



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization



International Tracing Service  
Inscribed on the International Register in 2013  
Memory of the World

**ITS**

International Tracing Service  
Service International de Recherches  
Internationaler Suchdienst

**Pieter Jan Wolthers, diplomat and previously i.a. Ambassador of the Kingdom of the Netherlands to Romania and Ukraine, is serving as Chair of the International Commission (IC) of the International Tracing Service (ITS) for the second time. The ITS spoke with Wolthers regarding the role of the IC, the future of the ITS, and what role the organization can play in a world that is seemingly forgetting the lessons of the past.**

*Please describe, in your own words, the work the ITS does.*

The role of ITS is dictated by the Bonn Treaty of 1955, the document that for the first time was agreed between a number of countries, most of them Western Allies in the Second World War, as well as the Federal Republic of Germany and Israel. At present, there are eleven Member-States. The 1955 Bonn Treaty has since been updated and extended by the present Berlin Treaty of December 9, 2011, but the original tasks of the International Tracing Service are unaltered. As is also expressed in the name of the ITS, its main task consisted of searching for people, mostly civilians, who had gone missing during the Nazi period, after the regime had incarcerated them or deported them to concentration camps. The ITS's main remit was therefore to help those who sought information about what had happened to their loved ones. The next, also very important task reflected in the Treaty is the preservation of the documents, which have been brought together at Bad Arolsen. That was very important in the early years when the ITS holdings were used quite frequently in criminal proceedings against people suspected of having committed crimes during the Second World War. Another task, equally important, is to see to it that the holdings at Bad Arolsen, which have been considerably expanded over the years, i.e. by the inclusion of documents related to the Nazi administration on forced laborers, were opened to the victims or their legal successors, who would be provided with authorized extracts or copies of the information from the ITS collections. Certainly in the early years, the ITS was slow to produce replies to requests for information. Research had to be done by hand, and there was always the need to protect the privacy of others mentioned in documents.

The tasks of the ITS have shifted in importance. We are now living some 70 years after the end of the Second World War, and the number of people sending in requests for information about relatives is very likely to go down. However, the expectation is that it will never stop completely. In this context, I found it revealing when I was told in Geneva, at the Headquarters of the International Committee of the Red Cross, where documents are displayed on prisoners of war from the First World War, that the Red Cross still regularly receives requests for information about the fates of some of these combatants, and this was a century ago! I think that also for the ITS, therefore, the task of tracing victims and survivors will remain.

*It has been ten years since the archives opened to the public, and now there is a major push to increase access to the archives through a number of methods, including creating programs for researchers and educators and improving descriptions. Where do you see the ITS going next?*

Indeed, the year 2011 marked a major development: the ITS was allowed to expand its activities to include the gradual development into a center for documentation, information and research on Nazi persecution "in order to ensure that the fates of those who fell victim to the Nazi regime and of the survivors continue to be studied and that the knowledge thereof be

passed on to future generations,” as the Treaty of Berlin says. For example, the ITS is currently focusing on programs that provide researchers with the chance to come to Bad Arolsen to study. At the same time, the ITS is working hard to finish the process of digitization, which would make it less necessary to physically be present in Bad Arolsen. The ITS is in the process of putting many holdings online. This is a complex process, which requires great attention to detail in order to perform this work accurately. Moreover, it is important to add metadata in order to be able to explain what a document is and where it comes from. This information, in turn, is crucial to connect ITS documents with other documents or archives. However, although these processes are labor-intensive, this fact should never prevent the ITS from steadily going forward and putting more and more of these digitalized holdings online.

Under the leadership of Director Floriane Hohenberg, the ITS is taking a very proactive approach in reaching out to researchers and others who wish to work on the holdings of the ITS. This fits both in the category of promoting education and research, but at the same time it serves to enhance the visibility of the ITS and it ensures that the ITS can hold a strong position in the larger network of organizations and research institutions focusing on the study of the Nazi era. It is good to spread the news of what the ITS can bring to the table, and that this is undertaken with much fervor. I really think the ITS is home to a big and unique treasure of documents, as is also demonstrated by the fact that the ITS collections have been included in UNESCO’s Memory of the World Register. The more people start to realize the importance of this unique collection, the better it is.

