

“Respect for the past and responsibility toward the future”

Peter Maurer, President of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Geneva

“I should appreciate it if the International Committee of the Red Cross would declare its willingness to assume the management and administration of the International Tracing Service.” This invitation by the German Chancellor and Foreign Minister Konrad Adenauer was the result of a five-year long discussion between the Allies and the Federal Republic of Germany as well as between the states involved and the International Committee of the Red Cross. This request, formulated in a letter of June 6, 1955 and addressed to the President of the ICRC, Paul Rügger, must be

“I should appreciate it if the International Committee of the Red Cross would declare its willingness to assume the management and administration of the International Tracing Service.”

placed in the context of the political evolution of the era: On May 5, 1955, the occupation of the Federal Republic of Germany ended, and with it the Allied High Commission for Germany disappeared, which hitherto had supervised the work of the International Tracing Service. Parallel to the agreement appointing the ICRC to manage an institution which was believed to be temporary, the agreement appointing the International Commission for the International Tracing Service (ITS) took force, one of the very first



Peter Maurer, President of the ICRC.

treaties to be signed by Germany as a new sovereign state. This Commission, initially formed by nine states, is now composed of eleven states.

The letter by the German Chancellor, which had been prepared in close cooperation with the Allies, likewise stipulated that the continuation of the activities of the ITS should be carried out "in the spirit of the Geneva Convention of 1949". In another message it was

Präsidenten des Internationalen Komitees vom Roten Kreuz
Minister a.D. Dr. Paul Ruegger

Präsident,

Die Bundesrepublik Deutschland hat sich in dem zwischen Bundesrepublik Deutschland und der Französischen Republik, Vereinigten Königreich von Grossbritannien und Nordirland und den Vereinigten Staaten von Amerika geschlossenen Vertrag über die Beendigung des Besatzungsregimes in Deutschland (in dem die Besatzungsregeln für die Bundesrepublik Deutschland geändert sind), Sieben- und Artikel 1 d, verpflichtet, "die Fortführung der Suchdienstleistungen zu gewährleisten, die gegenwärtig vom Internationalen Suchdienst durchgeführt werden". Der Internationale Suchdienst ist errichtet worden, um Vermisste zu suchen und Unterlagen über Deutsche und Nichtdeutsche, die in nationalsozialistischen Konzentrations- oder Arbeitslagern gefangen waren, oder über Nichtdeutsche, die infolge des Zweiten Weltkrieges verschleppt worden sind, zu sammeln, zu bewahren und Regierungen und interessierten Personen zugänglich zu machen. Die Verantwortung für die Tätigkeit des Internationalen Suchdienstes, die früher von der ICRH und der Internationalen Flüchtlingsorganisation übernommen wurde, ist später von der Alliierten Hohen Kommission für Deutschland übernommen worden.

Die Regierungen der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, der Französischen Republik, des Vereinigten Königreichs von Grossbritannien und Nordirland...

DER BUNDESKANZLER
UND
BUNDESMINISTER DES AUSWÄRTIGEN

June 6, 1955: Letter by German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer to the ICRC. The five pages explain the benchmarks for the administration and management of the ITS.

Herr Präsident,
Die Bundesrepublik
der Bundesrepublik
dem Vereinigten
und den Verei
zur Rep

likewise stipulated that the ICRC should take on this management activity, applying the principles of neutrality and impartiality and independence. How was the "spirit of the Geneva Convention" to be understood? I note that it specifies the Convention of 1949, that is, the humanitarian treaties updated and completed after and with the perspective of the experience in World War II. This is the case especially with the Fourth Convention, the terms of which were cruelly lacking during the war, the terms intended to protect



The following press release comes from the International Tracing Service

INTERNATIONAL TRACING SERVICE

"The Federal Chancellor, the International Committee of the Red Cross and other representatives of power have agreed to transfer the International Tracing Service to the German government, thus transferring the responsibility for the service to the German government. The International Tracing Service is an institution of the Red Cross for

civilians in the hands of the enemy or in the territories under military occupation. This development of human rights is important. We are aware that rights are far from ever being duly respected. But the absence of rights is worse still. Sadly, this was evinced in World War II among other conflicts.

It is indeed the civilians, the victims of multiple persecutions of all kinds, who are the focus of the action of the International Tracing Service. Foremost at the centre of its archives, millions of documents stored, received or acquired in Bad Arolsen over the years bear witness to oppression, injustice and suffering of prisoners, of forced labour, displaced persons, separated families, stolen childhoods. Behind the documents there is the person, each individual, each family, who is the centre of activities of an institution such as the ITS, following the example of the ICRC which managed it for 57 years. It is here that the "spirit of the Convention" can be found, the humanitarian spirit, to wit (I quote a passage from the Commentary of the First Geneva Convention) an attitude that regards the fate of man solely on the basis of his quality of being human, and not on the basis of the value he represents with regard to any military, political, professional or other elements.

