around a table including a woman who looked after Espoir and an interpreter who spoke Kinyarwanda. I was promised that nothing I said would leave this room and my history would be dealt with in strictest confidence. But how was that possible with so many people present? Someone was bound to let the cat out of the bag. Thoughts flitted through my head: Do not lie – don't tell them where I'm from – you can't trust a woman from Rwanda – the truth will out – was the Rwandan woman a Hutu or a Tutsi? – a secret shared is a secret lost – I don't want to be sent back, deported – who are all these people, anyway? – who can I turn to in Africa?

But the interview had already begun. The questions rained in on me, and I answered them all, mechanically, somehow, as if my brain had been switched off. As I was leaving the room I could only remember that I had admitted that I came from Rwanda. The fictional story of my flight was already forgotten. I clung to the thought that God knows my true story, He will save me.

Back in the refugee centre of Zurich airport transit zone, I was shattered. The interview had lasted almost an entire day. "How did it go? Did you do as I advised you?" the African asked me. "Yes, I did, it's all fine," I replied. I just wanted peace and quiet.

Soon afterwards, I was given a drawing with German writing on it, and a ticket. I was to pack my things and go to the Reception and Processing Centre for Asylum Seekers in Kreuzlingen, on the Swiss-German border, where I was to report immediately. But how was I to get there? I had never seen written directions nor a railway in my life, and I had no idea of how I would find my way in the train station. So there I stood with my luggage – clothes I had been given – and Espoir in my arms. Luckily, the Swiss are always helpful. I looked around me and decided to show the paper to an elderly lady. In Africa, we address older women as "Mother". You can trust them. They aren't in a hurry like the young folk, and they don't laugh at you if you say something stupid. And I was right. The elderly lady kindly came with me to the train and explained that I could stay seated all the way to Kreuzlingen.

When I got out of the train, I saw other people who looked as if, like me, they didn't belong here. I followed them to a house close by with a sign on it: Schweiz, Suisse, Svizzera, Svizra ... I wondered: "Suisse? What does that mean?" I had heard the name before but couldn't quite place it. I knew of Genève, of course, in connection with UNO, UNHCR and the Red Cross, and thought it must be a country. Now, at this house with the sign on it, we refugees were taken to reception and thoroughly examined: our bodies were patted down and our belongings gone through, all of which wasn't a problem for me, but when someone wanted to keep back my little Bible I rebelled. "Please, you can take what you like, but not that!" It worked.

After the health check – blood taken, vaccinations – Espoir and I were at last allowed to see our new accommodation. I was grateful to find safety and protection here, for at that time the only thing that counted was survival. I didn't ask where I had landed nor what was expected of me nor what would come next. I was numb, lame, had lost interest in life and all curiosity. I barely noticed hunger and thirst. I was allocated a bunk bed in the middle of a large room. All around me was hustle and bustle, coming and going. Even at night there was no peace, and Espoir cried for hours on end. I couldn't sleep. Next day, names were constantly being called out. Suddenly I heard: "Joséphine Niyikiza!"

A security officer was standing at the door waiting for me. He said I had to go for an interview. "Interview?" I asked. "I've already been interviewed." What more did they want to know from me? Well, they wanted to know exactly the same as at the airport interview, but I couldn't remember my fictional escape story any more. So I answered every question possible with "Yes." "Are you from ...?" "Yes." "Are you a refugee?" "Yes." "Were you in ...?" "Yes." I just wanted the whole business to stop. Finally, they let me go again. A few days later I was called in again and they gave me a letter stamped: ABGEWIESEN – REJECTED. "Oh we are sorry; you'll have to leave Switzerland. Your statements are full of contradictions and therefore not credible."

My heart began to pound. I was rejected, was refused asylum. Had to leave here, back to Africa! Rwanda? Cameroon? Congo? But I had nobody left in Africa, no home, no money. Where were Désiré and our sons? The police would take me away in handcuffs. I could hear my blood roaring in my ears.

"Oh God, don't abandon me!" I prayed. I was standing on the steps, weeping bitterly, when a woman came by, probably from a charity like HEKS or Caritas, and asked me what was the matter. I showed her my negative decision and my dossier. She told me to stop crying, all wasn't lost. I might still have a chance. And she pushed a visiting card for the Legal Advisory Service in St Gallen into my hand.

"There's nothing else you can do here in Kreuzlingen, but in the transit centre in Buchs, where you are going next, you'll have the opportunity to ask for an appointment with the Legal Advisory Service. They'll help you file an appeal. Hand this card in when you get to Buchs."

And indeed, soon after this I was once again given a train ticket and my second page of directions with instructions to go to the transit centre in Buchs, a town in the Rhine Valley near Liechtenstein. Again, I was in automatic mode, my head a jumble, devoid of feelings. I now knew my way around the station in Kreuzlingen, where I took the train to Buchs, and was greeted kindly there by a woman. I gave her the card and asked her to arrange for me to have an appointment with the Legal Advisory Service. "Right," she said, "I'll do that tomorrow." I was relieved.

We got into a car and off we went, up the mountain, higher and higher, bend after bend, deep into the forest. What are we doing here? I wondered, fetching wood? I imagined that all Europeans lived in towns and cities and bought their food in cans and boxes, imported from Africa for instance. Countryside and farms simply didn't belong in my mental image of Europe. Eventually, we arrived at the transit centre and got out of the car. Refugees from all over the world were standing around outside the building, staring at me. The woman led me inside, gave me a woollen blanket and showed me a tiny room for Esipoir and me. A room all to ourselves – I ought to have been pleased, but I was incapable of any feeling. This place, located far from the nearest village, surrounded by trees, reminded me of my flight through the jungle. I had the feeling we refugees were shameful and had to be hidden. But hidden from whom? And in any case, my request for asylum had been refused, and the threatened deportation hung like a shadow over everything.

