

Preface

January 1946: In North Hesse a cold month in the first winter after the end of the war action. For a large-scale move of location, the weather is far from being ideal. And still the preparations are running at full speed in Arolsen, then district town of the Waldecker Land, in order to take over the enormous amount of files of the UNRRA (United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration). These are exclusively personal records which, for an interim period, have been stored in provisional buildings outside Frankfurt since May 1945. The search for an appropriate location has now finally come to a happy end.

Boxes full of unique documents are to be stored properly and in accordance with the task to be fulfilled. These valuable files often bear the only hope for the numerous former persecutees to receive information about the fate of relatives. The true value of these many tons of paper, however, reveals itself only little by little, for more and more persons concerned are lacking evidence with advancing age in order to assert their rights, because pension matters and compensation claims can only be settled smoothly if a definite proof of the persecution suffered as well as of its duration is available. The access to numerous special funds - as, for example, the Foundations "Mutual Understanding and Peacemaking" only recently opened in Eastern Europe - depends in most cases on the replies issued. At present, still far more than 200,000 requests for certificates arrive at the International Tracing Service per year.

But let us once again look back to half a century ago. Not only thousands of linear metres of archival material, but also a considerable number of specialists - who accompany the extraordinary wagon train - are to be "stored". They alone are in the position to guarantee an orderly evaluation of the documents. In view of the increase in the amount of work becoming evident, the hiring of many additional employees is already absolutely certain. Only shortly after the move, the staff of the Tracing Service that has its home in Arolsen now rises to more than 1,400 employees. To provide places of work and accommodation facilities for this "army" is part of the planning. Certainly, it was not by chance that the town of Arolsen has been chosen. Decisive were, among other things, the location, i.e. the geographical centre of the four occupation zones at that time, and also the available infrastructure, because Arolsen remained largely unaffected by the war events in the years 1939 - 1945. For example, the transport routes as well as the telephone and telegraph network were intact. These are all

prerequisites for a fast and efficient work routine.

The following text is meant to be a contribution to a better understanding of the work and the stock of documents of the International Tracing Service. May it convey an impression of the difficulties in setting up the individual parts of the archives and their card-indexing in the spirit of true pioneering work of those days. Who could do this better than a person directly involved?

An employee of many years' standing and now retired, Mr E. Henschel, outlines the arduous way of building up this institution that is exclusively working in the service of the former persecutees, and he does it from his own personal point of view. The personal story of any other colleague would presumably turn out to be different. However, as far as the stock of documents is concerned, this represents the common denominator as such for all employees of the first hour. May this contribution to the anniversary oblige all 400 employees active at present to continue the humanitarian task and to bring it to a successful conclusion, and may it, at the same time, make an important contribution to "the remembrance of the persecution".

C. Biedermann

Arolsen, in January 1996