The archives of the International Tracing Service

The ITS' archives today contain 17,118 linear metres of documents. In accordance with its mandate, the International Tracing Service has collected since it was established all available personal data on the former persecutees of the National-Socialist Regime.
Since the beginning, processing the massive number of documents on hand and putting them in a very specific archival order has been an enormous task. A system had to be set up which made it possible to draw all the relevant information on a given individual easily and quickly from all the different documents and lists. This need gave birth to a system, still in use today, consisting of placing the index cards in a central index of names arranged in alphabetic/phonetic order.

The Central Index of Names is still growing and now contains about 43 million reference cards, established in card-indexing. It serves as the key to the ITS' archives.

Administration records from 1951 show that about 100 persons from the typing pool alone were at that time working on the transfer of names and dates from the many tonnes of material onto individual reference cards. A circular of 25 June 1951 from the Chief of Documentation Division ***"To all typing-pool employees"*** is a good explanation of why this work was and still is a prerequisite for effective evaluation:

The following are excerpts from that circular:

"Most of you have been sitting in the same room for months, amid the clatter of typewriters, filling out little cards. You must sometimes find this work monotonous. You probably often wonder what all this is for, what purpose these cards could possibly serve, what will become of them and what role they will play in the work of the ITS.

The answer is simple:

Without these cards and without you to prepare them, we would not be an international tracing service and the ITS would not be able to answer the thousands of requests which pour in every month. The ITS would be hard put to trace anyone, and the many tonnes of documents so carefully filed away in Records Branch would be almost completely useless. You, with your clattering typewriters, are the ones who draw the millions of names and pieces of information out of those documents.

As you know, we have obtained documents from the most varied sources, lists from German civilian offices, the confiscated files and records of the concentration camps from the War Crimes Teams, others from pastors and priests, from prisons, factories, hospitals and many organizations which were active in Germany during or after the War and had contact with non-Germans who were deported from their countries of origin, arrested or otherwise persecuted, or who simply came to work here.

Of the millions so far from home, many are still missing, and their families have asked the ITS to trace them. Others have returned home but they or their governments require certification that they were held prisoner or came here voluntarily. Some have a rightful claim to compensation, others do not; some must substantiate their claims while in other cases claims must be rejected; some people have emigrated and are still being sought by their families.

The ITS can reply to these requests only if it is able to find the information from the hundreds of tonnes of documents in its archives. And it is able to find that information because you have already taken it from the documents and transferred it clearly and legibly onto cards."

These lines are just as valid today as they were 35 years ago. How many tonnes of documents have been added to the ITS' archives since can only be guessed at. The exactness of classification work has therefore become even more important because an error in copying onto one of the cards can make the search for information on an individual a hopeless task.

We take great pride in the fact that at ITS, we have meanwhile attained a highly professional degree of archival classification and that we have also achieved a high standard in technical record management.


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