All the same, I was also thankful because at that moment I was (still) in safety. And already the next day I was given an appointment with the Legal Advisory Service. I shall never forget the trip to St Gallen. They had given me a ticket, but had forgotten to tell me to stamp it at the station and how to go about it. Unsuspectingly, with Esipoir in my arms, I got on the train and found myself in a smoking compartment. I didn't like that, so went to the next compartment where nobody was smoking. In fact, the carriage was practically empty. Great! I sat down and made myself comfortable. The inspector came and wanted to see my ticket. He said something I didn't understand, but it was obvious that he wasn't happy. Then he tried speaking French: "Billet – pas correct et ici première classe, pas deuxième classe, première classe. Vous devez payer." Stamp the ticket, first class, second class, none of it made sense to me. And I had no money anyway. I explained that I couldn't pay. In the end, he stamped my ticket himself and led me into second class. I thanked him politely and he said: "You're in luck, this is my good day!" I thought to myself, I hope it's also my good day.

Oh yes, it was! At the Legal Advisory Service I was given a very warm welcome. "What would you like to drink? Would you like something to eat? What's the sweet baby called?" The people were very kind to us both. I remembered what the African had told me, that in Switzerland they don't like people from Rwanda. It wasn't true at all. One woman sat at the table with me and the other took Esipoir onto her lap. My papers were there, obviously sent on ahead of my visit and I was asked to tell my story. Once again. However, I still didn't dare to tell the whole truth, so only about fifty percent was true. Then I asked why I had been given a negative decision.

"Well," said the woman, "that's probably because of your contradictory statements. You've just told me yet another new story! How are we to believe you?" She was right, of course.

After this interview, on the way back to the transit centre, I was very concerned. Would I be allowed to stay? How should I behave? Could I trust the people at the Legal Advisory Service? In the end I decided that I could and on my second visit I described my escape

truthfully and fully. That did me good. At last I was no longer alone with my worries about Désiré, Patrick and Joyeux. And when I heard that there was a possibility of trying to trace my lost family, I could hardly believe my ears. Search for them, in Africa? Yes, but where, how? Oh yes, they explained to me. The Croix Rouge – Red Cross – has a tracing service with branches everywhere, even in Cameroon and the Congo. And anyone searching for someone is allowed to make use of this service, including me.

At this point the Legal Advisory Service set all its cogs in motion: the appeal against my negative decision, the search for my family and the application for me to undergo trauma therapy. At last I felt that someone understood me. I found new hope. All the same, until all the cogs of the bureaucracy were in sync, the machine needed plenty of attention: until the children had been traced and then Désiré, until my application for asylum was approved, until I was able to stand on my own feet, and the whole family was reunited, the cogs had to be oiled many times.

I stayed at the transit centre in Buchs for eleven months. During this time, I phoned the Legal Advisory Service over and over again, enquiring whether my appeal had been heard and approved. Every time they reassured me with the words that no news is good news, better than a negative decision. I had to be patient. Many months went by before I was finally informed that my appeal had been approved and a request for reconsideration had been filed. That smoothed the way for a transfer from the transit centre to a place in a community, and soon afterwards I was informed that I could move to an apartment in the town of Jona, on the Lake of Zurich.

I still had no idea where my life was going, and there was still no trace of Désiré, Patrick and Joyeux. Nevertheless, the Red Cross was trying to trace them and I felt well in my support network and safe in my new apartment. For the first time in years, I raised my eyes beyond the confines of my own four walls. I felt it was high time that I was at home somewhere. Why not in Jona?

Joséphine's Integration in Rapperswil-Jona

Joséphine's story:

Espoir and I had been living in Jona for about a year when I was granted my F-category residence permit, which meant I was provisionally accepted. Don't think that made me happy: I was disappointed and deeply insecure. "Provisionally" meant that I could be deported at any time, and wasn't completely welcome in Switzerland. Where had that feeling of security gone that I had so hoped for? Indeed, I would rather have still been an asylum seeker with hope in my heart.

On the other hand, my status as a temporary resident motivated me to do everything I could to be integrated. I was determined to show "them", those who held my fate in their hands, that I could manage to adapt to "their" society and that I would not be a burden to "them". The better I could succeed in integrating, the greater my chances of being allowed to stay in Switzerland. How could they send me away again, when I had no other home? I wanted to look forward to a future with the people here and that meant letting go of my past. From time to time a woman from the community in Jona visited me. I honestly don't know whether she was a volunteer or in an official position, but she gave me the feeling that someone cared about me and was interested in me. We are still in touch to this day.

I also plucked up the courage to step out by myself. The contact with other Christians in Jona for instance played an important part in my daily life and my successful integration right from the start. There was this woman friend that I had got to know in the free church and who invited me to join in the "Women of the Woods". That is a group of women with their children who meet once a month, whatever the weather, and take time out from daily life by going into the country, sharing their time, cooking together and letting the children play together. I have belonged to this group now for many years, the only African among Swiss women, who are all married to African husbands.

Isn't that romantic, sitting around the fire, summer and winter, come rain or shine, barbecuing sausages or cooking a stew in a big pot? Really? Think again! In the beginning I found it no fun at all, and utterly absurd. How can anyone even dream of going off into the forest to roast meat or sausages over a campfire when you have a clean, state-of-the-art kitchen at home in your nice warm apartment?

