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ITS

International Tracing Service
Service International de Recherches
Internationaler Suchdienst

Effects: Frequently asked questions and answers

How many effects does the ITS have in its archives?

The International Tracing Service (ITS) in Bad Arolsen still preserves about 3,200 effects in its archives. The term “effects” is used to refer to personal objects seized from prisoners on their arrival at the concentration camp.

Where do the personal objects come from?

The majority of personal effects in the holdings of the ITS are from the Neuengamme (approx. 2,400) and Dachau concentration camps. In addition, there are some personal belongings of former prisoners of the Hamburg Gestapo, the Natzweiler and Bergen-Belsen concentration camps, and the Amersfoort and Compiègne transit camps.

What type of objects are the effects?

The effects include wallets, identification papers, photos, letters, certificates and in a few cases also fashion jewelry, cigarette cases, wedding rings, watches or fountain pens from the personal possessions of former concentration camp inmates.

How valuable are they?

All objects of value, such as money or jewelry, were confiscated by the National Socialists. The remaining effects are therefore of no material value, but they do hold high sentimental value for the family members. Sometimes they are the last memento of a prisoner. What is more, the effects in the ITS holdings have a certain intrinsic historical value, as many of the owners’ names are known. Comparable objects cannot be found in any other institution. The effects kept in the ITS archives are commonplace objects that allow insights into life prior to incarceration, while at the same time making clear the loss of normalcy.

Who were the owners?

It is difficult to draw connections between the effects and specific inmate groups, although it can be said that many of the former owners of the personal belongings were persecuted for political reasons. Their numbers are likely to include members of all nations whose territories

were occupied by the National Socialists, primarily Eastern Europeans. As regards the Dachau concentration camp, the share of German victims of persecution among the former owners of the effects is considerable. Jewish internees or Sinti and Roma only seldom figure as effects owners, as they were often not incarcerated to perform slave labor but murdered in extermination camps. Those who survived the hardships of the death marches and ultimately ended up in concentration camps in Germany had very few remaining possessions or none at all.

What does the ITS do with the effects?

The ITS aims to return as many effects as possible to the former victims of persecution or their families. Often, however, it is difficult to find out whether there are any relatives and, if so, what countries they live in today. In 2011, the ITS undertook to counter this difficulty by publishing a list of names of effects owners on its website, followed in 2015 by photos of the effects. The service has also lent out some of the effects, primarily those that could not be attributed to a name, to memorials and museums for exhibition purposes. The ITS supports journalists, researchers, and the interested public in their search for survivors or their family members.

How and to whom are the effects returned?

The effects list published on the ITS website contains the first and last names and birth dates of the former prisoners and effects owners. If a family member finds the name of a relative, he or she can send the ITS a brief message. If the ITS is able to locate any relatives, it informs those persons. A family member must place an application for the return of the effects, submitting a copy of his or her identity card or power of attorney and explaining how he or she is related to the effects owner. In other words, the applicant must furnish proof that he/she is entitled to receive the objects. The recipient of the objects must moreover release the ITS from any liability in the case of (family) litigation. Further legal claims cannot be asserted against the ITS.

Is it possible to identify all owners?

The former owners' names are known in about 2,700 of the total of 3,200 cases. When the ITS took charge of the effects in 1963, it assumed the responsibility to retain the structure given them by the Administrative Office for Inner Restitutions ("Verwaltungsamt für Innere Restititionen"). This institution had divided the effects roughly into objects of known and those of unknown owners. Over the following decades, the effects of unknown ownership remained untouched. In late 2009, however, the archives and research departments of the ITS launched a large-scale project to re-check the effects not yet identified. Nine-hundred effects from the Neuengamme concentration camp classified as "owner unknown" at the time

were re-examined within the scope of the survey finalized in April 2011. This new analysis allowed the identification of the owners of 476 effects – a result made possible primarily by the prisoners' numbers frequently appearing in or on the effects. Yet letters, invoices or doctors' notifications of sickness also served as bases for identification.

How did the objects find their way to the ITS?

The ITS was entrusted with a total of about 4,700 effects in 1963. The majority (more than 4,300) had come from the Administrative Office for Inner Restitutions in Stadthagen and the remainder (339) from the Indemnification Office of Bavaria ("Bayerisches Landesentschädigungsamt") in Munich. When it was in the process of concluding its restitution work, the Administrative Office for Inner Restitutions turned over the effects kept on its premises to the ITS. Most of these effects had been seized by the British Army shortly after the liberation of the Neuengamme concentration camp. A small portion of them had come from the Hamburg Gestapo and the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. The Administrative Office also received some personal belongings from the Red Cross in Hamburg, effects formerly kept in the concentration camp Dachau. The majority of the effects the ITS received from the Administrative Office are wallets. The Indemnification Office of Bavaria provided the ITS with private items taken from persecutees in the Dachau concentration camp. Unlike the Administrative Office, the Indemnification Office primarily had effects in the form of papers, certificates, letters and photographs.

Has the ITS managed to return effects between 1963 and today?

When the ITS took charge of the effects in 1963, it launched its first large-scale campaign to find their owners. Within the scope of that campaign, Red Cross societies, mainly in Russia, were sent effects and asked to take part in the search for any of their owners' next of kin. What is more, whenever inquiries about such owners were placed with the ITS, the respective personal objects were returned to the inquiring family members. Over the decades, some 1,500 effects have been returned in this way. Since 2009, the ITS has been involved in cooperating with memorial sites, international camp committees and other partner organizations in the effort to return the effects still in the ITS archives.

What happened to the effects between 1945 and 1963?

The personal items owned by the prisoners of the Neuengamme concentration camp were secured shortly after the liberation of Lunden, Schleswig Holstein. These items constituted the remainder of the office responsible for administering inmates' personal belongings at Neuengamme ("Gefangeneneigentumsverwaltung"), which had been evacuated to Lunden. Pursuant to the ordinances of the time, the objects were confiscated by the British authorities. The latter handed the items over to the Central Claims Registry ("Zentralamt für

Vermögensverwaltung”) in 1948 and ordered that agency to restore them to their original owners. The Central Claims Registry was renamed the Administrative Office for Inner Restitutions in 1955.

Effects owned by inmates of the Dachau concentration camp were found when the camp was liberated. However, only a few of these effects survived a fire of May 1945. Until 1946, these personal belongings were kept by the International Information Office (“Auskunftsstelle Dachau”), which was in charge of returning them. When that office was closed, the effects were separated and sorted into valuables and personal papers. Whereas the valuables ended up with the German Red Cross Tracing Service in Hamburg, the personal papers were turned over to the Bavarian State Commissariat for Persons Persecuted for Political, Racial and Religious Reasons (“Bayrisches Staatskommissariat für politisch, rassisch und religiös Verfolgte”). The Indemnification Office of Bavaria was the successor organization to the State Commissariat.

What condition are the effects in today?

Of course, the past decades have left their mark on the personal items. The paper of identity cards and letters in particular has become brittle and fragile. Thanks to their storage in archives, however, the effects are in relatively good condition. The letters and identification papers are legible.