The International Tracing Service (ITS) in Bad Arolsen, Germany, serves the victims of Nazi persecution and their families by documenting their fate through the archives it manages. The ITS preserves these historical records and makes them available for research. The ITS is governed under the 1955 Bonn Agreements and their 2006 Protocol by the 11-member International Commission for the International Tracing Service (Belgium, France, Germany, Greece, Israel, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Poland, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and the United States of America). The ICRC manages the ITS on behalf of the International Commission.

**CONTEXT**

The International Tracing Service (ITS) in Bad Arolsen, Germany, remained an invaluable resource for civilians persecuted under the Third Reich and for their families, particularly those residing in Eastern Europe, where the ITS made a concerted effort to make its services better known. To this end, the ITS conducted missions in Poland and the Russian Federation for talks with representatives of archives, victims’ organizations and research institutes.

During the period under review, the ITS received 12,941 requests from 69 countries, mainly from victims of persecution under the Third Reich or their relatives. The ITS used its archives to record and confirm the incarceration of individuals and their subjection to forced labour and other forms of Nazi persecution. It also undertook worldwide searches for persons missing from that period.

Researchers, research institutions, and memorial and educational bodies continued to show keen interest in the work of the ITS following the opening of the archives to the public in November 2007, which had required the ITS to adapt its services to accommodate this additional focus. The ITS and various historical and other institutions extended their cooperation, and further research projects started. Work with schools, universities and other educational institutions progressed.

The ITS continued the digitization of its archival holdings, focusing mainly on the 3 million correspondence files, the most elaborate sub-project of the digitization process. Almost the entire collection of historical files, containing about 30 million documents on National Socialist persecution, forced labour and emigration, had already been scanned and handed over to institutions in seven countries. In December, the Wiener Library in London, United Kingdom, was the latest institution to receive digital copies.

The International Commission (IC) for the ITS concluded discussions on the future structure of the service and the role of a new institutional partner, namely the German Federal Archives, in view of the ICRC’s withdrawal, officially announced for the end of 2012. At a ceremony in Berlin, Germany, in December 2011, the IC members signed new agreements governing the future management and tasks of the institution.
ITS ACTION AND RESULTS

CIVILIANS

Victims of Nazi persecution and their families receive answers

Approximately 81% (10,540) of all requests addressed to the ITS came from direct victims (3%) or their relatives; these humanitarian requests averaged 880 per month (compared to 850 in 2010), reflecting people’s continuing strong interest, especially in Eastern European countries, in information regarding the fate of relatives. After Germany, the second largest number of enquiries came from the Russian Federation.

The increased number of requests was partly attributable to ITS public promotion work through the media, publications, events and exhibitions, and missions to Poland and the Russian Federation (see Context). Further improvements were made to the Russian-language website (launched in 2010), which was being widely used in Eastern European countries.

During the period under review, 9,598 humanitarian enquiries received an answer, the majority within 8 weeks of receipt. The internal data protection handbook on the handling of humanitarian requests, introduced in 2010, continued to be particularly useful in dealing with tracing requests for immediate next of kin such as parents and siblings. In many cases, the ITS helped provide information obtained from its large archive, through its contacts with various institutions in Germany or via the worldwide Red Cross and Red Crescent network. In one case, the ITS not only facilitated the re-establishment of family links but also enabled a man to find out his real name and birth place. In another, the ITS helped a mother in Belarus to find the daughter she had been forced to give up for adoption in the post-war years.

New initiative launched to return survivors’ belongings

In May 2011, the ITS published an online list of personal belongings remaining in the archives to facilitate their return to survivors of Nazi persecution or their families. In its efforts to help keep these personal belongings, the ITS relied on the support of survivors or their relatives, as well as of partner organizations, researchers and journalists. Some 3,400 such items were still held in the archives. They included 2,400 and 330 items from the Neuengamme and Dachau concentration camps respectively, as well as items belonging to people held by the Gestapo in Hamburg, in the Bergen-Belsen and Natzweiler-Struthoff concentration camps, or in the Amersfoort and Compiègne transit camps. By the end of 2011, owners’ names had been found for 2,900 items; these included 476 items for which the owners’ names had been found by means of thorough research in the archives. Thanks to the online list, some 55 items were returned in 2011.

ITS research and information services developed

In 2011, 2,634 people visited the ITS. Scholars and journalists continued to show interest in the ITS as an important and still widely unexplored source of information; in 2011, the service recorded 1,487 requests made by researchers and 254 by journalists and other interested parties. The restrictions concerning the release of copies to researchers were lifted in November 2011. The rules on fees and tariffs and the online form for research requests were revised accordingly.

Work to accommodate researchers and improve their access to archive materials continued. To that end, the ITS organized a two-day workshop in October on the “Usability of the ITS Archives”, attended by archivists from seven IC member countries; the workshop results were presented to and approved by the IC in November. Additional search tools were to be made available, providing an overview of the whole ITS archive collection and access to an additional collection (the “Lebensborn” file). ITS staff completed the scanning and indexing of documents relating to the tracing of children and what were known as factual documents on Nazi persecution. The digitization of a first batch of 300,000 correspondence files (out of a total of 3 million) was completed, making the files ready for dispatch to partner organizations in IC member States. In December 2011, the ITS also handed over digital copies to the Wiener Library in London. Researchers were thus able to make use of the ITS collections, containing about 30 million documents on National Socialist persecution, forced labour and emigration, through institutions in eight countries.

The ITS advanced in its research project on the death marches from concentration camps and discussed the initial results at a two-day international conference in November. A catalogue of camps for displaced persons was to be presented to partner organizations for completion. The 2010 pedagogical concept for partnerships with educational institutions led to a first conference for educators in April 2011 and to several new projects with schools and universities in the field of teacher training.

ITS prepares for future management change

To ensure the sustainability of its services, the ITS, together with the ICRC, continued to take an active part in the IC’s deliberations on the future of the institution (see Context). The IC members supervising the work of the ITS signed two new agreements governing the future tasks and management structure of the organization. These agreements formally extended the tasks of the ITS into areas such as historical research, education, commemoration and cataloguing, thereby broadening the existing main mandate of tracing. The future director of the ITS would be directly selected and appointed by unanimous decision of the IC. A new provision related to the role of an institutional partner, which will be taken on by the German Federal Archives as of January 2013. The role of the institutional partner was to advise and work together with the IC and the ITS director in the areas of conservation and preservation, cataloguing and indexing, budgeting and auditing. To ensure a smooth transition following the ICRC’s withdrawal from the management of the institution at the end of 2012, additional efforts were under way to reinforce the ITS’s internal management.