

AROLSEN

The International Tracing Service

In its issue of March 1971, the International Review printed an article describing the two principal tasks pursued today by the Central Tracing Agency in Geneva: to maintain links between prisoners and their families, and to trace persons who have disappeared or have been separated from each other as a consequence of various events (international conflicts, civil wars, internal disturbances).

For over a hundred years, the Agency's card index has continued to expand and today contains 45 million cards. During the previous year alone, more than 45,000 requests and other mail items were received and 43,500 sent. In addition, over 10,000 files were closed; positive results were obtained in nearly half of these cases.

The sheer volume of these figures and the number of replies received should not make us overlook the splendid work carried out at Arolsen by the International Tracing Service. It is twenty-five years since it was set up. In June 1955, its management was entrusted to the International Committee of the Red Cross and today it comprises a staff of 250 persons.

It gives us pleasure to print the following article, from the pen of Miss Françoise Bory, of the Press and Information Division of the ICRC, who has recently visited Arolsen.

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The applicant was a Belgian woman who had been deported more than 25 years earlier during the Second World War. She was applying for a certificate that she had been interned in a concentration camp, so that she might obtain compensation. Her application was made to the International Tracing Service (ITS) at Arolsen in the Federal Republic of Germany. In this cheerless building on the edge of a romantic park are stored the records of the concentration camps.

The employee assigned to the case consulted indexes, files and lists, a tedious task which often demands weeks of effort. He was to find that according to the records the woman had been detained successively in the Auschwitz, Flossenbürg and Mauthausen camps and was released from the latter at the end of the war. The service was therefore able to issue an official certificate attesting to her detention in concentration camps and with that certificate she could claim the indemnity to which she was entitled.

Such requests are received by the hundred each day at the ITS. They constitute the main part of the work of this organization which is unique and which we shall now consider more closely.

The origin of the ITS

Immediately after the Second World War, the need was felt to centralize the concentration camp records and to keep up-to-date card indexes on former detainees. The innumerable requests for information on missing persons gave support to the idea. The Central Tracing Bureau was therefore set up in 1946 and operated by UNRRA (United Nations Relief & Rehabilitation Administration).

In 1948 the Bureau changed its name to the International Tracing Service (ITS). Its headquarters was located at a point where the four occupation zones meet, in Arolsen, a small eighteenth-century town some 35 miles from Cassel, in Hesse.

The ITS was then taken over by the International Refugee Organization (IRO). Four years later, when that organization was disbanded, it was managed by the Allied High Commission for Germany.

When, on 5 May 1955, the occupation ceased, it was decided that the management of the ITS would be entrusted to a neutral and independent organization. The International Committee of the Red Cross was well suited to discharge such an assignment. The 1955 agreements entrusted it with that mandate and also required it to appoint and remunerate the director. An international commission was set up to maintain co-operation among the countries concerned and conserve the records.

The work of the ITS

This is defined in the 1955 agreements as:

“ To trace missing persons, to collect, classify, preserve and render accessible to governments and to interested individuals all documentation relative to German and non-German nationals who have been detained in National-Socialist concentration or labour camps, or to non-German nationals displaced as a result of the Second World War ”.

Today the search for missing persons is hardly 5% of its work which consists mainly in replying to applications for certificates attesting to detention in concentration camps or for death certificates, with a view to seeking compensation for persecution or injury, exit visas or naturalization. Official certificates are necessary also to claim restitution of property seized by the nazis and for probate of wills or the claiming of pensions.

The deaths recorded in the concentration camp documents are legalized by a special office for death registration (Sonderstandesamt) which is also in Arolsen. So far, it has legalized 343,661 death certificates.

Despite the passing of the years, the number of inquiries reaching the ITS remains high. There was a slight increase in 1954, following the entry into force in the Federal Republic of Germany of the indemnity law in 1953, but the figures have varied only slightly since then, as shown in the following table:

<i>year</i>	<i>inquiries</i>	<i>replies</i>
1945	52,258	—
1946	244,179 *	47,589
1947	58,252	47,057
1948	48,121	38,580
1949	83,419	59,768
1950	33,451	65,330
1951	51,619	61,338
1952	53,095	61,889
1953	67,110	85,108

* A large part of these inquiries were forwarded to National Red Cross societies.

