

## The International Committee of the Red Cross reaffirms “open door” policy on its role during and after World War II

THE International Committee of the Red Cross has reaffirmed its “open door” policy towards researchers looking into the organization’s role during the Second World War and its aftermath, following the resurfacing of reports in the media that Nazi war criminal Josef Mengele tricked the ICRC into issuing him a travel document.

The ICRC document, which Mengele obtained by using a false name in Genoa (Italy) in 1949, enabled him to escape justice and flee to Argentina.

The ICRC had already brought similar cases to light several years ago, when it publicly announced that Adolf Eichmann and Klaus Barbie had also obtained documents by using false identities.

Writing in the *International Herald Tribune* on 10 March 1992, Yves Sandoz, Director of the ICRC’s Department of Principles and Law, wrote: “These men [Barbie, Eichmann and Mengele] and their secret supporters took shameless advantage of a humanitarian service which benefitted half a million people, mostly survivors of concentration camps and refugees from Eastern Europe.”

In the wake of the Second World War and the mass population movements it caused, hundreds of thousands of people found themselves without legal documents, and sometimes with no nationality. Many wanted to start a new life on another continent. The ICRC helped tens of thousands of these people by giving them travel documents in accordance with guidelines agreed with the governments concerned.

In a number of cases this system was abused.

“We are committed to dealing as openly as possible with painful and regrettable experiences from the past”, said Yves Sandoz today. “We would not be human if we did not feel at least some of the anguish that survivors of Mengele’s experiments and their relatives must have felt when they heard how this evil man managed to escape justice in the chaos of post-war Europe.”

Just over three years ago, the ICRC opened its detailed and extensive collection of archives to researchers. Since then more than 150 academics, journalists and students have consulted documents released under the 50-year rule.

René Kosirnik, the head of ICRC’s Working Group on the Second World War, said: “As an institution that seeks to learn from its past, the ICRC is keen to supplement its own research with independent, external scrutiny.”

In recent years, after being supplied with a list of aliases used by war criminals and high-ranking Nazis who arrived in Argentina, ICRC researchers have discovered that at least ten of them received ICRC travel documents by deceitful means. They include Erich Priebke, Erich Müller and Gerhard Bohne.

“This is not an exact science”, said René Kosirnik. “All we can do is check whether we issued travel documents that correspond to the aliases we have been given. Some correspond precisely, others less so. What is certain is that we will search our files as thoroughly as possible and address the issues that arise.”

*ICRC*

Press release 99/09

17 February 1999