

AN IMPORTANT DOCUMENTARY CENTRE ADMINISTERED  
BY THE INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE

**The International Tracing Service**

The International Tracing Service (ITS) is housed at Arolsen, former seat of the princely house of Waldeck, in wooded country near Kassel (German Federal Republic). Since the end of the war it is here that are deposited concentration camp archives and individual card-indexes referring to former detainees, deportees, forced labour workers and displaced persons, kept up-to-date.

Since June 1955 the administration of this important documentary centre has been entrusted to the International Committee of the Red Cross, which thanks to the long experience which it had already gained from the Central Prisoners of War Agency in Geneva, was without doubt the best qualified international institution to undertake such an activity. As its director it appointed Mr. Nicolas Burckhardt, who already had a fruitful career behind him in the ICRC's service.

Between them the Central Agency and the ITS total the impressive figure of 70 million classified card-indexes. The ICRC, which directs these two bodies, thus possesses the largest collection of archives and documentation in existence for humanitarian ends.

The activity of the ITS is of such importance that it deserves to be better known, especially in the Red Cross world. In fact, requests for information and enquiries continue to flow in, seventeen years after the end of the war at the rate of about 10,000 a month, fully occupying two hundred-and-twenty employees of the institution.

In order to understand the nature and the range of this activity, one should first of all go back to the origins of the ITS and the conditions in which its administration was entrusted to the International Committee.

All will remember the proportions which the tragedy of displaced persons took at the end of the war. Millions of human beings were then scattered throughout Europe, especially in Germany, where there broke waves of refugees and where innumerable families found themselves dispersed, their members having been deported, detained in concentration camps or sent to forced labour. Assurance had to be given to all those who were without news of those nearest to them. Attempts had to be made to renew broken family ties.

This was the task of the Central Tracing Bureau, which had, since 1946, been taken over by UNRRA (United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration). The following year the running of the bureau, which then took the name of the International Tracing Service (ITS), was entrusted to the I.R.O. (International Refugee Organization). But this latter organization ceasing to exist in 1951, the administration of the ITS was then entrusted to the Allied High Commission in Germany.

When the occupation regime came to an end, however, and Germany regained full sovereignty, the ITS could no longer be administered by foreign Powers and a new statute had to be found for it. It was then that the idea of entrusting its administration to the ICRC appeared to be the best solution.

All the questions relative to the International Committee's taking charge of the ITS were regulated by general agreements signed at Bonn on June 6, 1955. An International Commission was set up "to maintain international co-ordination on matters relating to the International Tracing Service" and "responsible for the safeguarding of the archives and documents of the ITS."

The 1955 agreements also defined the activities of the ITS: "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".

Working on a vast amount of documentation and archives patiently collected and classified since the end of the war, the ITS has carried out the many arduous and multiple tasks which were expected of it and continues to render valuable service to the tens

of thousands of people who still consult it month after month. In order to obtain a fair idea of this tremendous activity and its usefulness many years after the end of the war, the best thing is to visit the building itself occupied by the ITS at Arolsen with the card-indexes and cases of files and its busy personnel.

In a verdant setting, not far from the XVIIIth century castle in which the German administrative offices are housed, the ITS headquarters appear welcoming and peaceful from the outside.<sup>1</sup> But once the visitor has penetrated inside he is filled with pity when he thinks of the amount of suffering which these piles of documents represent, in spite of the apparent air of indifference which habit has given those handling them.

In order to understand how the ITS services function and how use is made of these striking documents, one starts with the office where mail is registered : several hundreds of items daily.

These are mostly requests for certificates to obtain compensation allocated by the German Government to the victims of the Nazi regime. Next come individual enquiries, then requests for certificates of decease. Other letters request the despatch of photocopies of various documents. Finally, frequent requests for information of a general nature are made to the ITS.

Out of this massive correspondence, a certain number of letters have to be extracted each day and returned immediately to the senders, requesting them to complete insufficient data submitted. But, generally speaking, the ITS' correspondents, who are very often German lawyers acting on behalf of former detainees or deportees, know how to set down their requests which can be forwarded to the appropriate services without delay.

Most of the cases dealt with are verified and minutely checked with the institution's various card-indexes. The most important of these is the central index consisting of more than 11,000 cases containing nearly 20 million cards.

There can be no question of classifying them by nationality as is done for example at the Central Tracing Agency in Geneva. The map of Europe has, in fact, been subjected to so many alterations

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<sup>1</sup> *Plate.*

since the beginning of the century that, in many cases, the real nationality of former detainees and deportees would give rise to inextricable disputes.

A rigorous alphabetical classification was also not possible. In fact, names are spelt in very different ways according to the language of those writing them down.

For these reasons, therefore, the Agency in Geneva has already adopted a phonetic system of classification for certain card-indexes : names are grouped according to their pronunciation and not their spelling.

An astonishing number of variants can thus be found for certain names : for example, Schwartz, of which there are 35,000 in the central index, is spelt in 42 different ways (Schwarc, Szwarcz, Shwars, Svarz, Swartz or Szvarcz, etc.). Again, Weiss, of which there are 46,000, has 33 variations. An extreme case is Szczepanskiewicz which can be written in hundreds of different ways.

There are other examples of variable names taken at random, such as Josef Grumnicki, which becomes Grumicki, Grominski, Brninzki, for one and the same person. Another who had been detained at Buchenwald, then at Natzweiler, is successively called Zychowski, Jekowski, Fikowski, Schikowski. The name of a Belgian also interned at Buchenwald has the following variations : Dielwart, Dunluwart, Dielwack, Dielwaert, Delwaert, Dillwart.

Christian names also undergo innumerable changes. The ITS has compiled a catalogue of these in which one can find, for example, that there are 160 different ways of spelling John, according to country or dialect, which becomes Jean, Johannes, John, Ivar, Ivan, Hans, Joop, Jani, Dschani . . .

