Manhunt for 6,000,000

By HUGH G. ELBOT
Displaced Populations Division, Office of Political Affairs, HICOG

RS. FRANCOIS: Can you find any trace of my son? He was taken to Mauthausen Concentration Camp in 1942. I have not heard from him since.

Chief of Records Branch: We can try. We have here some of the original registers used at Mauthausen. Just a minute. Is this it? Emile Francois?

Mrs. F.: Oh yes... but... there is a red line through his name!

Chief: There is a red line through many of the names, I am sorry to say. Look, here is a whole page of red lines. All dead.

— Excerpt from a conversation between an inquirer and an official of the International Tracing Service in Arolsen, Germany.

* * *

ON APRIL 1 OF THIS YEAR the Allied High Commission took over from the International Refugee Organization custody of the information gathered in six strenuous years by the biggest missing-persons bureau of all time, the International Tracing Service. Its herculean assignment in 1945: To find out what had happened to the victims of Nazi terror — the Poles, the Yugoslavs, the Russians, the Frenchmen — all those who disappeared in the long night of Nazi barbarism.

It was in the mid-war year of 1943, when the names Belsen, Auschwitz, Dachau and Mauthausen began to filter through Allied intelligence pipelines, that the first plans were laid for the manhunt for 6,000,000 that was to follow the surrender. Two years later as International Tracing Service men (the name came two years after that, when IRO took over) followed General Eisenhower’s armies into Germany and into the concentrated misery of the camps, the ugly names became world-shocking reality.

But while the world stared in horror at the cordwood piles of anonymous bodies, the ITS people began the long and sorrowful job of identification. Dead, the guiltless unfortunates received the first individual attention since being thrown into the gears of assembly-line slaughter.

THE TASK WAS AS ABSORBING as it was big: a detective story in reverse. The clues were captured concentration camp files, testimony of war criminals, statements of the survivors, and rusty number tags linked around a skeleton’s wrist. A dozen factors complicated the search. It was immediately evident, for example, that even the captured camp records could not be trusted. For various reasons, SS clerks had falsified the death lists or confused them with misspellings. Such errors in data were particularly flagrant with the Slavic prisoners, whose jaw-breaking names the camp clerks either could not or would not get right.

A result of this linguistic lack was that one prisoner might pick up a new name with every entry in the records. (The name Kusnerzow was spelled 77 different ways.) Too, there was the fact that the camp administrations, frightened by the approaching Allied armies, tried in the last days to cover their tracks by destroying records, hiding mass graves, and shooting as many inmates who “knew too much” as possible.

ITS’s separation of frightful fact from Nazi fiction required field work as well as sorting and sifting.

As the dust settled over shattered Germany, ITS men plowed into the 100 tons of captured documents. Out of some 20,000,000 names, crosschecks on SS spelling weakness left approximately 6,000,000 bonafide entries. Every one of those 6,000,000 cards that now came into the phonetically ordered master file was a person who at one time had worn a concentration camp number or had been assigned to a factory as slave labor. Hospital, prison and municipal records were combed for additional names.

USING THE WRITTEN RECORDS as a springboard, ITS people took to the field. Interviews with guards, survivors, German doctors and civic officials were all warp

The story of International Tracing Service is history’s greatest detective story — an attempt to solve the mystery of the late of 6,000,000 persons who disappeared during the Nazi era of concentration camps. At gate of ITS’s headquarters at Arolsen, in Hesse, are liaison officers representing Allied missions seeking missing nationals.
threads to the woof of the documentary evidence. Nearly always, first interviews led to others. ITS staffs plotted the routes of the camp-to-camp death marches of the last war months, sent field men to interview farmers and villagers along the way. Hundreds of unmarked graves were turned up.

Over and over again data was sifted, compared, supplemented. The ITS goal was to get the complete picture of what happened to each inmate from the time he entered the camps to the end. Where death was recorded, the staff insisted on location and positive identification of the body. As the grisly task proceeded, ITS personnel came to learn perhaps more about the Nazi concentration and slave labor camps than Himmler himself knew, but ITS was always conscious that the investigation was no pure intellectual exercise.

