

The International Committee of the Red Cross and the International Tracing Service in Arolsen

by Paul Reynard

The International Committee of the Red Cross was very pleased when the management and administration of the International Tracing Service (ITS) were transferred to it on 6 June 1955. In his address during the signing ceremony, the Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, Mr. Konrad Adenauer, congratulated the ICRC on its willingness "to take over this task in accordance with the spirit of the Geneva Conventions".¹ In reply the President of the ICRC, Mr. Paul Ruegger, thanked the Federal German Chancellor and representatives of the member States of the International Commission for the ITS for the reliance placed in his institution.

A long-standing concern of the ICRC

For the ICRC, things were again simply as they should be. The Service was in fact officially set up in London in 1943 when the Allied Headquarters, deeply concerned about the large number of missing persons already estimated at several million, requested the Foreign Affairs Section of the British Red Cross to set up a tracing bureau to try to find them. Even the Chiefs of Staff themselves, otherwise largely unreceptive — as the ICRC had found out — to any proposals concerning civilians, had been struck by the scale of the civilian tragedy. So although the official establishment by senior military officers of a service to deal with one of the most cruel effects of modern warfare came rather as a surprise, it echoed a long-standing

¹ "Le Service International de Recherches" (The International Tracing Service), *Revue internationale de la Croix-Rouge (RICR)*, No. 440, August 1955, p. 517. (The Review was not published in English until April 1961.)

concern of the International Committee of the Red Cross which, since the turn of the century, had seen its field staff constantly beset by the difficult problem of protecting civilians in wartime. Any proposals to that effect had always been rejected by politicians and military personnel alike; they considered that war was a matter for soldiers and, as such, should never directly affect civilians. "When in 1907, the International Conference in The Hague drafted the first articles concerning military prisoners of war," wrote Mrs. Marguerite Frick-Cramer, a member of the ICRC, "the Japanese delegation suggested that the situation of enemy civilians in the territory of the opposing Power should be examined.[...] This amendment was unanimously rejected, not because the delegates to the Conference were in favour of stringent measures vis-à-vis enemy civilians, but because it was felt that by its very nature it was not a subject for discussion".²

Protecting civilians without legal bases to do so

And yet, all subsequent wars have shown that the concern of the Japanese was far from unrealistic. At the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, no sooner had Dr. Ferrière set up the International Prisoner-of-War Agency than enquiries about "members of families disrupted by the turmoil" began to flood in.³ However, there was no legal basis for giving protection to civilians. Despite this inadequacy of the law and objections by sceptics for whom the launching of an operation without a prior legal basis was inconceivable, "Dr. Ferrière went ahead. He could not contemplate rejecting, as if they had come to the wrong address, people who turned to the International Committee as a neutral, impartial and entirely trustworthy organization, confident that effective help amidst the dire distress of the world could be requested from it alone".⁴ The fact that, during the 1914-18 war, bilateral conventions concerning civilians had occasionally been adopted between belligerents for the duration of the hostilities perhaps gave rise to the hope that permanent international agreements could be concluded once peace had been restored. That was not to be the case.

² Marguerite Frick-Cramer, "Le CICR et les conventions internationales pour les prisonniers de guerre et les civils" (The ICRC and the international conventions for prisoners of war and civilians), Part 2, *RICR*, No. 295, July 1943, p. 568.

³ Georges Werner, "Frédéric Ferrière, 1848-1924", *RICR*, No. 67, July 1924, p. 507.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 508.

“All provisions that had been adopted during the war became null and void once the Armistice was signed in 1918”.⁵ Peace reigned and the world — chiefly that of the victors — was carried away by the illusion that it would be permanent.

