

ITS Director Nicolas R. Burckhardt

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Nicolas R. Burckhardt (1909-2003) joined the International Committee of the Red Cross rather accidentally: to pursue his interest in distant countries, a friend and university lecturer suggested he contact the ICRC. Although his first attempt failed because a peace treaty had been reached in the designated region of deployment, he was remembered and employed temporarily for a few weeks after the outbreak of the Civil War in Spain. The employment turned out to last 33 years.

Between 1940 and 1942 he gained crucial experience in the Central Tracing Agency for Prisoners of War in Geneva, which would prepare him for his future tasks in Arolsen. His next assignment led him to London where he established important contacts with exile governments. After the war he led the ICRC delegation in the British occupation zone, and from 1948 he became a member of

on Refugees, concurrently discussed tracing the missing and facilitating contact between displaced persons. In addition, the Supreme Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Forces (SHAEF) included tracing in their plans for the relief and reconstruction of Germany. The military authorities consulted with the aforementioned groups and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in Geneva about tracing, and established the SHAEF Tracing and Locating Unit in the spring of 1945.

The Allies tasked it with collecting nominal lists from concentration camps for later use in tracing activities at the national level. After the end of hostilities, the tracing unit took on a quadripartite character, and the military governments, who considered civilian searches a non-military operation, transferred its administration to UNRRA's Central Tracing Bureau under a mandate that included tracing and document collection.



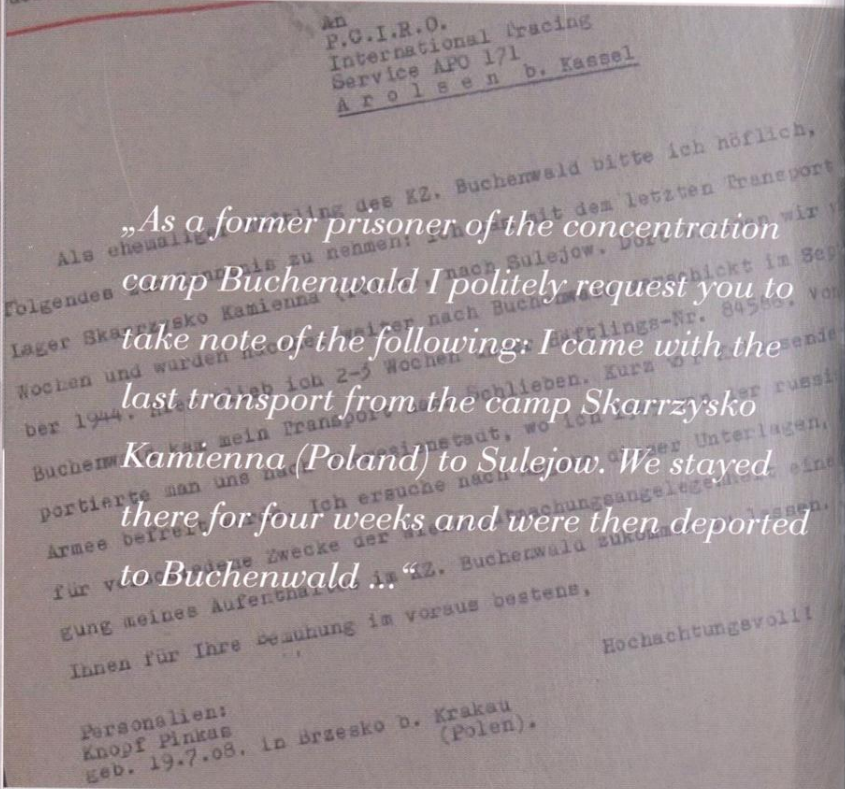
the delegation for West Germany. Missions in Pakistan, India, Korea and Vietnam followed.

On suggestion of the ICRC president he accepted the newly established position of ITS director in June 1955. Fifteen years later, in 1970, he left Arolsen and returned to his parental home in Basel. He received the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany for his achievements at the ITS.

In 1946, the Allies moved the tracing bureau from near Frankfurt am Main to the Hessian town of Arolsen because it was roughly equidistant to all four zones of occupation and had intact infrastructure.

