

# Central Prisoners of War Agency

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## ICRC DEPARTMENTS

### CENTRAL PRISONERS OF WAR AGENCY

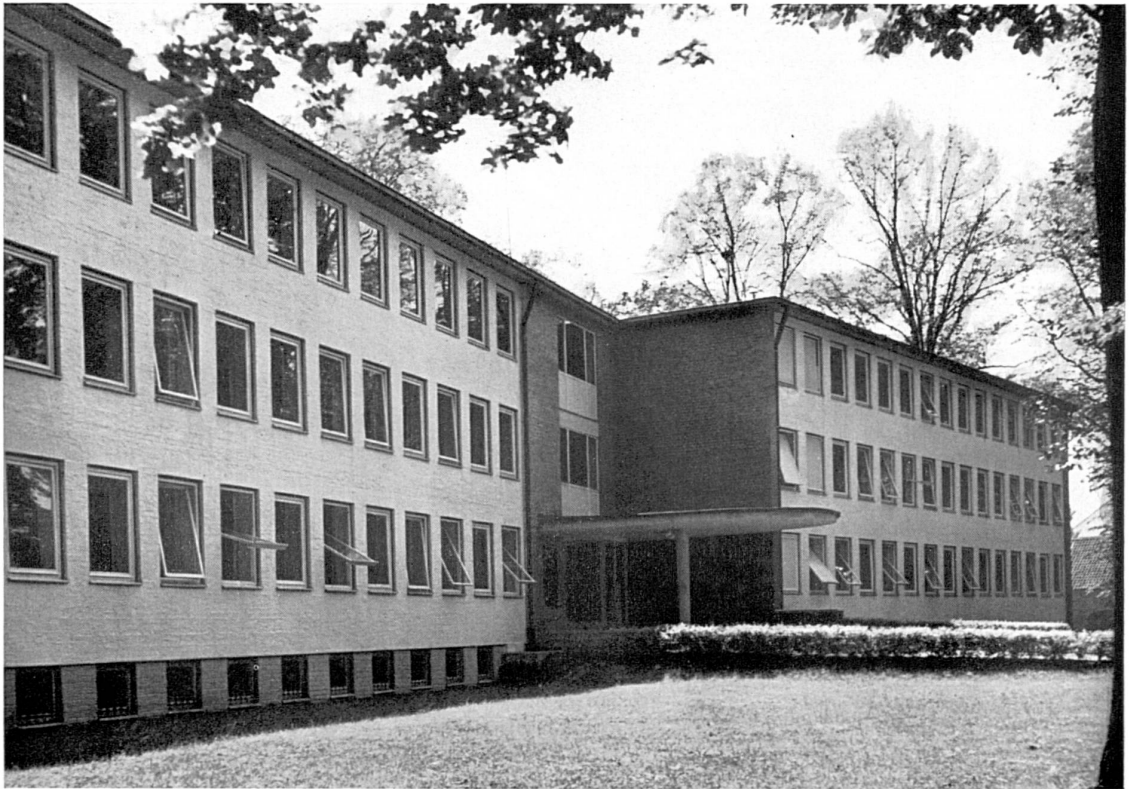
The *Central Prisoners of War Agency* set up within the ICRC, at Geneva, in 1939, continued its investigations relating to victims of conflicts, in conjunction with the national sections concerned.

The method followed by the *Central Agency*, and by the *International Tracing Service*, of which mention will be made later, consists of placing on cards the names of civilian persons or military personnel contained in requests for information (enquiry card), and making out similar cards (information cards) containing the information collected. The filing of the cards, both in alphabetical and phonetical order, allows for a more successful pairing of cards concerning the same person ("tallying"), in spite of variations in the spelling of a name in documents written in different languages. The cards, filed by national sections, are kept scrupulously up to date and form a whole which shows the Agency's work in the two hemispheres.

