

The Central Prisoners of War Agency

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VI. THE CENTRAL PRISONERS OF WAR AGENCY

Owing to international events the work of the Central Prisoners of War Agency increased in 1951.

In the course of the year it was found necessary to engage three new temporary workers (the number of regular staff workers had moreover been reduced by one member).

The total mail figure rose from 143,579 in 1950 to 180,564 in 1951, namely an increase of over 25%; on an average the Agency received 7000 items per month and sent out the same number.

a) *German Service.*

Mail : Incoming 43,102 items
Outgoing 46,247 items
Index : Records classified 43,950
Checks 83,750 (of which 56,000 for the Bavarian Red Cross).

The Belgian Ministry of the Interior sent 11,515 exhumation records for deceased German military personnel and the Netherlands Government sent 3,500 similar documents. The ICRC Delegation in France transmitted a list of 3,500 names of deceased German military personnel and the Czechoslovak Red Cross a list of 1,300 deaths.

Mention may also be made of lists of German prisoners of war repatriated from Poland (900) and from Yugoslavia (360).

The number of searches for missing persons was less, partly due to the renewal of diplomatic relations between West Germany and the Detaining Powers and also because the East German

authorities no longer authorised their nationals to make searches through the intermediary of the ICRC; from April 1951 they had to apply to the "Suchdienst", in East Germany. The mail of the Agency's German Service was thus reduced by 40%.

For Poland the ICRC continued until June 1951 to send petitions for reprieves, enquiries for news, requests for repatriation, either to the Polish Red Cross or to the public prosecutors of the various tribunals in districts where former German prisoners of war were held or were serving sentences.

The ICRC continued to send enquiries to Czechoslovakia and to submit petitions for reprieves through the Czechoslovak Red Cross which always replied with punctuality and gave advice as to the advisability of petitions for reprieves.

The Agency continued its enquiries with the Alliance of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in Moscow on the subject of missing German ex-army personnel reported to be in certain camps or who had written to their families but who no longer sent news. About 950 No. 542 cards (reply postcards) were sent out. These cards are sent direct to the prisoner in the camp where he is reported to be and can be used by the prisoner for giving short news of his health and his signature, which is authorised. About twenty replies only were received back in Geneva by the Agency. Nevertheless, numerous enquirers in Germany informed the Agency that they had received a message from a prisoner in Russia. Moreover, towards the end of 1950, the prohibition for Germans held in the USSR to correspond with their families seemed to have been cancelled and the right to correspond renewed for a great number. During the year 1951 the Agency sent 450 requests for enquiries to the Alliance without receiving any replies.

b) *Italian Service.*

Mail : Incoming 6,500 items
Outgoing 4,600 items
Index : Records classified 28,000
Checks 8,378.

The majority of the cases were opened at the request of the Tracing bureau of the Ministry of Defence, Rome, or of the Inter-

departmental Committee which made out new death certificates or duplicates of those lost or destroyed during hostilities.

Representatives from these public services, also Dr. Vincenzo Coffari, High Commissioner for Hygiene and Public Health in Italy, visited the Agency.

c) *Grouped Services.*

In view of events, special mention should be made of the Korean Service; set up on the day following the opening of hostilities in July 1950, this Service received five categories of information in 1951.

1. Nominal lists of prisoners interned or deceased.
2. Individual cards, called "Capture Cards" (Article 70 of the Convention).
3. Death Certificates (Article 120 of the Convention).
4. Lists of sick prisoners.
5. Lists of prisoners of war reclassified as civilian internees.

All these lists were given reference numbers and card-indexed.

One typed card is made out by the Agency services; the other, a perforated card (following the generous offer of International Business Machines, Zurich) is made out through the voluntary help of 21 Swiss firms. These two cards are filed in two separate card-indexes, one numerical (according to POW numbers) the other alphabetic. The individual or "Capture" Cards are filed in the numerical card-index. This double classification is essential owing to the fact that whereas the lists are in English the Capture Cards are made out in Korean or Chinese. This double classification thus allows of an immediate first check of information by comparing the Capture Card (made out by the prisoner himself in his own language) with the card made out from the lists giving a phonetic English transcription.

International Business Machines also made out (1) a numerical list of all prisoners' names received at the Agency, (2) a similar list in alphabetical order.

By December 31, 1951, there had been made 200,000 perforated cards for numerical classification, 130,000 for alphabetical clas-

sification and 167,191 Capture Cards had been received. The total number of cards filed in the Korean card-index was therefore 497,191.