These women are crazy, I thought at first. However, I let myself be persuaded to go along with them and put on a good face. And as time went by I began to join in the interesting conversations about everyday issues and bringing up children, and I started to appreciate how wonderfully helpful these women were.

In addition to the Christian fellowship, an equally important factor in my integration, though in a different way, was learning the language of the country. I wanted to be able to speak German because I was still dreaming of finding an occupation where I could work with people and support them in their daily life, but unless I could speak their language that wasn't possible. Full of hope and highly motivated, I started taking German lessons. Fortunately, kind people supported me financially and looked after Espoir. Once a week I attended a three-hour session of German lessons at the Migros Club School and two lessons in the so-called Family Forum in the afternoon. However, I realised one day that I would have to take many more expensive courses before I could express myself reasonably in German. I was disappointed, but my trauma therapist, who had stood by me throughout this difficult period and also helped me financially, had expected nothing different. She constantly motivated me to go on: "Come on, you have already made astounding progress, don't give up now!"

These German classes were super but it was clear to me that if I didn't want to forget what I had just learnt I would have to use it in everyday life. I would have to go out, get to know Swiss people and speak German with them. So I volunteered my time, for instance, helping in a nursery and for a women's integration group. I also figured out a special strategy for expanding my command of German. That wasn't possible in the apartment block where I was living, as we were all asylum-seekers and legally recognised refugees. We got along but had no common language, and hardly anyone spoke German. However, the garden behind the block looked onto a neat, quiet neighbourhood with small houses. When I was working there in my vegetable garden I saw locals passing. One day I deliberately positioned myself right behind the garden fence and dared to speak to a woman.

"Grüezi!" I said, greeting her in Swiss German, and then, using hands and feet and grimaces, "Would you like some seedlings?"

"Oh yes," she replied. She had some for me, we could swap plants. And so we got into conversation and I had made contact. She invited me to her house and one day she offered to teach me German. That would be great, I said, but I had no money. She chuckled. What's money got to do with it? I should simply come to her, whenever it was convenient. And if I needed someone to look after Espoir, she would be there for us, no problem. So a friendship developed and from this first acquaintance came two, three, a whole network. Gradually I got to know everyone who lived on this street.

My new friend also introduced me to the Careers Advisory Service, a charity shop and other important institutions in the town of Rapperswil-Jona. And my trauma therapist gave me a very important piece of information: she told me about a course leading to a qualification as a professional carer with the Swiss Red Cross, which in the long term might enable me to get into the nursing profession. She suggested I should ask the Careers Advisory Service, which I did, and this led me a step closer to my dream of working as a nurse and helping people.

Second step: The Red Cross training course. Third step: training as a registered nurse. And who knows, maybe my qualification as a registered nurse, which I obtained in the summer of 2016, will one day open up the way to becoming a graduate nurse?

Joséphine's Search For Patrick And Joyeux And Their Arrival in Switzerland

Joséphine continues:

At the time I moved to Jona, the Red Cross had already long been searching for my two older sons. However, information regarding progress never came to me direct: instead it always went via the Legal Advisory Service and my trauma therapist, because without their aid I wouldn't have understood the reports (of failure) or been able to stand the mental stress. The uncertainty as to the whereabouts of Patrick and Joyeux had numbed my emotions.

Then, about a month after I had moved, everything suddenly changed. Espoir and I were on the way home, waiting for a traffic light to change. I was chasing my dreams. In a clothes shop, I had just been looking at children's things that had been reduced in price, and now I was haunted by the mental picture of how Patrick and Joyeux would look in these lovely outfits, which colour would best suit Patrick, what I would pick for Joyeux. Suddenly my mobile phone rang, tearing me out of my fantasy. I looked at the display: a number starting with 022. Strange. I knew nobody with this area prefix. Hesitantly I pressed the "accept" button.

"Hello?"

"Hello. Are you Joséphine Niyikiza?"

"Yes."

"We have found your children."

"Found – my children? OK. Thank you." I hung up. The dream about the children wearing those beautiful clothes seemed to have taken over my mind. Now I was fantasising that someone was actually calling to tell me that they had been found. Weird! My phone rang again.

"Listen, we have found your children."

"Yes, thank you," I replied mechanically, without taking anything in, lost in my fantasy. When I arrived home a neighbour was standing at my door.

"Someone from the Red Cross phoned. Are you looking for your children?"

"Yes."

"How come?"

I began to explain but she interrupted me: "Yes, okay, and now the people from the Red Cross have found them." "What? How do you mean, found them?" My neighbour must have

misheard. Immediately I called my therapist and told her the strange tale. Yes, she replied, hadn't they reached me? "Yes," I answered, "but I don't understand ..."

"Joséphine, the Red Cross has traced your children. Come and see me tomorrow and we'll talk all about it."

I could hardly wait for the next day, but even as the therapist was explaining to me that the Red Cross had traced the whereabouts of the children, the news didn't really penetrate. Yes, my head knew that the children had been found, but in my heart I felt almost nothing. I would have had to see Patrick and Joyeux and hug them to me in order to be able to believe my luck.

Little by little, it dawned on me: the children were alive, the Red Cross knew where they were, and that meant they would soon be with me again. Wonderful! At least, that was what I thought. Alas, it wasn't to be. They weren't allowed to come to me – not yet. So there they were, my eight-year-old Patrick and my six-year-old Joyeux, all alone in Cameroon, in the middle of Africa, without their parents, with no family, and yet they weren't allowed to join their mother in Switzerland! I was flabbergasted. Yes, that was the law: as an asylum-seeker with my F-permit I had no legal right to have my children follow me. First of all, the decision had to be made whether I would be allowed to stay in Switzerland. That's right: at that time, I was still an asylum-seeker.

