

Commission in Paris. Representation from all countries was low-level, and the meeting was low-energy. I made a plea that release of the ITS documents should not follow a diplomat's or an archivist's timetable, but had to be dictated by the actuarial table of the survivor generation. My appeal was ignored.

The Commission was bogged down in debate about "access guidelines," and the guidelines they were considering were upsetting. Advance application would be required, with no time limit for receiving a response. No access would be granted if ITS decided that the applicant should look for answers elsewhere. Neither researchers nor survivors would see finding aids. Scholars would have to pay for staff assistance and buy indemnity insurance for ITS, the ICRC, and the Commission's eleven governments in case of a claim of document misuse. These guidelines virtually guaranteed that no one would seek or gain entry.

If anyone did, a last trap would await them. The ICRC insisted that all information in the documents relating to persons, places, or dates be "anonymized"—that is, blacked out.

No decisions on access guidelines or a timetable were reached in Paris, and the Commission put off further discussion until its May 2002 meeting in Berlin.

That winter I visited Bad Arolsen together with the U.S. embassy officer who served on the Commission. The welcome was as icy as the weather. The director ushered us into a conference room near the entrance...and near the exit. Referring to the Bonn Accords of 1955 that governed ITS operations as well as ICRC prerogatives, he indicated that he would not permit us to inspect the archival collections during the visit.

The director brought several ITS staff into the room to provide information. (Later, one confided to me that staffers had been instructed not to answer questions.) Once the staff was ushered out, the director, sensing our anger, agreed to let us see the digital imaging equipment used to copy the documents.

That was a mistake! I dove into the stack of documents being copied, saw registers of collections already reproduced, and solicited answers from the

technicians about the process. What would be copied next? That question required a collection manager to answer, and when the director was called away to his next meeting—evidently ours was supposed to be short—the collection manager took us into the storage deposits. I was overwhelmed by rooms

stacked floor to ceiling with documentation of transports, deportations, concentration camps, Gestapo offices, forced and slave labor sites, displaced persons camps, and resettlement files relating to millions of innocent victims of the Nazis and their Axis allies. I also got a quick tutorial in how the staff treated a survivor's request for information:

Every request passed through 17 separate work stations, and upon arrival at each station the inquiry would be placed at the bottom of the pile. I began to understand why survivors were kept waiting for years!

But there were other factors as well. Before the visit, I had obtained a bootleg copy of the documentary film "Biedermann's Reich," which had been shown in Germany in 1999 but then withdrawn, apparently as a result of ICRC legal action. The film showed an elderly Ukrainian, a former forced laborer, who tried for years to obtain documentation from ITS about his wartime victimization by the Nazi regime. Only when an investigative journalist appeared at ITS headquarters to take up the Ukrainian's cause did a serious search take place. The documents for which the visibly suffering old man had waited nearly a decade were found in under an hour. The film indicated that the staffer who helped the journalist was reprimanded and then forced out of her job by ITS director Charles Biedermann.

When we rejoined the director for coffee, my embassy colleague asked

about the handling of survivor requests. Biedermann replied coolly that ITS had a backlog of 450,000 requests, each of which had to go through 17 stations. The sense of urgency I felt was nowhere to be seen. It was the process, not the people, that mattered!

I left Bad Arolsen determined to convince the International Commission to take action, but how? Each member served for just a year or two, and the Commission met only once a year. Without strong motivation, they would surely do nothing and wait to be rotated off.

Perhaps the Commission would be moved, as I had been, by learning about the powerful contents of the archive. I requested inventories of ITS's holdings—and met a stone wall. At the



At ITS headquarters, I examine Holocaust-related documents. For over half a century, information about the fates of more than 17 million people were secreted away here, under lock and key.

Commission's May 2002 meeting in Berlin, the chair (from Germany that year) chastised me publicly for requesting "restricted" information. Lists of collections would be provided to Commission members only after a unanimous request by all eleven countries—and that, he stated with self-assurance, would not happen. The director, meanwhile, let some Commission members know that if they supported my request, he would see to an even slower flow of responses to their country's survivors.

Over lunch, a German diplomat confided that Germany, which had been funding ITS under terms of a postwar agreement, wanted to assert national control and apply German privacy law to the ITS collections. If that failed, Germany intended to keep the archive closed by provoking legal conflicts among Commission countries over privacy regulations that would drag on for years.

In 2003, the Commission met for half a day in Athens. No progress. I stayed away, gathering information, exploring