Cards concerning the victims of new conflicts are added to the 40 million cards of the national card-indexes set up during the Second World War. The greater part of the information collected originally concerned military personnel missing during hostilities, and prisoners of war. The field of work was extended later to enquiries, and checking in connection with civilian victims of events.

Careful checking in the card-indexes, by the so-called method of "tallying", gives a positive result when, on comparing an enquiry card and an information card, common identity particulars are to be found. The ICRC is then in a position to supply information immediately to national Information Bureaux, National Red Cross Societies, and families, by transmitting the information obtained from its card-indexes, or particulars which enable enquiries to be continued. This system is not always successful, however, and must be supplemented by a search for individual testimonies. When

THE INTERNATIONAL TRACING SERVICE



International Tracing Service building, Arolsen : main entrance

THE INTERNATIONAL TRACING SERVICE



A part of the huge card-index

the information required is not available in Geneva, the ICRC opens searches abroad which often continue for several years ; it applies for individual testimonies from members of the units to which the missing men belonged (regimental enquiries), and questions local authorities (communal administrations, municipal authorities, town councils, etc.) from which information is collected which frequently leads to successful results. It obtains lists of graves (in territories where the conflicts took place) where members of foreign armed forces were interred, and transmits them to the country of origin, and thus, in many cases, brings the cruel anxiety of relatives to an end.

In comparison with previous years, it is interesting to note that the work was maintained on a high level, and to point out that—ten years and more since the end of the Second World War—those investigations necessitated an exchange of correspondence over the year of 125,000 letters, telegrams and other postal matter. Phostat copies were made of over 2,500 documents (certificates of identity and capture, lists, etc.). The *Central Prisoners of War Agency* is still a centre to which all countries of the world apply. But, for its mission to be successful, the innumerable enquiries concerning victims of the world war and its consequences have to be undertaken in a truly Red Cross spirit.

In 1955, the release and repatriation of prisoners of war and civilian internees on Asia and Europe, who had been separated for so many years from their homeland and families, again led to successful results in enquiries opened by the ICRC, and raised new hopes which led to an increase in the correspondence with families.

During the year the *Central Agency* received 74,420 letters, telegrams, lists, etc., including 14,330 requests for new enquiries, which were carefully examined (in 1954, the figures were, respectively, 64,018 and 15,094), and despatched 50,441 postal items (54,363 in 1954).

In the classification by countries of enquiries opened during the year, *Greece* heads the list with 3,700 new enquiries in East European countries, at the request of the Greek Red Cross ; during the same period, the ICRC carried on considerable correspondence with Greece and the East European countries on the subject of Greek nationals who left their country, at some time,

of their own accord or under compulsion. The *German Federal Republic* comes second with 3,065 new enquiries, followed by *Italy*, and several European and Asian countries placed under the heading "Grouped Sections" <sup>1</sup> for which, altogether, 7,565 new enquiries were opened.

While the settlement of all simple cases was possible in the first years of peace, cases of a difficult, and sometimes desperate, nature are increasing. These are the cases which the ICRC should, in fact, make every effort to solve, in order that the anguish suffered by families who still wait and hope (or require proof that the missing member will never return) may be brought to an end.

### INTERNATIONAL TRACING SERVICE

On June 5, 1955, the ICRC assumed responsibility for the direction and administration of the *International Tracing Service* in Arolsen (Germany).

It may well be imagined that the presence in Germany, at the end of the Second World War, of millions of aliens, set a great problem. The ICRC, the Allied Command and Tracing Services of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, made efforts from 1944 to find adults or children missing through the events of war, to ascertain the circumstances of their disappearance in Germany and neighbouring territories, to assist former internees and deportees of all nationalities and beliefs, to help refugees, and to co-ordinate the work of national Information Bureaux and numerous voluntary tracing organisations.