The ICRC did not share this unqualified optimism. It sought to have a text, known as the “Tokyo Draft”, adopted in principle for the protection of civilians in wartime, but its efforts received only lukewarm encouragement or no response at all. “At the time, many did not even want to admit that there might be another war and were reluctant to face reality. People were hypnotized by the idea of disarmament. [...] Several highly placed officials intimated to the International Committee of the Red Cross that it was a particularly ill-chosen moment to suggest that governments should draw up statutes for civilians in time of war, saying that such an initiative would be viewed in international circles almost as a betrayal by the Red Cross of the cause of universal peace which was championed by the League of Nations in Geneva itself.”⁶

From 1933 onwards the atmosphere changed and the euphoria of the twenties gave way to a feeling of anxiety. Efforts were made to convene a new diplomatic conference without delay to fill a serious gap, but the Second World War broke out before the international community agreed on any definite progress. The ICRC’s only option was to show initiative and daring. It managed to have a few minor items adopted from the Tokyo Draft, but for civilians in occupied territories the legal hiatus remained.

Soon the extent of the tragedy became clearer. Millions of families had been dispersed by the maelstrom of war. Exercising its right of initiative, the ICRC had made arrangements to restore contact as far as possible between dispersed family members in the hope that they might one day be reunited. Thus when the tracing office of the Supreme Headquarters of the Allied Expeditionary Forces (SHAEF) was set up in London, the Prisoner-of-War Agency already had a “Dispersed Families Service”. As early as July 1943, the ICRC had devised “a standard enquiry card, by which persons who had been obliged to leave their home on account of the war could register and give details of members of their family whom they wished to trace”.⁷ This card, known as “P 10,027”, was issued in several languages and

⁵ Marguerite Frick-Cramer, *op. cit.*, p. 572.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 574.

⁷ *Report of the ICRC on its Activities during the Second World War*, Vol. II, *The Central Agency for Prisoners of War*, p. 309.

sent to a large number of National Red Cross Societies and organizations.

Attempts at cooperation

The ICRC had no intention of making this “Dispersed Families Service” its own exclusive domain and, as soon as “the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) was formed at Atlantic City, in November 1943, [it] got in touch with this organization and informed it of the action taken by the Committee to solve the problem here discussed. The Director of UNRRA took formal notice of the communication on December 14, 1943”.⁸ Although in Geneva there was a willingness to cooperate, it was not easy to reconcile UNRRA’s requirements with Red Cross policy. “The ICRC, [...] in the summer of 1945, was invited to come to an agreement whereby the Committee should, as soon as the military authorities gave their sanction, be ready to distribute its registration and tracing cards to the administrative officers of the Displaced Persons camps, especially those in Germany [...] This distribution however excluded former enemies, and could be made only to members of the Allied Nations who had lost all trace of their family ...”.⁹ The ICRC was reluctant to agree to such a condition. If, at the end of the day, it gave in, this was because it hoped thereby to broaden the scope of its work to help dispersed families; “at the time”, the *Report* goes on to state, “it stressed its regret that a whole category of DPs were thus excluded from the issue of P 10,027 cards.”¹⁰ Initially it had a million cards printed with translations into several languages, and then waited...

The ICRC supplanted by UNRRA

However, the military authorities’ go-ahead never came — and not without reason: UNRRA “set up a Central Tracing Bureau, at the

⁸ *Report of the ICRC, op. cit.*, p. 312. See also (a) the correspondence between Mrs. Marguerite Frick-Cramer and Sir Frederick Leith-Ross, member of the Inter-Allied Post-War Requirements Bureau, London, 8 December 1943 (ICRC archives, G 86); (b) the extract from the notes on the discussions of Mr. C.J. Burckhardt and Miss Suzanne Ferrière with Mr. Royall Tyler, special attaché to the United States Legation in Berne, 14 November 1944 (ICRC archives, G 86).

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 313.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 313.

beginning of 1946 at Frankfurt, which was later transferred to Arolsen, near Kassel, in the American Zone. The Allies recognized this Bureau as the sole competent body for dealing with cases of displaced persons, thus including dispersed families in the arrangement. The ICRC thus found that the project had been abruptly taken out of its hands, although in its opinion it was better equipped than any other organization to carry out the scheme ...".¹¹ The ICRC's general report on its activities during the Second World War — published in 1948 — clearly shows that the ICRC was not always on the best of terms with the Allied authorities between 1945 and 1948!