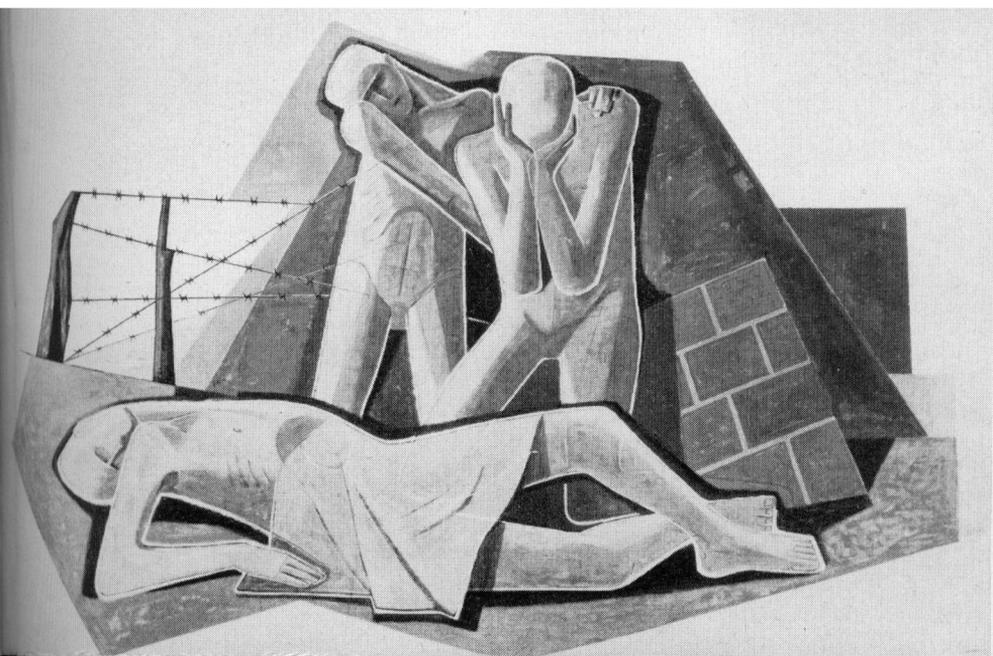
After looking at these cards and lists of names, let us glance at the work taking place at the tables adjoining the central index. The first documents which we see concern a Mr. Krzepicki and his wife, née Kalowska. A lawyer had written to the ITS to make out certificates for them for the purpose of supporting their rights to compensation. The person dealing with the case was able to prove, according to the files and lists of detainees, that Mrs. Kalowska had been successively at the Auschwitz, Flossenbürg, and Mauthausen concentration camps. She was liberated from the last



*Headquarters, at Arolsen.*

## THE INTERNATIONAL TRACING SERVICE

*A mural depicting captivity.*





*Registration of cases.*

*One of the rooms in archives.*



mentioned at the end of the war. Her husband, Mr. Krzepicki, was interned at Auschwitz, Mauthausen and Oranienburg. In 1947 they both went to Australia, from where they undertook steps with a view to obtaining the indemnities to which they are entitled. Thanks to the documents collected at the ITS, proof of their movements was so conclusive that certificates which they had requested were able to be established.

At the next table we see documents concerning a former Auschwitz detainee, Mr. Ladislaus Halbrohr. Trace of him was able to be found thanks to microfilms made in 1958 in the Auschwitz files. From this camp he was sent as forced labourer to a mine belonging to a large chemical firm. This firm decided of its own accord to pay compensation to former detainees and deportees who had worked for it during the war. The ITS was able to attest that Mr. Halbrohr had a right to such indemnity.

These two examples mentioned above, and chosen at random on the tables nearest the central card-index, demonstrate the way in which the ITS personnel is daily employed. Each of these cases is different from the others and, in fact, the cases dealt with are of a very great variety.

Another room and more card-indexes contain all the documents directly connected with concentration camps.<sup>1</sup> These number two-and-a-half million and retrace a multitude of tragic cases.

Documentation in this room is more or less complete for certain camps. This is the case especially for Buchenwald and Dachau. For others, on the other hand, there is little information, since their archives were destroyed during the last days of the war or dispersed at the liberation. This is the reason why there are so many gaps for camps such as Bergen-Belsen and Neuengamme. However that may be, there are sufficient documents in this section of the ITS to elicit the facts of numerous enquiries and, consequently, to render precious service to many victims of the concentration camp regime or to their next of kin.

Visits are also often made to the ITS to obtain information about concentration camps and the drama of displaced persons. During our visit to Arolsen we met one of these searchers. Himself

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<sup>1</sup> *Plate.*

a former detainee, he could add his own memories to the documentation which he wanted to consult.

Of these memories there was one which concerned the Red Cross. In April 1945, the former detainee was amongst the columns being evacuated from the Oranienburg camp on the approach of the Russian troops. The column he was in, whose track could be followed by the corpses left beside the road, stopped in a wood near Wittstock. "It was then", the former detainee related, "that we saw the white lorries of the Red Cross coming towards us. And it was the leader of this transport column who saved our lives". . . Mr. Albert de Cocatrix, delegate of the ICRC in Germany during the war and at present assistant director of the ITS at Arolsen, who was listening to this account, was able to confirm this. For the leader of the column of the white lorries of the ICRC which had halted in that wood nearly seventeen years before, was none other than himself!

The International Committee of the Red Cross certainly saved innumerable victims of the war and of the concentration camps, and it would have liked to have helped many more. Now all it hopes is that the often arduous and thankless task which it carries out in this mass of documents and cards, can provide some recompense and a little comfort to the men and women who underwent such deep suffering.

*R. D. P.*