

## CENTRAL TRACING AGENCY

*We give below two articles, both concerning the same subject. The first is a general survey by the Head of the Agency, Mr. E. L. Jaquet. Readers are aware that the Swiss Government, on the occasion of the Centenary of the Red Cross, decided to donate to the ICRC a new building to house the Agency, for, indeed, this service is today in a building which is not suitable for the protection of irreplaceable records against the effects of light, fire, humidity and dust.*

*The second article deals with the legal bases for the work carried out by the Agency. It is one of the last studies by J. P. Schoenholzer, who died recently in Cyprus whilst on mission for the International Committee.*

**Agency Activities.** — The records of the Central Tracing Agency constitute an impressive monument to the tragic events of two world wars ; a monument which is irreplaceable, for its like is to be found nowhere in the world.

Its forty million index-cards, compiled from millions of documents—mostly official—and its millions of case histories, are consulted and put to use every day and will continue to be so for another quarter of a century or more. Already in 1945 these records required a floor space of over 118,000 square feet and had been called by a journalist “ the department store of humanity ”.

The work of the Agency is carried out on the basis of immutable principles, but is adapted to circumstances. It entails the receipt of information concerning the victims of war and civil disturbances, i.e. : prisoners, internees, persons displaced either of their own accord or forcibly. These details are analysed, classified and inscribed either on ordinary index-cards or by means of punched cards.

Similarly, the Agency receives and handles requests for information from the families of persons reported missing.

When an index-card corresponds to an enquiry card—which we call a “tally”—the system of individual communication to the family or the family representative is set in motion. It is here that the flair and intuition of the staff involved in filing the cards comes into play. For instance, how shall one particular Martin be distinguished from 30,000 Martins, 2,000 of whom have the first name Jean? How shall we identify one particular Johann Muller from the 6,000 mentioned in the 55,000 cards bearing the name Muller?

The lists of prisoners of war or civilian internees received by the Central Tracing Agency from the Detaining Powers are transmitted as soon as possible to the Government of the prisoners' country of origin. During the Second World War, these documents were transmitted in the form of photocopies or lists, some of which had been drawn up from punched cards.

Since then, the use of microfilm has become established as the most rapid and certain method of communicating information received, because it eliminates errors. For example, the 600,000 standard-size photocopies which constituted the lists of French prisoners of war in German hands 20 years ago, would today be contained in several hundred reels of film in a single case which could be transmitted immediately by air at low cost.

We shall proceed in this fashion when, in the near future, we have the appropriate equipment. But whether the system involves the use of microfilms or typing there will be a great advantage for the Central Agency in that all documents will be in duplicate, one copy being for the reserve records, so that we shall no longer be haunted by the fear of loss or destruction of the originals.

Apart from the receipt and communication of information, the Agency institutes thousands of enquiries involving National Red Cross Societies, government offices, civil registration offices and the International Tracing Service which operates from Arolsen under the responsibility of the ICRC.

An impressive proportion of the cases dealt with refer even now to victims of the Second World War. These may involve tracing military or civilian persons who have been posted as missing, establishing proof of death if possible or finding out the place of internment. We deliver certificates of captivity, of hospitalization

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or death to former POW's, civilian internees and deportees or their heirs. These documents are sometimes also requested by the official authorities in many former belligerent countries whose own records have for one reason or another been destroyed or lost. These certificates enable the persons named therein to establish their status, or claim an indemnity or to obtain some other social benefit.

Several thousands of these certificates are made out by us each year, not counting several hundred referring to POW's of the First World War.

Even today the Agency transmits thousands of family messages on behalf of prisoners cut off by the interruption of normal postal services. Red Cross messages know no frontiers.

But the Agency has also been entrusted with other tasks necessitated by current events. In the post-war period additional sections or at least special index-records had to be set up at the outbreak of conflict :

*in Indochina ;*

*in Palestine ;*

*in Greece ;* where civil war called for action having a twofold aspect :

- a) intervention on behalf of military and civilian victims ;
- b) registration of displaced children, necessitating efforts by the ICRC to seek news and arrange repatriation. In these operations, the ICRC and the Central Agency—and this was something new—were acting at the request and on behalf of the United Nations, as no other institution had the practical means of carrying out this action on such a wide scale ;

*in Korea ;*—involving the use of several hundreds of thousands of individual records and punched cards.

*in Hungary ;*—from the outset of which the ICRC set up an office in Vienna, as a subsidiary of the Agency, for a census of refugees, whilst at the same time a section was earmarked in Geneva, to maintain a general index and to establish contact between the refugees and their families ;

*in the Suez Canal Zone.*—On the spot records of POW's were established and information was communicated to the government concerned and to the families who flocked in such numbers to the ICRC delegation in Egypt that the police had to regulate the crowd.

