

Preface

The endeavours on the occasion of the international Red Cross Conference in Tokyo in 1934 to embody a protection for the civilian population in case of a conflict in a law were unsuccessful. Only in 1949, with the adoption of the 4th Geneva Convention, and when its supplementary protocols came into force in 1977, this goal was achieved. The absence of respective rules during the Second World War required the establishment of a special service for the registration of the numerous civilians affected by the events.

The second chapter of this account is concerned with the history of the Tracing Service that has had its home in Bad Arolsen already for many decades. By way of introduction, the foundation of a special "registration office" at the British Red Cross in London in 1943 – that is exactly 60 years ago – is described, which was supposed to be exclusively devoted to the civilian persecutees of the Second World War that was still at the height of action.

Whoever had dared at the time to predict a development towards an operative tracing service with temporarily far more than 1,000 staff members and, above all, a full performance still at the beginning of the next millennium, would surely have met with a lack of understanding. In spite of all regularly recurring prophecies of a forthcoming end of the activities, still more than 400 employees – that is an institution in the dimensions of a medium-size company – are on duty for the concerns of the already mentioned group of persons untiringly every day in the anniversary year 2003. This Service, exclusively created at the time for the victims of the National Socialist persecution, would like to continue its work at least as long as there is still a need on the part of the entitled inquirers.

In the last decades, the surroundings of and the expectations towards the International Tracing Service (ITS) have changed to a great extent. An adjustment to the situation became inevitable. More

and more former persecutees are dependent on a fast reply due to their meanwhile rather advanced average age. The solution to this problem at the "classic" ITS of the early years would have been an augmentation of the personnel, connected with an extension of the infrastructure required for that. In the middle of the 1990s, totally new prospects opened up fortunately. The International Commission for the International Tracing Service (IC/ITS) decided on the conversion from previously pure paper archives into a completely electronic operation even before the enormous increase in the figures of incoming mail. Within the scope of the necessary adaptation, or as a logical consequence thereof, practically all steps of work at the Tracing Service are therefore changing little by little.

The following chapters describe the fulfilment of the various mandates of the Tracing Service in the course of time. The pleasant result beforehand: in the year 2002, the ITS dispatched far more than ½ a million replies to the inquirers. Surely the best proof of the correctness of the decision not only to perform single tasks by means of information technology, but to implement an "integral workflow", which presupposes the readiness for a conversion of nearly all steps of work. Even though this comprehensive task has not yet been completed entirely, already now a way back would not be conceivable any more. The following account is based on an article of the undersigned, brought up to date and extended, which was published in the "Archivalische Zeitschrift" (archival journal; issued by the executive board of the State Archives of Bavaria) in spring 2002.

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