What an unbearable situation! The people from the Legal Advisory Service enquired, wrote reams of letters, filed applications and demanded that the children's rights must be upheld. I myself was totally overwhelmed. I didn't understand the content of the letters and had to have everything explained to me. Finally, the Red Cross managed to arrange asylum for the children with the UNHCR. This meant that they were internationally recognised as refugees and therefore had the right to live in any country in the world. Anywhere – except in Switzerland. The Swiss authorities refused them entry because I didn't have a full residence permit here. There was no objection to me joining the children, they said. But did I want to go back to Cameroon where we had been attacked and where I knew nobody? Of course not! I was in despair.

Meanwhile, the Red Cross and the UNHCR had employed a woman to look after the children. They sent me photos of them, and gave me the phone number of the woman so that I could contact her. She told me that she was being paid a decent amount for the maintenance of the children, enough for them all to live on quite comfortably. So far, so good, I thought, but then the woman got it into her head that since I was living in Switzerland I must have more money than I needed and therefore I should support her with a generous contribution. That was only fair, and I should send her some money. Of course, I couldn't do that. I was dependent on social benefits. All the same, she insisted, and when I didn't respond she began to neglect the children. She left them alone in the house. Later, Joyeux told me the

same story over and over: that she claimed she had to go back to her village because her mother had died, and she didn't come back. She simply never appeared again. I can only guess how my children must have felt.

Fortunately, my friend from Buchs intervened and thanks to her connections, the boys were finally allowed to enter Switzerland on 19 May 2006 – almost a year after they had been traced by the Red Cross and three weeks after the Federal Migration Office had authorised the entry of my family members. I could hardly believe it was happening. How often had I imagined this moment, longed for it. Yet suddenly, my joyful anticipation was tainted by feelings of fear and uncertainty. Why?

It was early in the morning. There I stood in the reception hall of Zurich airport, surrounded by my friends, and waited. I was exhausted, as I hadn't been able to sleep, tormented by worry about how our reunion would go. Yet at the same time I was also wide awake, knowing I was going to see Patrick and Joyeux again very, very soon. And there they were! Accompanied by a strange woman, they were coming towards me. I went to meet them, wanted to take them in my arms and hug them, but they stepped back, clinging to each other.

"Salut Patrick, salut Joyeux," I said. "Bonjour."

The woman told them: "C'est votre maman."

Silent and distrustful they looked at me. I said again and again, "I'm your maman." But they only asked, "Where's our mother?" "I'm your mother." "Uh-huh." No joy. Nothing. The two boys just clung to each other. Finally, I said, "Come on, let's go home." "Okay," replied Patrick, "But where's our mother?" I gave each of them an apple. Joyeux turned to Patrick. "Can I eat this?" "Yes," said Patrick, "you can eat it." He took a bite himself, and then turned dizzy.

We drove home. Reminiscing afterwards, Patrick commented that he had been struck by how straight the roads were. Somehow, I got through the day. In the evening, finally, I was alone again – alone with my despair. I wept all through the night.

Next day dawned, grey and frosty. We were strangers to one another. Joyeux was constantly asking Patrick, "Where's our mother?" and Patrick replied, "She's gone to the village." Or else: "Our mother is sick." Or: "She's dead."

I told them about how I had been pregnant with them, had nursed them, and how I had cuddled them when they cried. I told them stories full of love and concern to try and win their trust, but they refused to believe me. Patrick asked, "But maman, why did you leave us? Why didn't you come back and get us? We had nothing to eat but rice and tomato sauce. Why did you leave us alone?"

I tried to explain the whole complicated story since the attack in Cameroon, but the children were too small and didn't understand what I was telling them. At night, I often lay awake crying. I was tormented by my thoughts and prayed. God had given me back my lost children, He would show us a way to find one another again. This faith and the support from those around me gave me the strength to put up with the mistrust and rejection that flowed from my children. I often didn't know what to do next. In my distress, I sought advice from everyone – neighbours, other mothers, church members, the Women of the Woods – telling them frankly of our problems. Patrick's teacher took time out for me nearly every week, and gave me much valuable advice. I listened to everyone and was grateful for all the tips and hints I was given from every side. I told myself: you must accept help and build up a social support network, on no account must you retreat into your own four walls. And the children also need to belong. So I sent them for school dinners where they became familiar with Swiss food and eating habits, and they were given help with their homework. I also enrolled them in this and that club, such as the Football Club. In this way I hoped I was able to make it a little easier for them to integrate into their new world.

On the other hand, they also helped me to integrate better. Here's a typical example: A Swiss lady whom I knew from the Free Church asked me if Patrick might be interested in taking part in a children's programme at the local protestant church on the topic of "The Slave Trade in Africa". She knew that the deacon in charge was looking for African children. Patrick agreed and when I went with him each time I automatically got to meet people involved with the protestant church. Later on, Patrick also joined in the activities of the YMCA, a Christian movement for children and young men and women, and took part in the nativity play at Christmas.

Little by little Patrick, Joyeux and I now began to trust one another and get closer. All that was missing to make our happiness complete was Désiré. The boys began to pepper me with questions. Didn't they have a Daddy? Why wasn't he with us? I didn't know how to answer them. In the first few years, I was completely in the dark myself as to where he was and whether he was even still alive. And of course I worried about the circumstances and why Patrick and Joyeux had been all on their own in Cameroon when the Red Cross found them. The boys themselves couldn't or wouldn't say anything about that, and still haven't spoken about it to this day.