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<i>year</i>	<i>inquiries</i>	<i>replies</i>
1954	103,363	171,765
1955	137,607	238,169
1956	158,439	236,523
1957	203,801	358,842
1958	154,581	383,023
1959	125,871	320,072
1960	114,900	271,887
1961	128,465	186,311
1962	154,988	200,387
1963	100,799	158,498
1964	197,805	208,219
1965	129,701	271,217
1966	155,981	227,682
1967	160,589	242,304
1968	142,727	205,976
1969	174,473	218,867
1970	123,329	169,106
	<u>3,158,923</u>	<u>4,535,507</u>

A vast amount of documentary material

The ITS archives are divided into three categories: concentration camp documents, wartime documents, post-war documents.

Concentration camp documents.—More than 3 million original documents are filed in this section. Unfortunately many records were destroyed when inmates were released from the concentration camps. For some, such as Buchenwald and Dachau, the records are almost complete; others are only 80% or 50% covered, and some camp records are completely lost. It happens however that records are recovered and find their way to the ITS. “ We received four years ago a list of 47,000 persons deported to Stutthof ”, Mr. A. de Cocatrix, Director, told us. “ It was a stroke of luck, as until that time we had no documents concerning that camp. We were thus enabled to reply to many inquiries which hitherto we could not answer ”.

The records consist of lists carefully drawn up by the German authorities. Everything concerning a detainee during his captivity was scrupulously noted: forced labour, transfers, sickness, release

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or death. Some former detainees owe their certificates of "incarceration" in concentration camps to the number of lice which plagued them! Who would have thought that, twenty-five years later, this degrading vermin would permit unrecorded detainees to obtain an indemnity?

Wartime documents.—These relate to foreigners living on German territory during the war but not interned or imprisoned. These files were compiled shortly after the hostilities, by order of the occupation authorities. They consist essentially of records of payment of social insurances premiums.

Post-war documents.—These concern the thousands of persons who were displaced between 1945 and 1951, especially in the German and Austrian Western zones of occupation. The information, most of which was drawn up by UNRRA and the IRO, is necessary to obtain exit visas and naturalization papers. A special section has been set up to seek children separated from their parents during the hostilities.

The Central Index

It might well be asked how, in all these documents, one can find one's way about. For that purpose the ITS has a central index: thirty million index cards containing brief references of all documents and concerning nearly ten million people.

This impressive index is based on the alphabetical-phonetic system. It seemed impossible to compile an index based on nationalities or residence. It was therefore necessary to have index cards with names. There again there was a problem: how to identify a case among the various ways of spelling the name? For instance, by the phonetic system the name Schwarz can be filed on a single card no matter which way it is spelt—and there are 144 variants. A special index was compiled for christian names. These sometimes change completely from one language to another: Wolfgang in German becomes Farkas in Hungarian, Lupu in Rumanian, Seev in Hebrew and Kurt in Turkish!

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Cases are not easy to deal with. In spite of the precision of the German administration at the time, names were spelled in several different ways, apparently at whim, when detainees were transferred. Nevertheless, by dint of research, deduction and cross-checking, the ITS employees find the key to the puzzles they have to solve. " Each of them is something of a detective ", said Mr. de Cocatrix with a smile. And it is true. It is only thanks to that fact that different names can be proved to concern the same person, for example when the Polish name Grumnicki becomes successively Grumicki, Groniki, Grominsky, Brninzki. It is obvious when it is known, but it is not always easy to find.

The ITS employees are as busy as bees. In their quiet offices, day after day, they apply their intelligence, tenacity and hope to the remedying of physical and moral injury to millions of victims, inflicted a quarter of a century ago. The ITS is seldom talked of. Its work is enormous, whether viewed statistically or from the human angle, and the modesty of the staff calls for admiration. Just one case in point is that of the Ukrainian speaking six languages and specializing in difficult cases which others would have consigned to the " negative results " files yet for which, thanks to his perseverance and flair, he finds the answers; it is always a sore point with him not to reach a result for all his files !

It is thanks to such a spirit that thousands of victims today find some compensation for their sufferings.