*How would you describe the role of the International Commission for the ITS?*

The International Commission (IC) is the supreme decision-making body in the ITS. It is composed of one representative from each of the eleven Member-States, and it has a rotating chairmanship. The primary role of the IC is supervision over the ITS, but, in addition, the IC should also provide advice and guidance to the ITS director on how best to achieve her mandate, while staying away from micromanagement as we have seen happening sometimes in the past; instead, the IC aims at ensuring and respecting proper governance structures. A few years ago, at the Annual Meeting in Rome, the IC formulated a set of five strategic goals for the period 2016-2020. We are now practically halfway the implementation period. The IC supervises this process, while at the same time supporting the ITS management in providing the necessary means, be it finances or staff, to be able to fulfill these tasks.

*Is the Dutch delegation planning anything special to mark its presidency of the International Commission?*

The Netherlands holds the presidency for a year. We will host the Annual Meeting, which will conclude its Chairmanship, in June 2018 in The Hague. We have chosen The Hague as the place for the Annual Meeting because the National Archives of the Netherlands are also located there. We want to use the presence of representatives of the ITS Member-States for the Annual Meeting in the Netherlands to introduce them also to the processes that we are conducting in our country to do similar things as the ITS is engaged in for providing access to documents from archives. We have in The Hague, in the National Archives, a huge criminal archive that dates back to the time of the so-called “extraordinary justice” that was dispensed in the years after the Second World War to people suspected of having committed certain crimes during the war years. Like any judicial archive, this extraordinary justice archive consists of materials not meant for the public at large. The files contain such diverse things as printed materials, handwritten documents, photographs and drawings. Understandably, scholars are very interested to get access to these rich sources for research. Pilot projects are therefore now underway to open those archives experimenting with different techniques

in the field of automated text recognition. We want to share our insights with the other members of the IC, because we feel that by mutually sharing our experiences the IC will eventually be able to choose the processes that are most suited for the ITS holdings as well.

*How did your own interest in the ITS and its work come about?*

I'm a lawyer by education, and my first acquaintance with the ITS came in 2005, when I was Chief Legal Officer at the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs. At the time, the notion of the ITS as the huge databank at Bad Arolsen was often associated with the reality that this collection was not very accessible, allegedly out of fear for violating rules on the protection of personal data. My interest in the subjects covered by the ITS stems not only from the legal perspective per se, but mainly because I have spent most of my diplomatic career in Eastern Europe. In the countries where I have been posted (i.a. the Soviet Union, Austria, Poland, Romania, Ukraine) I have come across the legacies of the atrocities that were committed in wartime, and the lasting influence these events have on how people approach certain questions. I have visited a great number of Nazi concentration camps, which are now memorial sites, and such visits never failed to make a deep impression on me.

Therefore, I found it really a stroke of luck that in 2006 the rotating Chairmanship in such an important organization as the ITS came my way. Moreover, at about the same time, I became Diplomatic Advisor to the Dutch delegations to meetings of the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research (ITF), now the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA). Furthermore, I led the Dutch delegation to the Holocaust Era Assets Conference in 2009. All these activities came thus together and reinforced each other, and in this way World War II and its legacy became an area of lasting interest to me. The driving force lies in my observations during my long years in Eastern Europe what all this misery of dictatorship and persecution has meant, and still means, to the people there, and that there are organizations, such as the ITS, that, although they cannot reverse history and injustice, can at least contribute to alleviating concerns caused by uncertainty as to the fates of victims by providing information.