Désiré's Search For The Children – Joséphine's Battle For His Entry Permit

Désiré takes up the tale:

It was now the end of 2009. For five years I had had no news of the children and I was still in Lagos. In the end I tried to make contact with the Red Cross in Cameroon to see if they could trace my children. I sent an e-mail. No reply. I e-mailed again. Nothing. Time passed. I wrote three times and then finally I received a reply from Cameroon. A woman wrote back and wanted to know all about me, who I was, where I was, all about my children, why they weren't with me, why I had abandoned them, where, how, what. We corresponded by e-mail for months until my identity had been fully established, and then I heard nothing more. An eternity passed. The uncertainty was unbearable. Then at last, another e-mail. The same woman asked me for my phone number, so I sent her the number of my boss. Silence.

Time went by. Eventually I wrote another e-mail and discovered that the woman had phoned but was told they didn't know me. I instantly went to my boss and asked him to call me to the phone next time she rang so that I could talk to the woman from the Red Cross myself. So that is what he did. She said, "The children you were asking about are in Switzerland, with their mother. Now get your own phone and ring be back. Then I'll pass your phone number on to your wife." We were disconnected.

Patrick and Joyeux were alive? Living in Switzerland? Living with whom? Joséphine? How could that be? Joséphine in Switzerland? And how had the children got there? All by themselves? Impossible! My head was buzzing like a wasps' nest. My imagination ran riot, question after question tormented and worried me, stopped me from thinking clearly, so that I couldn't sleep, eat or drink. Was I dreaming? When would I wake up from this dream?

Getting a phone of my own was really expensive and took me a whole week, but somehow I managed. Then I rang the woman from the Red Cross back. She told me she would give my wife my number that very same evening and I would hear from Joséphine.

October 2010. My phone rang. A call from Switzerland. A woman's voice, but not a voice I knew. My heart sank. It was as I thought, they had mixed me up with someone else. It was all a huge mistake. Meanwhile the woman had begun to fire questions at me. "Who are you? What's your name? Where are you? Why?" In the end she explained that Joséphine had asked her to speak to me because she herself didn't trust nor did she dare pick up the phone, but she would call me later. Next day, when the phone rang, it was once again Joséphine's friend on the line, but this time she said immediately, "I'll give you Joséphine." I heard her beloved voice. She asked who I was. "Désiré."

We didn't speak. An eternity. Then very carefully, gently, one word at a time, we ventured towards each other in our mother tongue, Kinyarwanda. Suddenly there was a torrent of

questions, memories, stories. We phoned over and over again. The children also wanted to know everything. “Where are you? Why haven’t we heard from you for so long? When are you coming to see us in Switzerland?” And when Espoir asked me, “Are you black or are you white?” that was an eye-opener as it hit me that we didn’t know one another at all. And when would I be able to go and join them?

Joséphine takes up the story:

In the autumn of 2010, the Red Cross Tracing Service phoned me out of the blue. They had traced someone who was very probably Désiré. The man was living in Nigeria. They would give me his phone number so that I could ring him myself and I was to let them know as soon as I was certain that it really was Désiré.

“What did you say, you have found Désiré?” I stammered. I didn’t know if I was on my head or my heels. Désiré really was still alive? How was that possible? The children alone, Désiré alone? What should I say to him when I called him? Fortunately, I was in a holiday camp when the Red Cross reached me with the news so I had the support of my friends and didn’t have to cope all on my own with the excitement of receiving this unbelievable news. I asked a woman friend to be with me when I phoned Désiré – or, as I feared, the man purporting to be Désiré. Then I mustered all my courage and dialled the number in Africa. I tried to say “Hello,” heard his “Hello” and instantly handed the phone to my friend.

I felt wrapped up in cotton wool. As if from very far away, I could hear my friend’s voice. Suddenly she put the phone in my hand but I couldn’t unscramble my thoughts. It was like fireworks going off in my head. I couldn’t speak. Finally, she took the phone off me and said we would ring back.

The next day, she called him again. I had asked her to cross-examine this man and to find out if he really was Désiré. She did her best and asked him everything she could think of, then she gave me the phone. Silence. “Joséphine?” “Désiré?” Hesitantly, we began to talk to each other. The voice that I heard was familiar yet at the same time he was a stranger. But yes, it was him, I was absolutely sure. We had enormous gaps to fill in. He asked me, I asked him: So you are still alive? And you? How did you get to Switzerland? How did you get to Nigeria? What are you doing there? And you? And the children? What happened to the children? Like an echo, I repeated every one of Désiré’s questions. There were no real answers. Only one thing interested me anyway: why had he left the children on their own? But that was something we couldn’t discuss on the phone, and it’s a gap that still hasn’t been completely filled to this day.

Amazingly, more than four years after finding the children, I now had found Désiré. Fantastic. Marvellous. We were all so overjoyed. Of course, he wasn’t yet allowed to enter Switzerland. Now I had to apply on his behalf. Once again I travelled to St Gallen, to the legal

Advisory Service, and returned home with a long list of requirements that had to be satisfied before permission could be given for the family to be reunited. Naturally, it had been clear to me from the start that it would be very difficult to obtain an entry permit for Désiré but I wasn't going to waste my time worrying about it. The children were missing their father, I was missing my husband, and I was prepared to move heaven and earth to get Désiré here with us. I knew God would stand by me whatever happened, whether I would find the way out of the labyrinth of Swiss bureaucracy or whether I would get stuck and have to turn back. It wasn't enough to sit back patiently and trust in God, though. I needed an enormous amount of support from the people around me, including financial assistance in order to get all the papers together that would allow Désiré to obtain an entry permit.

