

## Tracing Service

The description of this work should actually have come at the beginning of the delineation of the tasks of the ITS, since this is, in fact, the most original mandate of this institution. Even though, in the course of the years, the profile of the inquirers has changed, the task and, above all, its fulfilment has basically remained the same. Certainly, the two tracing service sections – Tracing Section and Child-Tracing Archives – profit from the new information technology, but a large part of the successful case processing continues to be based on the quite individual way of proceeding, that is on the experiences of the caseworkers. In future, this procedure will probably not change too much, because the positive result of a tracing case depends on the “intuition” of the single “tracing expert” to a not inconsiderable extent. Many inquiries that practically seem to be hopeless causes may – thanks to the persistent endeavours to take further possibilities of investigations into consideration – still be brought to a happy ending again and again. The description particularly of this work therefore ideally represents a bridge between the ITS before and after the change from the paper processing to the computerized operation virtually at the same time as the turn of the millennium.

As far as the inquirers are concerned, almost exclusively the persons concerned themselves were those who turned to the Tracing Service at the beginning. Being certain that they had not been deported alone, their greatest concern, even before the return home or the emigration, was to re-establish the contact with the closest relatives, which had completely broken off, as soon as possible.

Did they survive the Holocaust at all and, if so, where were they now? Not to know, which odyssey the missing family members had gone through, did actually not facilitate the search for the case-

workers in any way. In the course of the years, more and more cases have been added, in which the inquirers had experienced the turmoil of war as very young persons, often even as small children. Many of them only knew fragments respectively nothing at all about the parents and their life history. With their increasing age, the importance of finding an answer to the question regarding “their true roots” was constantly growing. Numerous visits in Bad Arolsen, particularly by so-called “Lebensborn”-children, are grievous examples of how depressing it is not to know the name and origin of one or both parents and to what extent this severely disturbs the inner peace of “stalwart” adults, i.e. their inner equilibrium. Recently, this group has been contacting the ITS more and more frequently with another concern: even though, often, the track of the parents cannot be picked up after so many years, they wish to follow at least the traces regarding half brothers and sisters – who must have suffered a similar fate – that frequently come into light in the course of the investigations.

Especially the actual tracing service work bears witness to how long the shadows are that an armed conflict casts on those who are most vulnerable.

While the reunion of families was in the foreground at the beginning of the tracing service work, the clarification of fates holds a special status today. The agonizing uncertainty concerning the whereabouts of missing persons still weighs heavily upon the persons concerned even decades after the events of the Second World War, which is why even the information about the place of a grave may be relieving news that helps with bringing a very personal life history to a close. Letters of thanks, in which relatives express their satisfaction, because “now they can die in peace” or “it is a comforting feeling to know that the person close to them has not been forgotten in the form of a grave”, are hardly understandable for out-

siders. Likewise the gratefulness of a son about the news, according to which his mother became ill with tuberculosis shortly after his birth and died afterwards.

A priori, the numerous cases where, in spite of the great distance to the events, survivors may still be found are certainly to be called more spectacular. The happiness about a found mother whom one has not known consciously may hardly be put into words. Here, letters of the persons concerned bear witness to an indescribable joy, even if, sometimes, the two generations do not even speak the same language. In many cases, too, family members come together who had not even known about the others' existence before. "Thank you very much for the efforts in the search for my meanwhile deceased father. Last week, I received a very kind letter from my half sister who is living in North Carolina. It was not only a big surprise for me, but also an indescribable joy, which I am actually becoming aware of only little by little, that I will finally learn something about my, our father nonetheless". Sometimes, the answers turn out rather unfortunately in spite of a success in the actual tracing. The person located may be living – as it has already happened several times – in a closed institution and those responsible may not permit any contact, since the patient cannot cope with this, or he/she may not be in the position to have a meeting for other, e.g. private reasons. So, the refusal of an establishment of contact or even of the consent to the release of the address on the part of the person found – for whichever reasons – is nothing unusual especially as far as the group of parents is concerned. For the caseworker who actually has a successfully solved tracing case before him, this is a deplorable situation. At the Tracing Service, however, we have to show consideration for the will of the persons concerned and therefore accept that only they can take the decision about a really positive outcome.