It is this same concern for prioritizing human rights and dignity which prompted the ITS, following the instructions of the International Commission, to monitor the protection of personal data of the victims and survivors as well as of their families, against undue or intrusive curiosity. With the passage of time and the evolution of ways of thinking, it became necessary and legitimate to extend

The ITS directors appointed by the ICRC

25 July 1955 – 30 June 1970

Nicolas R. Burckhardt

1 July 1970 – 31 December 1977

Albert de Cocatrix

1 January 1978 – 31 October 1985

Philipp Züger

1 November 1985 – 22 June 2006

Charles-Claude Biedermann

23 June 2006 – 13 September 2006

Toni Pfanner

14 September 2006 – 14 December 2006

Jean-Luc Blondel

15 December 2006 – 31 December 2008

Reto Meister

1 January 2009 – 31 December 2012

Jean-Luc Blondel

access to the records stored in Bad Arolsen to researchers and the public. This was done in 2006 by the decision of the International Commission to open up the ITS archives for research. Today the ITS, who still has the mandate, offers numerous and new services to a broad sector of the public, adding historical research and educational activities to its tracing and information work aimed at families. The new Agreement on the ITS, which will take force on January 1, 2013, confirms this welcome development.

Since 1955 the ICRC has provided seven managers to the International Commission for the ITS: Nicolas R. Burckhardt, Albert de Cocatrix, Philipp Züger, Charles-Claude Biedermann, Toni Pfanner, Reto Meister and Jean-Luc Blondel. Thousands of employees, between five and six thousand men and women, many of whom were themselves personally affected by war (I am thinking particularly of displaced persons) worked to accomplish ITS's noble mission. It is them – it is you – I am addressing today to bestow ICRC's recognition for work accomplished, work that remains and continues. If, indeed, in 1955 the work of the ITS and the mission of ICRC were not expected to last more than five years, we now see that this institution, in constant transformation, is destined to last for as long as the work of tracing and preserving memories is necessary. The ICRC is likewise pleased to transfer the management of the ITS in a few weeks' time to Dr. Rebecca Boehling, who was nominated by the International Commission to continue and to develop the work accomplished over the past decades and to contribute her extensive academic knowledge to the benefit of this institution.

During the debate of the 1950s concerning the potential role of the ICRC, the possibility of transferring the records then compiled at the core of the ITS to Geneva, to the ICRC archives, was discussed. The ICRC tended to favour the idea. Not only did this not happen this way, but the ICRC itself gave the ITS thousands of files. Moreover, it leaves the entire records produced during the course of its management in Bad Arolsen, including the correspondence between Bad Arolsen and Geneva on an extensive range of subjects. This can be of use when the time comes for research about the International Tracing Service itself, whose own development is worthy of interest.



Can any lessons already be learned from sixty years of experience? In my view, I see at least three: firstly, the creation of the ITS was a significant political signal: between the Allies and Germany there was the strong conviction that the end of the war would entail a number of tasks, not only the reconstruction of roads or infrastructure, but also of the social fabric. The search for missing persons, or at least clarification of their fate, reuniting families, certainty of the

fate of persons sought, even if this meant determining that they were deceased, were and are essential factors in the reconstruction of a society. When this dimension is neglected, as we have seen in a number of recent conflicts, an entire level of social and psychological reconstruction is lacking and encumbers the process of truth, justice and reconciliation. This was the purpose of the ITS and I am convinced that it has been able to play a positive role in the process of reconciliation in Europe and beyond.

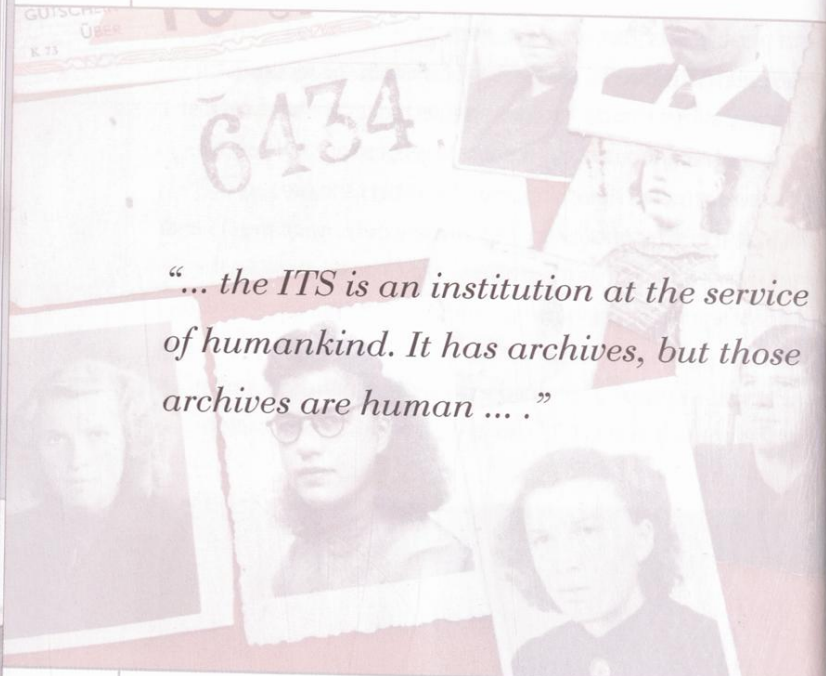
In this sense, a neutral, impartial and independent humanitarian organization such as the ICRC can make a positive contribution



