



moment of their life. Otherwise I wouldn't be there. And I'm always deeply moved that they invite me into their homes to share their stories with me. It can be horribly awkward, but it is necessary to ask them how they're feeling.

When I was covering my first war, a news editor instructed me to "find someone to interview who has lost his arm and/or entire family". So it's no wonder I've heard it said that journalists are just one notch up from second-hand car salesmen.

When we arrived at the Djoubadi family home, the search and rescue dog immediately picked up Yasmien's scent in several locations – a sure sign, the rescuers explained to me, that she was dead. I photographed

Friendship out of tragedy

As the Middle East Bureau Chief for Russia Today, Jo'burg-born Paula Slir has had her fair share of hair-raising encounters. From rockets exploding behind her to being caught in crossfire, this award-winning journalist brings us first-hand encounters of her travels off the beaten track. (@PaulaSlir_RT)



Paula Slir.

One of the great pleasures of journalism is the people one meets. Some touch you for a moment, others for a lifetime. I glance down the list of my Skype contacts and there's Mahdi Djoubadi's number. After years of no contact, he suddenly sent me a friend request, saying: "We lost a sister and daughter, but we found you. Please let us not lose you too!"

Flashback to 2003 and the strongest earthquake to hit Algeria in more than 20 years had

lasted just 34 seconds. Two thousand six hundred and thirty-three people died, one of them being 20-year-old Yasmien Djoubadi, Mahdi's twin.

"My sister spent the night alive under the rubble," he'd told me as I accompanied the South African Search and Rescue Team around the ravaged Boumerdes neighbourhood of his childhood.

As is often the case with twins, Mahdi and Yasmien had been so close that they could feel each other's pain.

"The earthquake happened on the Wednesday night and at 10 minutes to eight the next morning my body went completely cold. My sister had died... And it was I who found her."

As a war correspondent, one meets a lot of people. Sometimes an invitation is extended to visit again. I always smile and think: no, you don't want to see me again because if you do, it's only because something very bad is happening. I often meet people during the worst

her mother screaming as she was told the news and her father, Krime, whispering pleas.

"All I want is a bone, a tooth, a hair," he had begged. "I'm a Muslim and it's important for me to have something of my daughter to bury."

Mahdi had heard his sister's shouts as the five-storey apartment block that had been the family home crumbled around her. They had just started dinner when the earthquake struck and after fleeing with her brother, Yasmien had turned back to fetch a scarf to cover her hair.

A year later, I returned to Boumerdes. The buildings were all in frighteningly similar shape to the way they'd been 12 months

"I OFTEN MEET PEOPLE DURING THE WORST MOMENT OF THEIR LIFE. OTHERWISE I WOULDN'T BE THERE."

earlier: some leaned alarmingly while others had broken windows and smashed beams.

A frail woman living on the fourth floor of a building eerily empty of all other tenants had never heard of the Djoubadi family, nor did the authorities have any record of them. One false lead led to another until eventually a young boy in a sweet shop recognised Mahdi's photograph and gave me his father's work address.

When I finally found Krime, he'd aged considerably. Wiping away tears, he smiled sadly. "It's just so difficult to carry on," he sighed.

This was the first of many visits to the family's new home in what became a friendship borne out of the most tragic of circumstances. And while Yasmien's death was covered in only a short news report, her story and her family's pain have remained with me. 🌈