UNRRA, like many relief agencies with an interim mandate, terminated its operations as planned in 1947, amid allegations of mismanagement of the tracing bureau. These two factors cast doubt onto the continuation of the operations. However, the Allies acknowledged the importance of the agency for the international community, and thus sought a different institution to supervise it. UNRRA's successor, the International Refugee Organization (IRO), eventually agreed to assume further responsibility. In 1948, the IRO centralized disparate local, national and international tracing efforts and re-established the Central Tracing Bureau as the International Tracing Service.

The reorganization and change in administration significantly impacted the agency's mandate, effectively repurposing it to serve broader political agendas. It ended Soviet participation in operations due to Moscow's unwillingness to recognize the IRO, a circumstance that had previously excluded International Committee of the Red Cross participation in the Central Tracing Bureau. Moreover, it resulted in American dominance in policy formation and increased collaboration with German authorities at a crucial juncture in the Cold War, thereby exacerbating growing tensions between the humanitarian mandate and the political agendas of Western governments. These factors shaped the organization's path in the following decades.

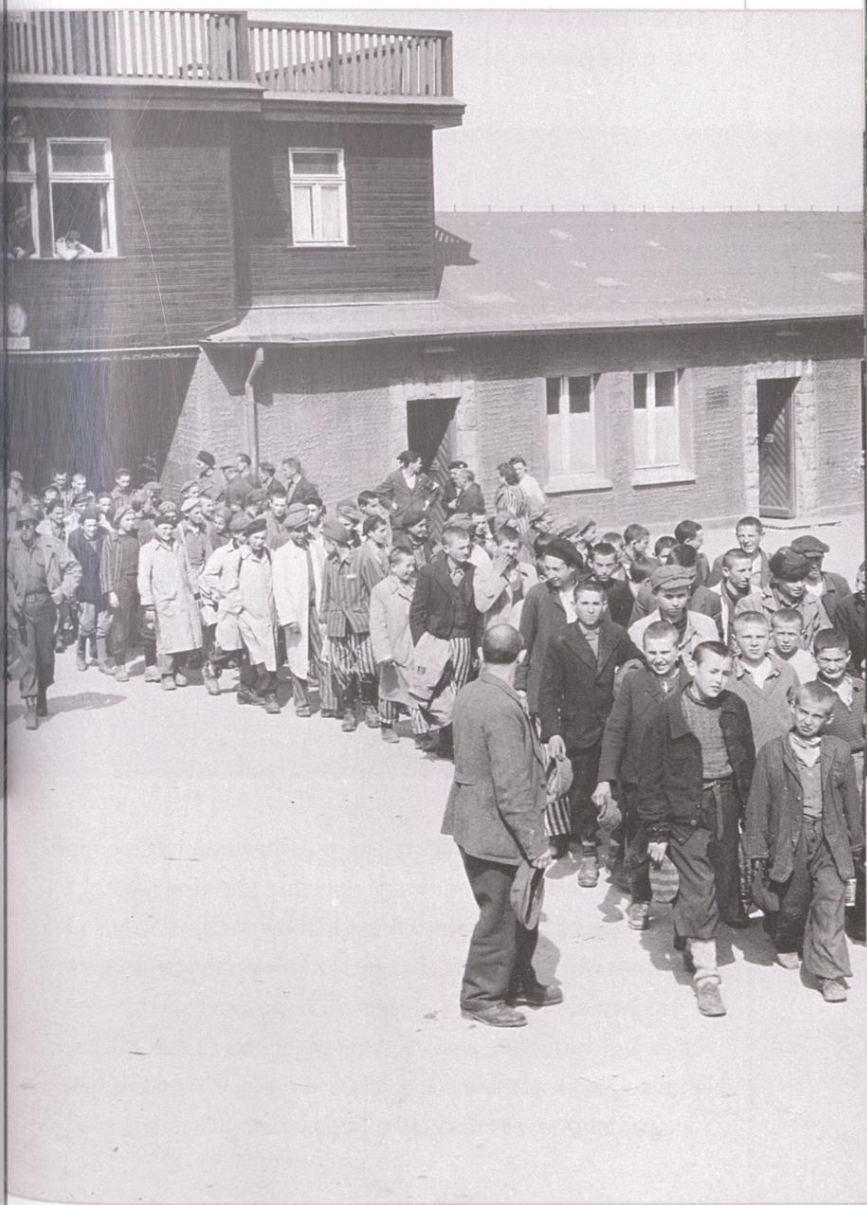


Picture above and quote: Personal letter of a former concentration camp prisoner to the ITS asking for a certificate of incarceration in October 1949.