In 2010 I myself had only the provisional F-permit as a temporarily accepted refugee, and that for less than five years, which meant family reunification was precluded. But even on 24 July 2011, when several appeals and requests for reconsideration of my circumstances had at last culminated in my obtaining a regular B-category residence permit for humanitarian reasons, which of course was a huge cause for rejoicing, I discovered that this was only the beginning.

The B-permit gave me the right to file an application for the reunification of the family, but I had no idea at all as to how I was to obtain the necessary papers. I had to prove that we could live without the support of social benefits, meaning that I had to find Désiré a job and get a signed contract of employment for him since I wasn't earning enough to support a family of five on my own. Then I myself needed confirmation that I was employed, references, pay slips, and of course a passport. Only, who was going to issue me – and Désiré – with a passport? Rwanda, maybe? No question of that happening.

I also had to find us a family apartment at a rent that we could afford and produce written confirmation from the landlord that Désiré would be allowed to live with us. It was only thanks to my support network that I was able to meet this requirement. Then I had to provide a current extract from the criminal and debt enforcement registers to prove I had no record. That wasn't difficult. And I needed confirmation from a health insurance company that they would cover Désiré. In addition, I had to get a certificate issued within the last three months by Congo-Brazzaville confirming that we were married – which I managed to do – and birth certificates for the children. Furthermore, I also had to prove that I had attended German lessons and done voluntary work, and I asked my Swiss friends to confirm in writing that I had made efforts to be integrated. And so on and so forth.

Over and above all this, the police also investigated us closely: in the school attended by my children, in the neighbourhood and at my place of employment. What did they want to know? Whether we were decent, respectable, law-abiding, acclimatised, hard-working?

It seemed interminable but eventually I had managed to fulfil all the endless requirements and after years of running around every possible official department, the social services, the Federal Office for Migration, the Red Cross, OIM (Organisation Internationale pour les Migrations), the Swiss Embassy and many others, in January 2013 Désiré was granted his entry permit.

Reunited in Switzerland

Joséphine continues:

For two years and three months I had battled to obtain his entry permit. During that time, I had phoned him again and again, and talked about him to the children. No wonder that in the night before he was due to arrive, I could hardly sleep. Questions flew round and round in my head and gave me no peace. When would his plane land? How would the children react? What should I cook for dinner? Finally, this last night crept to its close. I went to the airport with Patrick, Joyeux and Espoir, accompanied by my friends and friends of my children. The woman from the Red Cross had come, too. Altogether, a welcoming committee of a score of people was gathered impatiently at the barrier. Then I saw on the board that Désiré's plane had landed.

I'm waiting, tingling all over. My head is buzzing. Incredible. He's coming, now. I'm waiting. The sliding doors open – no Désiré. Close, open – still nothing. Close, open – only strangers. Close and – there he is! He's so thin, I think. Nothing else ...

Désiré takes up the tale:

It was exactly the same for me. I couldn't think clearly, either. After the long haul from Nigeria via Dubai to Switzerland, I was dead tired. I had barely slept for days and was totally drained by the suspense and tension of wondering whether I would actually be allowed to enter the country. Right to the last, I had to be prepared to be turned back, with every single customs check a gamble. All I had was a visa printed on ordinary paper, but no passport. And even if I had had every single document required, it would still not have guaranteed me free passage because in many African states everything depends on the whims and moods of the officials. But now – Swiss customs and immigration were behind me. The door to Switzerland was open. Unbelievable: I was with Joséphine and our children again! The three boys hugged me. How big they were, Patrick and Joyeux. And this was Espoir! He was crying. "Are you staying with us now?" he asked, "Or will you have to go away again?"

It took some time before the children accepted me. Especially Patrick found it difficult at first, but then little by little he began to trust me and we connected again.

I had left my life in Africa behind me. For good. I wasn't sorry about that, not at all. Although Switzerland is on a different continent from my native land, nothing can change the fact that whether I live in Congo-Kinshasa, Congo-Brazzaville, Cameroon, Chad, Nigeria or Switzerland, I am living in a foreign country. Those last years spent in Africa, struggling to survive alone, had been very tough. I certainly didn't want that kind of life back.

Of course, Rwanda is my homeland. The river of my life has its source in the village where I was born and grew up. That will always be in my heart, and that is a good thing, as otherwise the source of my life would run dry. Yet the waters of this river have never stopped flowing and have now reached the Lake of Zurich. Yes, I am open to a future in Switzerland. In safety. That is what matters to me. Here there is law and order, something that doesn't exist in most of the African countries I have lived in. The Swiss federal constitution and laws are not only established in writing, they are also respected and implemented. That's something I can rely on. In Africa I never knew whether the police and justice were on my side or not, even when I had done nothing wrong or illegal. And peace reigns in Switzerland. Here I can relax, I hope. People are reliable and kind. Occasionally someone stares at me or looks away instead of making eye contact and saying hello, as is usual in my neighbourhood. But isn't it up to me whether I feel discriminated against or whether I tell myself that the way the other person is behaving doesn't necessarily have to do with the colour of my skin?

Yes, I see my future here in Switzerland with my family.

Joséphine concludes:

This is my home now. In Switzerland I feel safe, secure in the circle of my family, friends and acquaintances. We have become a kind of extended family. Without them, without the Red Cross and without the Christian fellowships I would never have managed, for example, to overcome all the red tape and bureaucratic hurdles that blocked the way and prevented Patrick, Joyeux and Désiré from entering the country.