Picture to the left: Among the DPs were also unaccompanied children – the search for relatives and the reunion of families were important tasks after the end of the war.

Picture: The ITS archives in 1952.

to a political process initially burdened by the memory of a hostile past or the lack of confidence between the parties involved. This is a second lesson which remains valid today in other situations of conflict or tension. Of course, humanitarian action alone cannot accomplish the totality of tasks imposed by the post-war period but precisely because its motivation is humanitarian and impartial it acts as a bridge between the parties, becomes the advocate of persons



“... the ITS is an institution at the service of humankind. It has archives, but those archives are human”

in need, opens doors for listening and mutual understanding. In the case of the ITS, this is done by making records available to the survivors or their families, enabling them to assert their rights or to simply find out the fate of loved ones.

Finally, the ITS proves today that it is good to be able to document history, it is useful to be able to base its action (including financial compensation or “Wiedergutmachung”) on well-founded archives. This also applies for the research and education work which is an integral part of the continuation of humanitarian action. In this sense, the archives are not dust-magnet documents that can be relegated to remote places. They are a useful communication tool for the historian and educator, journalist and politician. To conserve and preserve the archives, to open them to the public, result from the duty of preserving memories and of education, and even from the promotion of human rights.

The ICRC will soon give up the management of the ITS. But it is not leaving the ITS or the International Commission, in which it shall remain an observer. From Geneva, and in particular through its Protection Division and the Central Tracing Agency, the ICRC will remain in regular contact with the ITS as a member of the universal humanitarian tracing network constituted by the Red Cross Societies.



Separation after so many years of working together assuredly has a nostalgic side, but the process unfolds with a feeling of mutual recognition. As far as the ICRC is concerned, it is proud to have received this mandate from the Federal Republic of Germany and allied states, gathered today, with others, in the International Commission. I am not unaware of the moments of tension, for example recently in the debate regarding the opening of the ITS for research, but I also have the feeling that the ICRC knew well how to manage the task entrusted to it in an era where greater tensions made its services as a neutral, impartial and independent organization particularly indispensable.

Without doubt, we live in a different era. The ITS is an institution that is known and recognized, the International Commission naturally assumes its governing function and the German Government, by transferring the administrative responsibility related to the support of the ITS from the Interior Ministry to the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media, shows how the ITS is an instrument of culture and communication, just as the federal German Archives, the future institutional partner of the ITS. Through you, Ministerialdirektorin Ingeborg Berggreen-Merkel, I likewise thank the German government for the continuous support it provided to the ICRC over the course of these many years.

As I have said before, the ITS is an institution at the service of humankind. It has archives, but those archives are human: they remember the immense suffering endured by millions during the course of World War II and thereafter. Professor Thomas Buergen-thal, you are one of those that the ITS documentation attests. You call yourself, not without bittersweet irony, "a lucky child". But you will tell us that in your own words. I thank you for honouring the ICRC and the ITS, by being present among us today and giving us your testimony.

Indeed, the ICRC is retiring from the management of the ITS. May I suggest, however, that the humanitarian principles that have guided its management continue to inspire the future work of this institution? Neutrality, impartiality and independence. Often misunderstood, neutrality in its strictest sense expresses the availability, the spirit of the service: without intending to judge – and often making mistakes – the attitude of neutrality is at the service of men and women in need, it listens to them and supports them. Impartiality requires objectivity and balance, qualities also so very important in history. With regard to independence, no need to recall the imperative necessity therefore for accomplishing multiple missions, sometimes upsetting, which a humanitarian organization needs to carry out. The International Commission has confirmed the independence of the ITS by giving it a new legal form when the ICRC retires from the management and this is very wise.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a theologian who was part of the resistance against the National Socialist regime and who is recorded in the ITS files, wrote: "Respect for the past and responsibility toward the future give the right attitude toward life." These sparse, yet clear words describe the identity and relevance of the International Tracing Service. Thus, this institution continues its work in the same spirit and with the same determination shown since the end of the Second World War.