*Your diplomatic career took you to Ukraine and Romania, two countries where ethno-nationalism and xenophobia run quite high, and in which conversations about World War II often downplay their own complicity in crimes against humanity. What role does ITS have to play in countries such as those?*

Germany and countries in Western Europe that were occupied by the Nazis had more time in freedom to reflect on how to cope with the legacy of the Second World War than countries in Eastern Europe, where remembrance under communist rule was highly politicized and where the genocide of the Jews was often anathema. Therefore, I think there is still some time needed before we can say that former communist countries have found a proper way to deal with their past, although I noticed quite some progress in recent years. Romania, for instance, just finished a very proactive and commendable presidency in the IHRA. And with regard to Ukraine, I can say that when I first arrived in Kyiv, in 2009, there was, indeed, a yearly commemoration of the 1941 killing by the Nazis of some 34,000 Jews within two days at Babi Yar, but nothing actually happened at the ravine where the shootings had taken place. The next year, an Israeli minister attended a ceremony held at the actual location of the murders, and somewhat later, two Jewish oligarchs in Ukraine announced their initiative for the construction of a Jewish museum close to the ravine at Babi Yar, which thus also holds the promise of cleaning up the whole area. Therefore, I think the situation is certainly not hopeless. I've noticed in Poland, when I was posted there at the end of the 90s, that it simply takes time. You may recall the disputes regarding the different perceptions regarding the Auschwitz camps, which for Poles meant a place of martyrdom for Polish political prisoners more than anything else, while for most people in Western Europe, Auschwitz

stands primarily for the killings in Birkenau; well, we've gradually found solutions to these and other issues; we've seen new concepts for the exhibition halls in Auschwitz, allowing for a balanced approach that does justice to all sides. However, precisely because they take time, these processes offer us opportunities to help countries such as Ukraine in dealing with the past, including through approaches to remembrance and Holocaust education that are in line with modern concepts worked out by the IHRA.

*In Germany, the far-right just achieved its best electoral results since the Nazis, and the French National Front made it into the second round of the presidential elections; there was also a time in your own country where there were serious fears that the Freedom Party would achieve far better results than it actually did in the March elections. Considering those developments, and that a wave of populism and anti-immigrant rhetoric brought about both Brexit and the Trump administration, could one posit that the West is losing sight of the post-war values of tolerance and liberal democracy? How do you deal with stemming the rise of nationalism in the very countries that defined the post-war world order? What role can ITS play in conversations in those countries?*

These types of political developments are precisely the reasons why the tasks of the ITS should not be confined to looking backwards, preserving the collections and doing the traditional task of tracing; the ITS should also be proactive in using its collections for purposes of spreading the word that such atrocities as have been committed in World War II were the end of a long road, and that this road gradually developed over many years, in which groups of people were first excluded from society, then dehumanized, and eventually killed. If we are not vigilant, such things could happen again. We see all around us how large numbers of refugees entering Europe has raised eyebrows, caused feelings of unease, and even protest and resistance. By demonstrating, on the basis of documents from the past, how exclusion and dehumanization can eventually lead a society to the abyss, ITS can certainly play a useful role in raising the warning flag, as appropriate, through its work with researchers, teachers and students. In this respect, ITS firmly belongs in the same network with IHRA (International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance) and the EHRI (European Holocaust Research Infrastructure).

*The international community has said “never again” time and time again when discussing war crimes and crimes against humanity, but often has remained silent – and is sometimes even complicit – when confronted with very modern examples (i.e. ethnic cleansing in Myanmar, Rwanda, and the Balkans). “Never again” is a very evocative rallying cry, but does it actually have any meaning in 2017?*

I remember, a few years ago, a well-known columnist of The Washington Post pointing out that “Never again” was used too often, and that, because of that, the expression was running the risk of becoming meaningless. It's a puzzling thing, because I do believe in the power of the saying “Never again”, and also that it is worthwhile to say “Never again” in order to send a lasting warning. When I see in Dachau the monument on which is inscribed “Never again”, “Plus jamais”, “Nie wieder” and the same in Hebrew and Russian, these texts convey a powerful message, which resonates as a task that means something to me. But one should indeed be a bit careful and reserve the use of these two words to places and occasions where it is really appropriate.