In 1947 the work of the UNRRA tracing services was handed over to the *International Tracing Service* of the International Refugee Organisation <sup>2</sup>; at that time the ITS was under the direction of M. Maurice Thudicum, formerly a member of the ICRC staff at the Central Prisoners of War Agency. New methods which had been tried out in Geneva were applied with success by M. Thudicum for tracing missing adults and children, and issuing

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<sup>1</sup> Austria, Baltic countries, Belgium, Czechoslovakia, France, Hungary, Korea, Middle East countries, Poland, Rumania, Spain and Viet Nam.

<sup>2</sup> For the sake of brevity the *International Tracing Service* will be designated by the initials ITS.



certificates of death and captivity, both at the headquarters in Arolsen—where the archives and card-indexes are held—and in the divisional sectors responsible for investigations in the field, in the British and American Zones, as well as the liaison offices for contacts between the *Bureau de recherches en zone française* and the Allied authorities in the various Berlin sectors.

More recently still, the ITS worked under the direct control of the Allied High Commission in Germany.

Following the signature of the *Protocol on the Termination of the Occupation Regime in the Federal Republic of Germany* (Paris, October 23, 1954)<sup>1</sup> the States interested in the tracing of missing persons, and the preservation and impartial use of the Arolsen documents (which remain today the most abundant source of information on deportees and displaced persons in Germany and the countries under its occupation during the Second World War), agreed to entrust the management of the ITS to the ICRC.

The methods of its transfer to the ICRC, consistent with the latter's status as an impartial agency, and the principles of the Geneva Conventions, were defined in the agreements concluded in Bonn on June 6, 1955<sup>2</sup>. The problem raised by the transmission of the powers of the Allied High Commission was solved by the creation of an International Commission, to which the ICRC is responsible for the direction and administration of the ITS (Agreement instituting an International Commission for the ITS, Art. 1, Par. 2). The German Federal Government undertook to finance the Service. The ICRC appointed M. N. Burckhardt, a Swiss citizen and former delegate of the ICRC, to the post of Director. His appointment was approved by the International Commission and he assumed his duties on July 25, 1955. M. Burckhardt is assisted by three specialists, also of Swiss nationality, and a staff of German nationals and displaced persons ; relations with certain Powers continue to be maintained by representatives of those countries.

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<sup>1</sup> The Contracting Parties to this Agreement are the United States, France, the United Kingdom and the German Federal Republic.

<sup>2</sup> The signatories to the agreements were, in addition to the four Contracting Parties, Belgium, Israel, Italy, Luxemburg and the Netherlands, and the President of the International Committee of the Red Cross.

In 1955 the ITS received 137,607 applications consisting of : 41,498 enquiries concerning persons who had been the object of deportations or persecutions, and refugees, 17,944 applications for death certificates, 77,907 requests for certificates of detention or forced residence (in connection with claims for compensation) and 258 requests for information of a historical or statistical nature.

During the same period 238,169 documents and certificates were issued (90,245 reports on interned, persecuted or displaced persons, and refugees ; 3,178 death certificates, 144,527 reports and certificates concerning claims for compensation, and 219 historical and statistical reports relating to concentration camps).

The following table shows the distribution by countries :

| Country                        | 1955    | 1954    |
|--------------------------------|---------|---------|
| Belgium <sup>1</sup> . . . . . | 1,803   | 1,016   |
| British Commonwealth . . . . . | 2,402   | 2,257   |
| France <sup>1</sup> . . . . .  | 3,773   | 2,701   |
| Germany . . . . .              | 144,052 | 112,288 |
| Israel . . . . .               | 40,579  | 28,982  |
| Italy . . . . .                | 7,829   | 5,370   |
| Luxemburg . . . . .            | 79      | 27      |
| Netherlands . . . . .          | 1,871   | 1,559   |
| United States . . . . .        | 28,943  | 11,749  |
| Other countries . . . . .      | 6,838   | 5,816   |
| Total . . .                    | 238,169 | 171,765 |

i.e. an increase of 38.66 % in 1955 compared with the previous year.

<sup>1</sup>The above figures do not include checks made in the ITS records by the Belgian and French missions.