

## ON THE TRACK OF FORMER ITALIAN INTERNEES IN GERMANY

It may seem surprising that, 16 years after the end of hostilities, certain sections of the Central Tracing Agency are obliged to continue their task of discovering the fate of members of the armed forces missing or presumed dead during the course of the Second World War.

Thus, for example, the Italian Section is still dealing on an average with 400 cases each month. The chief object of these enquiries, which are mostly submitted to it by the Italian authorities, is to identify interned Italian military personnel in German hands who died in captivity in Germany or in German occupied territory.

It should be pointed out in this connection that these interned military did not enjoy the status of prisoners of war and that the ICRC did not receive official notification concerning their capture, internment or death.

Information of their death was gradually discovered after the war through the records of certificates of births, marriages and deaths or from the cemetery in the locality in which they were working during their internment, but more often than not these records do not state the place of birth of the deceased, whose name is often incorrectly spelt. Furthermore, searches which are made in cemeteries result in finding graves of Italian subjects often with incomplete and even half-obliterated inscriptions.

It should also be added that many former internees have, on their return from captivity, given eye-witness accounts of the death of some of their comrades, without, however, being able to indicate the place of origin or the exact name of the deceased.

How is the Italian Section able to supply details necessary for the identification of these deceased military? Only a certain number of Italian military internees were authorized to send capture cards to the Central Agency. The latter, however, anxious to fill in the gaps in its documentation, took care to record on card indexes details mentioned on the internees' message forms (a

certain number of these messages were in fact sent via Switzerland), details which included the name and Christian name of the internee, his prisoner's number, the number of the camp upon which he was dependant, the work commando to which he was attached, as well as the address of his family.

In addition, the Italian Section's card-index, containing 7 million cards, also retains all enquiries which were made by Italian families to the Central Agency.

As one can imagine, it is by no means easy to correct a mistake in a name in such a way as to find subsequently in the card-index details which are likely to refer to the same person. In order to solve such a real puzzle, one should take various factors into account : the dialect of the person writing down the name in his own spelling, mistakes in striking in type-written texts, distortions arising from the repatriated prisoner's dialect in which a verbal account has been given, etc. . .

The same work has to be done, to a certain extent, in the opposite direction, that is to say when the fate has to be established of military missing or interned personnel who have not returned home, after the war. Using their exact particulars as a basis, it is then necessary to imagine all the possible distortions to which their names could have been subjected in order to find some information concerning them in the card-index.

This is no doubt an arduous task, but, in the end, is it not a question of being able to give to the families of the military missing, a certainty, however painful it may be, and the comfort at last of knowing where a son's or a husband's body lies buried ?