Duplicates of all lists received were sent to the Moscow Embassy of the People's Democratic Republic of Korea, for transmission to its Government. Duplicates of lists which mentioned Chinese volunteers were also sent to the Chinese Red Cross in Peking for the information of the families concerned. The North Korean Government was periodically informed, by cable, of the documents sent to its Embassy in the USSR.

The Agency continued without success during 1951 to open enquiries concerning military personnel or civilians in North Korean hands; no replies were received from the North Korean authorities or from the Chinese Red Cross to which it also applied.

Messages on bi-lingual message forms (specially printed in French and Korean) were sent to the Korean Red Cross in Pyongyang and "express messages" were sent to the North Korean authorities and the Chinese Red Cross; no replies reached the Central Agency. From December 4, 1951, requestets for information and messages were also sent to the China Peace Committee in Peking.

Failing to obtain official information from the North Korean authorities in regard to persons held in North Korea¹ the ICRC sent a delegate to Hong Kong, in May 1951, for the collection and transmission to the Central Agency of the names of prisoners of war broadcast from Chinese stations or published in the Chinese Press. The International Committee thus acted in conformity with the Geneva Conventions of 1929 and 1949, relative to the treatment of prisoners of war, which provide that the function of the Agency shall be to collect all information it may obtain through official or private channels. Until December 31, 1951, this delegate supplied nominal information to the Central Agency concerning 1,955 persons; the names thus collected were communicated to the authorities concerned.

In 1951, as in 1950, the Central Agency received no requests

¹ It will be recalled that in August and September, 1950, the Agency received two lists from the North Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs containing in all 110 names of prisoners of war.

for information concerning persons in the hands of the United Nations forces.

The *Polish Service* was occupied in handing to the owners various handmade objects made by them in captivity, which the administration of Oflag II D in Germany had entrusted to the care of the Young Men's Christian Association. Among other objects these contained artistic and literary work, plans for farm-buildings, school centres, machinery, etc. After patient search the Agency was able to get in touch with the majority of the owners; some had returned to Poland, others were still in Germany or had emigrated under the auspices of the International Refugee Organization (IRO).

Halfway through the year the *Hungarian Service* received numerous requests for news concerning persons evacuated from Budapest. These requests were brought to the knowledge of the Hungarian Red Cross. In the meantime, most of the persons concerned having notified their new address, the information received was placed on record and, at the families' requests, a few individual parcels were sent.

The *Austrian Service* received a few hundred claims for credit balances from Austrian nationals captured by the American forces in 1945. These claims were sent on to the competent authorities.

The *Greek Service* renewed most of the 2,200 enquiries it had opened in 1950 relative to Greek military personnel reported missing during the civil war. It also ensured the reforwarding of 5,860 messages for the exchange of family news.¹

In the Indochina Section of the *French Service* over 700 enquiries were opened. Those concerning missing military personnel were sent to the ICRC Delegation in Indochina, whereas requests for the tracing of civilians were handed to the French Red Cross in Saïgon. The ICRC Delegation also undertook to send on the mail intended for prisoners under control of the Democratic State of Vietnam.

The *Japanese Service* handed to the Alliance of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in Moscow about a thousand requests

¹ In regard to the repatriation of Greek children see below, page 48.

for repatriation, or for tracing, concerning Japanese still held in the USSR, from the Japanese Red Cross.

In 1951 the Grouped Services made out 560 Certificates of Capacity, the majority in behalf of Poles or Yugoslavs.

It is known that the Agency was entrusted with the technical work in regard to the tracing and repatriation of Greek children.

It had photostat copies made of 21,171 documents and set up an index of perforated cards similar to those in use for the Korean Service. A code system was planned and the work was started at the end of the year; it will make automatic selection possible by children's and parent's countries of residence, by sex, age, district of origin, etc. It will also allow for making partial lists and the cross-checking of items listed in Latin characters with items listed in Greek characters.

PHOTOSTATS

The events in Korea and also the making of partial lists and individual records for Greek children trebled the work of the Photostat Service in 1951 as compared to the previous year.¹

VISITS

Each year the Agency is visited by the representatives of many National Red Cross Societies.

These visits included members of a Commission of the Swiss National Council, a group of nurses from about ten countries, a large delegation of international jurists, French and Belgian War Veterans, about 2,000 young men from various French training centres accompanied by their instructors and a delegation from the General Staff of the Swiss Army which made a two days' study of the Agency records system.

A great many individual visitors came from all parts of the world; many were most interested to find at the Agency documents relative to their own captivity or that of relatives or friends.

¹ 47,581 photostats in 1951 as compared to 16,071 in 1950.