

## Introduction

With Hitler's seizure of power on 30<sup>th</sup> January 1933, the "world" was to undergo fundamental changes not only for the winners of the election, but also for the opponents of the National Socialists, very soon. While some people had the impression that a time of "unlimited opportunities" had begun, others soon had to fear for many things – even for their own lives. The Enabling Act (Law for the Remedy of the Hardship of People and State), which had already come into force on 24<sup>th</sup> March 1933, made it possible for the members of the NSDAP already incredibly early to create, by means of inactivating the Reichstag, i.e. the parliament of the German Reich, an essential prerequisite to guarantee the assumption of absolute power in the state<sup>1</sup>.

With the authorization of the Reich's Government to pass laws without debate and adoption by the parliament, an essential basis of democracy – the separation of legislative and executive power in the state – had been abandoned<sup>2</sup>. The result of the lacking separation of legislative and executive power was that, even less than half a year later, two laws, among others, came into force: the "law against the new formation of political parties" and that "for the prevention of offspring with hereditary diseases" (both on 14<sup>th</sup> July 1933), which soon resulted in a division – only of the German population for the time being – into persecutors and persecutees.

These laws only, together with further ordinances as, for instance, the "Reichstag fire ordinance", were the necessary basis for the creation of the National Socialist dictatorship in Germany that was to last for 12 years<sup>3</sup>. If, besides this, the ideological intentions, which had been clearly formulated already much earlier, are taken into consideration, the tragedy unmistakably began to emerge, at least to some extent, as of 1933 at the latest. From today's point of view, it is

nonetheless hardly comprehensible that, within the shortest time after the assumption of power, the firm conviction was prevailing, according to which the nationalistic state had to endeavour everything "to declare incapable of procreation anything that is obviously diseased in any way and subject to a hereditary taint and therefore a burden otherwise and to also put this into practice"<sup>4</sup>, and that a law concerning offspring with hereditary diseases came into force.

Even though, still in the middle of the 1930s, a majority of the people were not to believe or did not want to believe in the evil, nonetheless the rumour about the opening of new camps, where the National Socialists locked up unsuitable citizens, somehow came to the attention of many of them. These camps included places of detention like Camp Börgermoor – which was already described as early as 1935<sup>5</sup> – or the pre-war concentration camps, often no longer known today, e.g. Oranienburg, Sachsenburg and Lichtenburg, up to the early and large concentration camps like Dachau and Buchenwald, which were gaining increasing importance still during the war.

To the same extent as the effects of the new laws became more noticeable, and more and more persons concerned lost their rights, the number of those who found themselves deprived of their liberty rose constantly. Apart from some fluctuations – as the great wave of arrests immediately after the "Reichskristallnacht" on 9<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> November 1938 and the releases in the weeks and months afterwards –, this became more and more evident during the entire time of persecution with an upward tendency. By the end of the despotic rule, people from the most various countries were to be affected by that. From the very beginning, the rulers had endeavoured to exactly record the facts in writing. This even still at a time when, partly, no paper at all or only paper of very poor quality was available. Due to the effects of the war or at the end of the war, many of these valuable records were destroyed by order of the rulers at the time. However,

thanks to the will to meticulously record, if possible, all stages of the persecution, the ITS has nonetheless a considerable part of this documentation at its disposal today. The following account is an attempt to describe the benefit of these records for the former persecutees over all the years. The problems of the physical preservation of the documents as well as efforts for a better accessibility of the "masses of paper" are to be pointed out as well.