

## INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE

*loyal support and great humanity of his excellency john f. kennedy and shall always remember his moving message which you read to the international redcross centenary congress stop have expressed our sympathy to his excellency president lyndon b. johnson comma grateful if you would kindly convey to mrs kennedy and family the expression of international committees deepest sympathy stop regards = Boissier president of the international committee of the red cross.*

---

### A WORK OF PATIENCE AND METICULOUS DETAIL

This year, which marks the Centenary of the Red Cross, the Central Tracing Agency is visited by larger numbers than ever before of people wishing to inform themselves on its activities. Whether it is a question of members of National Societies, groups of university students or of tourists passing through, they are all struck by the sight of millions of index cards and the voluminous archives which still remain an invaluable working instrument for the Central Agency. Indeed the necessary information is extracted daily from these sources for establishing the identity of deceased military personnel, the handing over of attestations of captivity and tracing civilians separated by war etc.

*The problem of homonyms.*—However, the visitor's attention is more especially held by a large board which illustrates better than any long report one of the Central Agency's greatest difficulties. This board shows two index cards in facsimile which at first sight seem identical. In fact these cards, which date from the war years, each contain the same name, the same first name, the same place and date of birth, the same rank and unit, the same family address, the same place and date of capture and the same country of internment. Only closer study reveals a difference in the prisoner's serial

number and internment camp number. It could apparently have been a question of the same prisoner of war to whom the detaining Power had assigned two different serial numbers in error and whose presence it reported in one or other of the camps. Now, as a result of searches, the Central Agency was able to establish that this information really concerned two prisoners whose civil status was identical, with the exception of the name of their mother.

Such similarities are rare, but the index cards of the Central Agency contain very many cases of homonymy which, whilst being less exceptional than that which we have just mentioned, necessitate however special attention, in order to avoid making unfortunate confusion between two persons with the same name and first name, and born on the same date.

If it is a question of a member of the armed forces, his unit or the place of his deportation can generally enable him to be distinguished from his namesake. On the other hand, details supplied about a civilian are often so vague that they render identification extremely difficult.

*A multitude of unique beings.*—When addressing themselves to the Central Agency, families often omit to supply it with precise information about the civil status of the missing person. In her anxiety, a mother who has been deprived of news of her son, will search after him as a unique being and cannot realize that the index cards of the Central Agency contain hundreds of missing persons all with the same name and first name as he. She is surprised at being asked to supply additional information, regarding this as some foolish administrative practice, when in fact the Central Agency seeks to avoid at all costs, either in communications to families, or in enquiries which it opens with the information bureaux of the detaining Powers, making mistakes of homonymy whose consequences could be most serious. This may seem strange, but experience has shown this to be the case. There are many families who are unable to discern whether the information given to them concerns the person who is being sought or not. Difference in the date and place of birth are insufficient to undeceive their hopes, since to them these are mere errors in transcription, when it could only apply to the loved one, found at last.

*The most frequent names.*—It goes without saying that cases of homonymy assume impressive proportions when one comes across surnames most frequently used. One need only mention that the German card-index at the Central Agency includes in particular 50,000 Müller of which 10 % have the first name of Hans. In the British, French and Italian indices, the names of Smith, Martin and Rossi can be counted by tens of thousands.

To try to establish the identity of a man killed during the course of the war with only his name, first name and the year of his birth to base oneself on—details revealed by studying a cemetery register—becomes one of the most difficult of tasks, when searches have to be made amongst a considerable number of homonyms. This requires much patience, involving the following up of each minute seemingly unimportant detail, but which may lead to cross checking and thence, perhaps, to throwing light on some case which has hitherto seemed insoluble.

Finally, one could add that, if the card-indices of European names present innumerable examples of homonymy, those of prisoners of war and interned civilians of African or Asiatic origin are even more striking. Thus the Korean card-index of the Central Agency comprises 170,000 cards, 40,000 of which bear the name of Kim, in other words, more than a quarter of the total. In view of these examples, one cannot be surprised at the meticulous care with which the Agency must classify its cards and follow up all the information which they contain.