*in the Congo.*—Here, during the civil disturbances, tracing activities were organized on the spot to find European and native civilians reported missing, as well as to regroup families which had been dispersed throughout this vast country ;

*in Goa.*—The ICRC communicated to the Portuguese authorities information (capture cards and personal messages) concerning military personnel who had fallen into the hands of the Indian forces.

*in Algeria.*—As early as 1956, thousands of files were opened in respect of military and civilian persons posted missing. A special mission was at work in Algeria from March to September 1963, which set up a tracing service to enquire into the fate of persons who had disappeared following the cease-fire on March 19, 1962. The results of the enquiries were transmitted to the French Government which alone was empowered, under the terms of prior agreements, to communicate with the families.

*The conflict between the Iraqi forces and the Kurds.*

*The Yemen*—Here again the intervention of the ICRC was called for as well as the traditional activities of the Central Tracing Agency.

As can be seen, the work of the ICRC over the last few years has extended to three continents. For the first time, for a limited period, the Agency branched out by setting up regional tracing services in one place after another, for instance in Cairo, Léopoldville, Elisabethville, and in Algeria. It may be possible that this positive experience, three times repeated, may be made necessary yet again by circumstances.

It must be stressed that two activities were made possible only by the use of punched card equipment : the action on behalf of Greek children and that undertaken during the Korean war. Not

having such machines ourselves, we were obliged to contract the work to a firm specialized in this field. But it becomes more obvious every day that, with the ever-increasing difficulty of staff recruitment, the Agency ought to be provided with electronic equipment and qualified staff. This, of course, applies wherever the rapid and accurate reproduction of documents is called for.

In a world eager for peace, it is an elementary precaution to seek ways and bring to bear the means appropriate for the alleviation of the misery engendered by new conflicts. Modern techniques show us the way and make these means available to us.

The International Committee must take this into account in order the more rapidly and the more surely to relieve the anguish of the victims of war and of natural disasters throughout the world.

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**The Central Tracing Agency in International law.**—It was in 1870, during the Franco-Prussian war, that the first official Agency was started for centralizing information on the wounded and the sick, on prisoners and the dead. The initiative for this was taken entirely by the ICRC and it was found to respond to such a great need that the ICRC opened a second bureau in Trieste in 1877 and a third in Belgrade in 1912.

In 1914, it opened a fourth in Geneva. This immediately assumed considerable importance and it was here that the ICRC, with the assistance of over 1,000 specialists, evolved the system by which this complex machinery functioned in order to maintain contact among people separated from their families by war.

This task proved to be so necessary and the machinery—the like of which was not to be found elsewhere—so useful that in 1929 a Diplomatic Conference for the revision of international law, decided to give the force of law to this spontaneous private initiative by the ICRC.

Thus, for the first time, we find the following provision in the 1929 Geneva Convention relative to the treatment of prisoners of war : “ A Central Agency of information regarding prisoners of war shall be established in a neutral country. The International Committee of the Red Cross shall, if they consider it necessary, propose

to the Powers concerned, the organization of such an Agency ”.

When war broke out anew in 1939, the ICRC did not even have to ask itself whether it should open a new Agency: it just did so. Since that time, the Agency has never ceased to function and whenever conflicts break out, whether large or small, whether national or international, the Agency offers its services to belligerents. Moreover, even today, it receives enquiries referring to the Second World War and even to the First.

From 1939 to 1945, the activity carried on by the Agency was vast in scope. Some 3,000 persons were employed on its staff, its floor space exceeded 118,000 sq. ft. and its index system contained 36 million cards, 6 million of which referred to civilians, each and everyone representing a message of hope, of love or suffering.

The 1949 Diplomatic Conference paid tribute to this work. It desired to strengthen further the 1929 regulation by transforming the ICRC's option to open the Agency into an obligation, but the ICRC itself insisted that the 1929 formula be maintained as it stands. It is the best arrangement, allowing flexibility and the possibility of other institutions carrying on, should the International Committee ever be prevented from so doing.

The Conference conceded this point, but added a provision to the 1929 text inviting belligerents to contribute to the financing of the Agency. The new Geneva Convention of 1949 relative to the treatment of prisoners of war and the Convention of the same date relative to the protection of civilian prisoners introduced into international law the wish of States that the Central Tracing Agency be given the character of a permanent obligation.

Thus, what was but a small office due to the initiative almost a hundred years ago of the ICRC—a private organization—is today an official institution sanctioned by international law.