

## **„Every search is a new challenge.”**

The special task of searching for survivors and family members is undertaken by Margret Schlenke and her team of 15 employees. The head of the tracing section came to the ITS in 1970.

### **Ms Schlenke, do you still remember your start at the Tracing Service?**

My superior had been at the ITS from the very beginning. Vilma Andersons had experienced the National Socialist persecution in Latvia and was registered as a displaced person in Germany after the war. She had already worked for the UNRRA and IRO, the predecessor institutions of the ITS. I learned a lot from her. She also taught me how important it is to put oneself in the position of the victims and to leave no stone unturned. In 1976, I became head of the tracing section. Since then, it has been my task to sensitise my employees to the tracing work, and to pass on my knowledge and my experience to them.“

### **What is essential in your work?**

Of course, I have to know a lot about the documentary stock of the ITS. Especially the documents from the post-war period are often the first clue in our search. These files reveal the countries where the displaced persons emigrated after the war. It is also essential that I recognise the correct way of approaching the research. I must know where I can make further inquiries: at Red Cross Societies, registration offices and other archives. It is of particular importance, however, to develop a feeling for the requests, because even cases which involve some detours may be successful in the end. The tingling feeling and excitement that you have because you want to help the person making the request should always be there. Because then you also strive your hardest to exhaust all possibilities.

### **Your task is of great emotional significance to people.**

The basic desire to know what has happened to family members will always remain. This is also true for the second and third generation. Many victims only start to deal with their past as they get older. They wish for clarification or want to disclose family secrets such as, for example, illegitimate children born during the war. Often, it is only then that they get round to speaking about missing brothers and sisters or other relatives and find the courage to send inquiries to us. If we then succeed in tracing fathers in France, half-brothers and sisters in Australia or a cousin in Russia, and in reuniting the families after so many years, these moments are very emotional and heart-felt. Those who made inquiries with us describe feelings of joy, peace and happiness.

### **What if you cannot find the relatives?**

Details from the ITS records can also be of enormous importance to the victims and relatives. For that reason alone we include copies of original records in our replies. That means a lot to the families. Often, this is one last bit of evidence they can hold in their hands regarding their relatives. A gravestone can also be the conclusion to a search and provide someone with peace of mind.

**What does your work mean to you?**

The task of heading the tracing department at the ITS is a great honour for me. Many times, cases are still on my mind even when I am at home. I often have an instinctive feeling telling me there must be a clue. Then I mull over the facts and correlations between them once more and I put together the pieces again and again like in a jigsaw puzzle. The next day, I discuss the matter with my colleagues and we take a decision together. For our work, it is important to put our hearts and souls into it. This is about feelings, emotions and sometimes delicate family histories. Unfortunately, it also happens every once in a while that we have found persons who refused to establish contact with the inquirer. These personal decisions are very sad for the entire team, but of course we respect them.

**You mentioned that you have a network of offices supporting you in your research.**

Without the Tracing Services of the Red Cross and the many other offices we cooperate with, we would not have been successful in reuniting many a family. The mutual exchange of information has an enormous significance on the research. Every single detail in the correspondence is important. The information has to be passed on correctly and comprehensibly in order to avoid any misunderstandings in the further search. My employees use a lot of individual initiative for this work and often prove their powers of deduction.

**Do you sometimes have the feeling there can be no story that you have not already heard?**

Every inquiry which reaches my department is a new challenge for us. Some cases are still distressing for me today. It is incredible what kind of details may become evident from the records and the correspondence. Our motto for our daily work is: 'If you try to do something, you may fail. If you don't even try, you have already failed'.