Picture to the right: Buchenwald prisoners after their liberation by the US Army.

When the IRO took over the tracing service, it reached an agreement with the Western Allies to either terminate operations and establish a research institute around the archive, or transfer them to a more permanent organization. Under heavy pressure from the international community and victim groups to continue operations, the Allied Military Governments and successor Allied High Commission for Germany explored several options, including the ICRC and United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees.

However, these inquiries foundered by late 1950 in part over concern, especially on the part of Washington, that the neutrality and universal service mandates of non-governmental, humanitarian



organizations would negatively impact refugees from Eastern Europe, or even that Soviet Union might gain control of the archive itself. They also could interfere with American agencies' use of the archive for refugee programs, which included anti-Soviet propaganda.

Two additional factors informed the decision by the Allied High Commission to directly operate the ITS until they could decide upon its ultimate fate. First, American budget cuts and waning inquiries for direct tracing led to the termination of these activities in 1949, though child tracing continued until 1951. Second, primary function of the agency had become certifying claims and issuing death certificates for social welfare and indemnification programs that benefitted the victims of National Socialist persecution. For this reason, the Western Allies deliberated as early as 1947 a possible



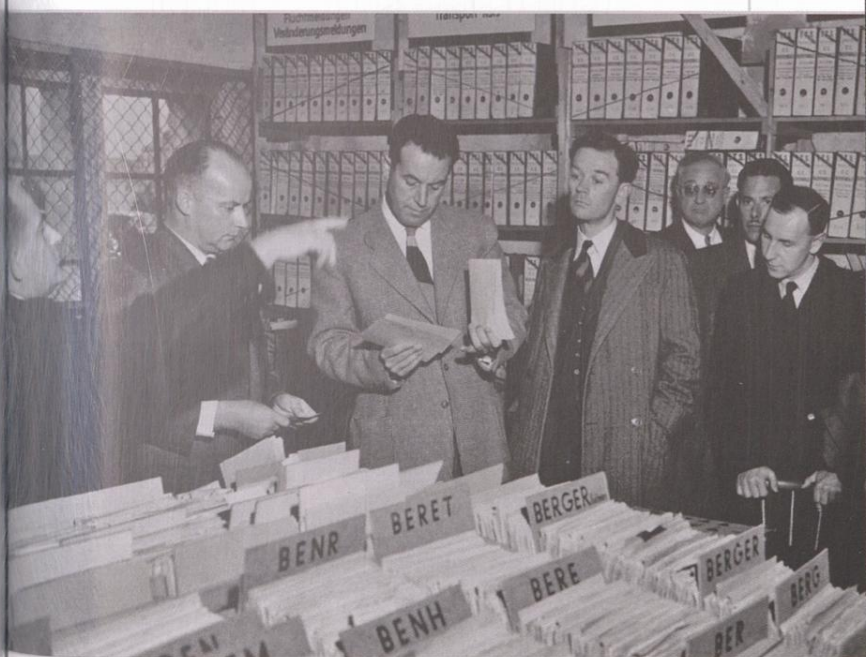
Picture above: The International Tracing Service was managed by different organizations before the ICRC took over.

Picture to the right: Guided tour through the ITS archives in 1952.

German takeover of the tracing service. At the encouragement of French and American government representatives, the nascent Federal Republic of Germany offered to take over the ITS, thus sparking tense negotiations on ultimate control over the organization and its archive.

Ultimately, none of these plans came to fruition. In February 1955, various controversies from public distrust of West Germany, to a

Council of Europe takeover of operations, and the nationality of the future director compelled the West German request to the Red Cross to administrate the agency. The scheme also allowed the Federal Republic to fulfil its war burden of guaranteeing the continuation of the ITS. It also presented the ICRC, according to the Israeli Foreign Office, a means by which to deal with an "internal crisis" over its future and role "in present world conditions." Earlier concerns over the organization's neutral and universal mandate dissipated, as Geneva assured Washington uncontested ownership and access to the archive, and to continue policies of limiting information exchanges with Moscow and its allies.⁴ This solution proved acceptable to all parties and the Bonn Accords transferred the ITS to the administration of the International Committee of the Red Cross on May 5, 1955, under the control of an eight nation International Commission.