I'm happy and grateful for the warmth of our hearth and home. Here in Switzerland we live in peace and security, and have a lovely home. The children can go to school, learn a trade and are supported according to their abilities. And we, too, are able to have vocational training. We are settled in a large circle of friends who support us and to whom we can also give something back. Yes, I'm content and contentment is important in life.

My tree has been transplanted. It has Rwandan roots, but it has been able to grow and flourish again in Switzerland.

Thanks be to God.

Interview with Nicole Windlin, Head of the Tracing Service of the Swiss Red Cross

Johanna Krapf:

To what extent was the search for Patrick, Joyeux and Désiré unusual and not just one of many?

Nicole Windlin:

There were two separate investigations, one concerning the search for the children and the other for Désiré. Neither was very easy – in Désiré’s case, for instance, we had no clues at all as to where he might be. And yet both inquiries were successful. Both Patrick and Joyeux as well as Désiré were found pretty quickly and were able to join Joséphine and Espoir in Switzerland - although that didn’t go nearly as fast!

The positive outcome in both instances was down to the fact that our inquiries coincided with tracing requests at the other end, that were made at more or less the same time as ours. This synchronicity in the timing of the search is in itself something very uncommon. Sure, I could say it was a coincidence. But at any rate, the fact that both Joséphine and Désiré filed tracing requests speaks volumes about their deep bond and their commitment to wishing to live together again.

Is the story of the Nsanzineza-Niyikiza family unusual in any other respect?

Oh yes, indeed. Just think of Joséphine’s extraordinary determination and persistence in fighting to bring her family back together again. Despite all the administrative obstacles, she never lost sight of that one objective: that all three children should grow up with both their father and mother. And she has built up a large, close-knit network of relationships that she could rely on during all these years. Désiré, too, showed tremendous perseverance in the hardships he had to go through, in Chad, in Nigeria, where he managed to scrape along all by himself, eking out an existence on the poverty line and constantly confronted with the high costs of living.

Both the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the Red Cross of Switzerland and of Cameroon were involved in this search. When is each organisation active?

The ICRC¹ is responsible in situations of conflict and war, whereas the local Red Cross acts in times of peace. So in Switzerland, where there is peace, the ICRC isn’t active. In the case of Joséphine and Désiré the Swiss Red Cross collaborated with the Cameroonian Red Cross.

¹ The International Committee of the Red Cross, the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, plus 189 national societies comprise the International Movement of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, which together forms the largest humanitarian network in the world involved in tracing missing people.

However, the ICRC was also involved although Cameroon can't be said to be directly in a conflict situation. Both organisations often work closely together. For example, since the ICRC is chiefly present in large cities, the local Red Cross takes over if news has to be taken to a village. A three-day walk – that's too much for the ICRC. And then it also depends on how closely the national Red Cross of a given country is linked with the current government. In some circumstances, it's safer to work with the ICRC rather than with the national Red Cross.

Can you give me a brief outline of the SRC and its main tasks?

The SRC is active in the areas of health, integration and rescue, and also assists internationally in disaster relief and development cooperation. One branch of the SRC is the tracing service. As the Swiss Red Cross doesn't take sides in hostilities, and also because it is generally well known, it enjoys great confidence on a wide scale – that's an important prerequisite for a successful search for missing persons. Moreover, the SRC has world-wide connections.

The tracing service that is available to anyone living in Switzerland who is looking for a missing family member or a person close to them, is used by around 1,000 people a year, and rising – no wonder in view of the dangerous routes taken by refugees through Africa, by sea and across Europe. More and more, refugees are getting separated from their families as they try to flee.

Joséphine and Désiré²: Key Data

1.5.1974	Désiré Nsanzineza born
Summer 1979	Désiré starts school
July 1994	Désiré escapes to Congo-Kinshasa (to Bukavu)
5.5.1980	Joséphine Niyikiza born
Summer 1985	Joséphine starts school
April 1994	Joséphine flees Rwanda
July 1994	Joséphine and Désiré meet by chance in Bukavu; three months later they move into Bukavu Refugee Camp
Late autumn 1995	After lengthy stays in refugee camps, they spend months fleeing through the jungle
Early summer 1996	Crossing from Congo-Kinshasa to Congo-Brazzaville
Late summer 1996	Joséphine and Désiré settle in Ouesso, north of Congo- Brazzaville
June 1997	Patrick born
May 1999	Joyeux born
End of 2000	Return to Bukavu: Désiré travels to Rwanda, later imprisoned; Joséphine, Patrick and Joyeux stay in Congo-Kinshasa
December 2003	Espoir born
Spring 2004	All flee together to Cameroon
June 2004	Attack in Yaoundé
End of June 2004	Joséphine and Espoir reach Switzerland

² It was difficult to establish a timeline based on the information given in the texts and the historical facts (e.g. construction and demolition of refugee camps) and with the official reports of the Swiss Red Cross, since as Joséphine frequently reiterated, she and Désiré had no calendar or sense of time while they were on the run. Their sole focus was on survival and they barely noticed how much time had passed. Hence, this timeline can only be approximate and even then, apart from officially established data, should be regarded with caution.