The main purpose was always to enable relatives and friends of the concentration camp inmates to learn what had happened and — the bit of sunlight in the death-laden atmosphere — to reunite surviving inmates with relatives whom the storm of the war had scattered to the four winds.

At the same time, the accumulated data acquired monumental significance. Because ITS was not set up to prosecute the sponsors of the camps but only to help the inmates and their families, the cold, factual documentation of Nazi barbarism contained in the millions of case histories, is one of the most eloquent objective testimonies to the bottomless evil of the Nazi system with its trappings of leader principle and master-race theory.

**THIS OBJECTIVE WAS always in the minds of the ITS staff, although it was not specifically mentioned in the quadripartite directive of Sept. 17, 1945, which formulated the task thus:**

(a) To search for and trace military and civilian missing of the United Nations;

(b) To establish, where possible, the fate of those missing who cannot be found alive;

(c) To locate, collect and preserve all available records regarding displaced persons in Germany;

(d) To serve as a link to bring interested persons into contact with each other.

During the first postwar years ITS was under UNRRA's administrative roof. On Jan. 1, 1948, the International Refugee Organization (IRO) inherited the tracers, and, with the naming of Swiss Maurice Thudichum to the top desk, ITS entered its busiest phase. Early tracing had been largely through radio and press channels; now, as the word got around the world, letters began to stream into ITS's Arolsen headquarters in the US Zone.

Some of the inquirers came personally to Arolsen, like Mrs. Francois, whose recorded conversation with the investigator is printed above, but most of them wrote — sometimes literate and cultivated, often a painful, childish scrawl — but all with the same theme: Can you tell me what happened to him — to her — to my father — my son — my friend. Forty percent of the time, ITS could.
SADLY, MOST INQUIRIES led to an entry like that of Emile Francois, or of the Pole, Wladyslaw K., which states: "K., Wladyslaw. Polish nationality. Born in W... on 5-19-95. Occupation machinist. Arrived in Camp Mauthausen on 9-22-44, was registered under prison number 105,589, and died in the camp hospital on 4-17-45 at 0150 hours, as a result of colitis and low blood pressure." It took the SS only eight months to starve Wladyslaw.

Sometimes the investigators unearthed poignant sidelights. A field worker checking reports of a mass grave near a camp fell into conversation with a waitress at the village inn, learned that her fiance, who had died a year before, had been a Jewish doctor, a prisoner at the camp, and had ministered to the other inmates. "He was determined that those who died should at least have some identification," she told the investigator, "So he put into the mouth of each victim a capsule containing name, date and cause of death." Thanks to these capsules, ITS was able to positively identify 3,000 bodies.

Another eloquent conversation was recorded by the field worker checking the case of Vladimir Renzo. An inquiry after Renzo launched a search in the Master Index, where the investigator discovered that he had been first at Concentration Camp Sachsenhausen as No. 21,234. The Sachsenhausen records stated that he was transferred to a camp at Laura, and from there he was traced to Buchenwald.

One of the last records of the Buchenwald camp note the departure on March 2, 1945, of a 200-man group, including Renzo, marching to Mauthausen. A look at the Mauthausen records for March 31, four weeks later, show that 20 men arrived from Buchenwald. Vladimir Renzo’s name was no longer among them. With 179 brothers in suffering, he had died or—unlikely but not impossible—had escaped en route. A field check was called for, and after exhaustive door-to-door interviewing, the investigator found a farmer who could give information. The conversation follows:

Investigator: Have you been farming here long?
Farmer: All my life.
I: Then you were here in March 1945?
F: Yes, of course.
I: Do you remember that period well?
F: Who could ever forget those terrible times!
I: Did you see men from the concentration camps passing this way?
F: Yes, many times.
I: Did any of them ever die here on the road?
F: Yes, many did. I buried them myself at the end of the field.