Owing to the longstanding view that the ITS was a relic of immediate post-war relief efforts and thus an interim organization, the Bonn Accords stipulated quinquennial review of operations and the question of the agency's ultimate fate. In 1960, the governments of the International Commission, including new member Greece, agreed to extend the Bonn Accords without amendment because of the continued need for access to the archive for West German indemnification programs. At this stage, the International

ICRC administration of the ITS. Moreover, they also agreed that no additional countries could join the Commission, despite the easing relations between East and West.

The ITS continued its mandated activities of document collection and humanitarian aid – answering individual inquiries and indemnification claims – under new director Albert de Cocatrix during the 1970s. He also expanded access to the archive for historians and historical scholarship. However, a worldwide shift in data-privacy legislation, internal financial difficulties, and an increasing backlog of inquiries triggered a reevaluation of the agency's mandate, and even its right to exist, in the late 1970s and 1980s.⁶

De Cocatrix's successor, Philipp Züger, and members of the International Commission thus reinterpreted the Bonn Accords and decided to pursue humanitarian activities as defined in 1955, allowing for historical inquiries only in cases because the ITS found itself increasingly under "moral or political pressure" to undertake such work.⁷

The orthodox interpretation of the tracing service's *raison d'être* and data-privacy laws consequently created a shroud of secrecy around the agency in the 1980s. The ITS continued operations, but earlier accessibility and the relative transparency in operations evaporated. These circumstances alarmed the international community. As awareness of the Holocaust and desire for information about it grew, several non-governmental groups, such as the German Studies Association and the Conference for Jewish Material Claims against Germany lobbied the ICRC to reopen the archive. These petitions fell on deaf ears. The end of the Cold War, scrutiny on compensation and restitution programs, and ever-decreasing numbers of Holocaust survivors served as a catalyst for more vigorous debate on the status of the ITS in the 1990s.

In the past decade, German debates on the Berlin Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe and diplomatic efforts, led by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, spurred renewed media attention on the tracing service and the inaccessibility to its collections. International efforts finally succeeded in restoring access to the archive in 2007.

As the ICRC withdraws its long-time administration of the International Tracing Service in 2012, it is clear that the agency has finally begun to realize the original plans envisioned by the Western Allies and West Germany of becoming a research institution of international repute.



1 ITS Digital Archives Doc. 82507500, Allierte 52: 20 August 1952 Elbot welcome speech to the new administrative building in Arolsen.

2 See Jean Marc Dreyfus, "À Bad Arolsen dans la forêt des archives nazies," *La Vie des Idées*, (2008): last accessed 15 February 2012, http://www.laviedesidees.fr/IMG/pdf/20080911_badarolsen.pdf; and Bernd Joachim Zimmer, *International Tracing Service: Von der Vermisstensuche zur Haftbescheinigung. Die Organisation eines « ungewollten Kindes » während der Besatzungszeit*, (Bad Arolsen: Waldeckischer Geschichtsverein, 2011.). In addition, Dreyfus has a forthcoming publication on French diplomats and the ITS. The author of this article is currently finishing a dissertation that examines how Western governments- Washington, Bonn, Paris, London and Jerusalem- and the International Committee of the Red Cross used the ITS to promote and legitimize political and cultural agendas in the post- World War II era.

3 Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes (PA-AA), B85/ 1552, 2 April 1980 Minutes of the meeting of the International Commission of the ITS.

4 National Archives and Records Administration, RG 466 HiCOG Bonn Classified General Records, 1953-1955, Box 233 Folder 572.1 Red Cross – International Tracing Service 1953-1955, 4 February 1955 Confidential from Dowling to Dulles regarding a possible takeover of the ITS by the Red Cross.

5 Bundesarchiv Koblenz (BAK), NL Lübke, see miscellaneous correspondence dated between June 1965 and March 1966 regarding the examination of documents from the Buchenwald concentration camps held at the ITS to ascertain German President Heinrich Lübke's knowledge of and complicity in Nazi crimes.

6 PA-AA, B85/ 1551, 8 February 1978 report from West German Representative to International Organizations in Geneva Rudolf Jaestadt to the Foreign Office and embassies at Moscow, Warsaw and Prague.

7 PA-AA, B85/ 1644, 8 May 1981 minutes of the meeting of the International Commission for the ITS, comments of ITS Director Philipp Züger.

ITS
Internationaler Suchdienst
Bibliothek: 171URU 65:A