Early summer 2005	Joséphine and Espoir move to Jona
14 July 2005	E-mail from SRC to Legal Advisory Service announcing that Patrick and Joyeux have been found
19 May 2006	Patrick and Joyeux arrive in Switzerland
7 July 2006	Joséphine is granted F-category permit (provisional residence)
24 July 2011	Joséphine is granted the regular B-category residence permit for humanitarian reasons
December 2004	Désiré falls sick during a truck journey in northern Cameroon and is unable to return to his children
Winter 2005/2006	Désiré travels to Chad with a healer
Winter 2006/2007	Désiré is taken as a slave to an island on Lake Chad
Summer 2008	Désiré flees to Nigeria
Spring 2009	Désiré is a free man
End of 2009	First attempt by Désiré to contact Cameroon Red Cross
October 2010	First (telephone) contact between Désiré and Joséphine
30 January 2013	Désiré is allowed to enter Switzerland



Bukavu-Brazzaville: Luftlinie 1516 Kilometer

Joséphine und Désiré flüchten zu Fuss von Bukavu via Bilolo in der Nähe von Brazzaville nach Ouessou (Sommer 1994–Spätsommer 1996).
 Von Ouessou fliegen sie zurück nach Bukavu (Ende 2000).
 Von Bukavu fliegen sie nach Douala in Kamerun und lassen sich in Yaoundé nieder (Frühling 2004).
 Von Yaoundé fährt Désiré im Camion nach Maroua (Ende 2004).
 Der kranke Désiré wird nach Bol am Tschadsee gebracht (Winter 2005/06).
 Désiré flieht von der Insel auf dem Tschadsee (Sommer 2008) und reist nach dem Tod seines Arbeitgebers zu Fuss und mit dem Bus nach Lagos.

Zentralafrikanische Republik = Central African Republic

Tschad = Chad

Südsudan = South Sudan

Demokratische Republik Kongo = Democratic Republic of the Congo (Congo Kinshasa)

Republik Kongo = Republic of the Congo (Congo Brazzaville)

Kamerun = Cameroon

Ruanda = Rwanda

Distance Bukavu – Brazzaville = 1516 kilometres

Joséphine and Désiré flee on foot from Bukavu to Ouessou via Bilolo near Brazzaville (summer 1994 – late summer 1996)

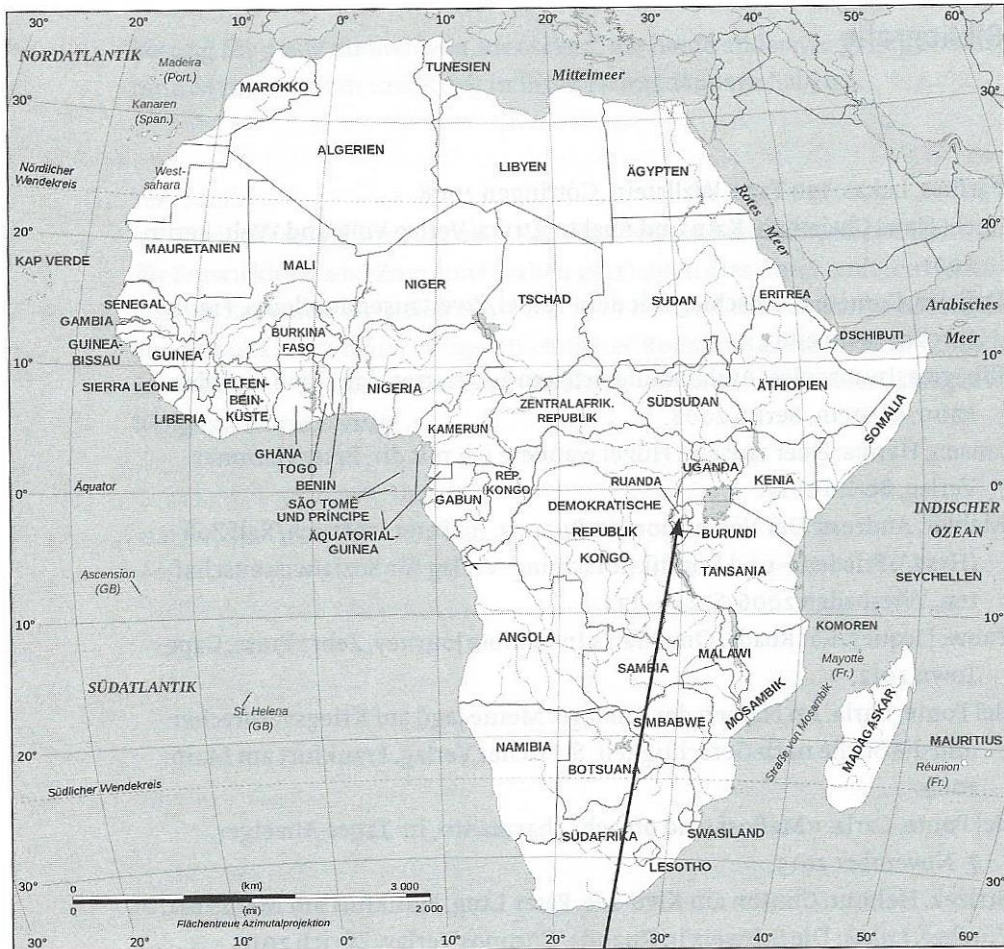
From Ouessou they fly back to Bukavu (end of 2000)

From Bukavu they fly to Douala in Cameroon and settle in Yaoundé (spring 2004)

Désiré drives his truck from Yaoundé to Maroua (end of 2004)

Désiré, seriously ill, is taken from Maroua to Bol on Lake Chad (2005-2006)

Désiré escapes from the island on Lake Chad (summer 2008) and after the death of his employer travels on foot and by bus to Lagos.



Ruanda