One of the skeletons had a tarnished wrist tag, No. 21,234. Vladimir Renzo had not escaped.

MOST OF THE AROLSBEN "meetings" (ITS workers refer to an inquiry which coincides with a name in the Master File as a "meeting") turn out that way, a tribute to the thoroughness of Nazi extermination methods. An even more impressive tribute is the fact that inquiries have only been received for approximately three and

MAY 1951
one-half percent of the 6,500,000 names on file. It seems certain that in many of the other cases the entire families were swallowed up.

An important and happier part of the ITS job was the tracing of children kidnapped by the Nazis to be "Germanized," orphans of concentration camp inmates, children born in Germany to forced laborers or abandoned by displaced persons. Checking of all institutions, foster home and adoption records turned up 343,000 such children in institutions (children's homes and Lebensborn baby farms), 130,000 in foster homes, and 21,000 adopted. Many of these children could be returned to their parents, but this operation was not always free of tragic undertones, since often the children had forgotten their own parents and had come to love the new ones.

ITS workers like to document the happy endings. A Polish mother whose husband was killed in 1939 made her way to France and there remarried. Her son was taken from her by the Germans in Poland and, as far as she knew, sent to a children's home in Silesia. ITS found him in one week.

Another Polish couple, brought to Germany as slave labor in 1942, had their two-year-old daughter Erica taken from them. In 1950 the parents heard of ITS and initiated tracing action. Little Erica, now 10 years old, was found by checking records of children's homes. She was listed as turned over to a children's home in 1942 and later given to a foster family only 60 miles from where her parents were living. The reunion was happy in this case.

A more complex case of child tracing affected the children of a Yugoslav woman picked up with her children by the Gestapo in 1942. After two days of imprisonment the children were taken from her and she was sent to Auschwitz. She managed to stay alive and after liberation return-

ed to her former home, where she was reunited with the daughter. The boy, who had been two and one-half years old at the time of the arrest, was missing. The daughter reported that she had seen him last in the same baby farm home where she had been, but her statements were vague. By means of a letter from the mother to a Yugoslav agency in Germany, ITS learned of the case, and the plot thickened when ITS sleuthing turned up the fact that the likely foster family, living in the Soviet Zone, had probably been expelled from their home.

Correspondence with IRO and Red Cross produced a list of families by that name who had sought refuge in the Western zones. One of these families, it developed, had taken a child in 1943. The papers from the baby farm gave the correct date of birth, but a false place of birth and the indication that the parents were dead. Here again a reunion was effected.

Besides the mountainous job of tracing, Mr. Thudichum's 1,500 man staff was obliged to take on heavy statistical tasks. Legal death certificates for concentration camp victims, certificates of births which occurred in baby farms and forced-labor camps, documentary proof of confinement for surviving inmates eligible for indemification under postwar German laws, all of these documents had to come from ITS, the only agency in a position to know.

In one important instance this work had to be done twice. In connection with the Auerbach scandal in Bavaria, where authorities suspect that persons have cashed indemnity checks who never saw the inside of a barbed-wire confine, ITS must recheck 40,000 names.

The year 1949 was the highwater mark for ITS. In 1950 both child tracing and individual field work came to an end, with corresponding phasing out of tracing personnel.

To continue under HICOM sponsorship is the job of processing the remainder of the material gleaned by the field service staffs in the past years. Five hundred employees will remain with Mr. Thudichum; Allied direction will be in the form of a tripartite executive board with a British, and a French member, and the writer as US member. In announcing the transfer, IRO Director-General J. Donald Kingsley paid tribute to the "great humanitarian significance" of the work. There is no sign that the work is anywhere near finished: 4,000 inquiries still stream into Arolsen every month.

Mr. Thudichum meets with executive board named by Allied High Commission: (l-r.) Charles P. Wilson, United Kingdom; Hugh G. Elbot, US member, who is chairman, and the author of this article, and Armand Klein, French representative. (Photos by Claude Jacoby, PRD HICOG)