The International Refugee Organization (IRO) appoints a delegate from the Committee as head of the ITS

But all was not lost. In 1947, when the IRO was entrusted with the problem of refugees and displaced persons, it appointed Mr. Maurice Thudichum, who was a specialist at the Central Prisoner-of-War Agency and a seasoned ICRC delegate, as head of the ITS, which meanwhile had its offices in Arolsen. Thoroughly acquainted with the tracing and classification system in use at the ICRC, Mr. Thudichum set about building up "an immense central card-index system along the well-tried lines of the Central Prisoner-of-War Agency".¹² The new director was aware that "the existence of the ITS met a desire already evidenced by the ICRC in setting up the CPWA, namely to enable families dispersed by the war to recover a sense of well-being by restoring the links severed by the events [...] In consenting to become director of the ITS, Maurice Thudichum remained true to the course he had followed throughout his work for the ICRC".¹³

The presence of employees who were more of a hindrance than a help was one of the drawbacks about which Mr. Thudichum discreetly complained: "In an international organization such as the IRO, upon which the ITS depends, member States want to have their own people in place even though they have little relation to the needs of the Service".¹⁴ But apart from these irritating intrusions, he could rely on a

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 313-314.

¹² Roehrich, Pierre, *L'esprit et le cœur, récit d'un engagement au service des organisations internationales (BIT, CICR, OIR)*, Geneva, June 1991, p. 105 (ICRC library, 362.191/1088).

¹³ Roehrich, *op. cit.*, p. 106.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

competent and dedicated staff who helped him to imbue the ITS' work with a humanitarian spirit entirely compatible with the ethical principles of Geneva; he managed to do so despite the Cold War, a considerable obstacle which deprived the Tracing Service of countless precious documents.

Although the IRO was always understood to be a temporary body, arrangements to close it down were nonetheless somewhat precipitate as the donors' attention had turned to financing the expenses incurred by the Korean War, which had just broken out. Consequently, the very existence of the ITS was called into question. Mr. Thudichum, who was convinced that the Tracing Service was by nature a virtually permanent institution, suggested to the IRO that it be placed under the responsibility of the ICRC. The Committee, likewise convinced of the need to continue its work, which rendered service to countless families, was certainly interested in the proposal. It did, however, have to set conditions. On the one hand, the financial means at its disposal were scarcely sufficient to cover the costs of such an undertaking and, on the other hand, it was concerned that its independence might be impaired; it attached great importance, in particular, to having all the documents required for tracing, whereas many of them were still in the hands of the occupying forces, who tended to restrict access to them. Since these conditions could not be met, the ITS came under the control of the Western Occupying Powers and had to contend with severe budgetary constraints. "It is because States have money only for preparing for war",¹⁵ wrote Mr. Thudichum. Although somewhat disillusioned, he agreed to stay on in Arolsen until September 1951 to ensure that the transition took place as smoothly as possible.

The ICRC at last...

So the ITS continued its activities under the auspices of the Allied High Commission for Germany until Germany regained full sovereignty, when the Powers concerned handed over responsibility for the ITS to the International Committee of the Red Cross, "considering the ICRC's impartial and universal character and its suitability to undertake such a responsibility".¹⁶ "I have given too much of myself

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

¹⁶ "Le Service International de Recherches", *op. cit.*, p. 515.

to the ITS not to be happy at this renewed transition”,¹⁷ noted Mr. Thudichum. He was all the more pleased because Mr. Nicolas Burckhardt, another experienced ICRC delegate who, like himself, was used to the methods of the Central Tracing Agency in Geneva, was taking over as Director.

Subsequent directors have not failed to live up to the institution's great ideals. Was it not Chancellor Adenauer's wish to see the ITS remaining faithful to “the spirit of the Geneva Conventions”?¹⁸

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¹⁷ Roehrich, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

¹⁸ “Le Service International de Recherches”, *op. cit.*, p. 517.