

## “Humanity's ancestral inheritance”

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“This is a service dedicated to millions of innocent victims of war, dictatorship and intolerance and to their families. We serve the dead and the living, men and women, adults and children, Jews and gentiles, we serve all nationalities, the Germans, the Czechs, the Dutch, the Poles, we serve concentration camp victims regardless whether they were social democrats, liberals, communists or gypsies. We serve – period!”<sup>1</sup>

Hugh Elbot, the American director of the International Tracing Service, celebrated the agency's new headquarters with these words in August of 1952. From its origins in wartime Washington and London, through the Cold War to the present, the ITS has provided humanitarian aid and information services to a broad spectrum of individuals, governments and institutions.



*Picture:* The ITS staff in the early years under the management of the Allied High Commission. In the background the former SS barracks that served as ITS headquarters until a new main building was erected in 1952.

The tracing service received recent media coverage because of widespread efforts to restore public access to its archive after almost 30 years. The extended inaccessibility and the International Committee of the Red Cross' desire to operate the agency out of the public eye have obscured the organization's history. However, the reopening of the archives to the public in late 2007 has given scholars the opportunity to examine the tracing service's institutional records, and consequently expand their studies to corollary archival collections in North America, Europe and Israel.<sup>2</sup> These initial studies demonstrate the significant impact that control over the agency – "humanity's ancestral inheritance" as it was called in 1980 – had on post-war politics, society and culture.<sup>3</sup>

This inheritance was a response to the ever-growing European refugee crisis created by the Second World War. The United States Department of State discussed already in 1942 the need for an agency to locate, and where possible, reunite individuals missing as a course of the war. In Europe, several discreet organizations including the British Red Cross Society, the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Agency (UNRRA), and Intergovernmental Committee



*Picture:* The ITS staff in 1969.