



German History in Documents and Images

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August Mayer, President of the Tracing Service for Missing Germans: People's Solidarity and the Tracing Service (1947)

In the Western occupation zones, the search for missing persons was carried out by the German Red Cross; in the Soviet zone, the search was led by the "Tracing Service for Missing Germans" [*Suchdienst für vermisste Deutsche*], which was founded in 1946. The main task of the Tracing Service was the registration of so-called resettlers (here meaning refugees). In this document, August Mayer, who headed the Tracing Service from 1946 to 1947, describes its work as well as its cooperation with "People's Solidarity" [*Volkssolidarität*], the main aid organization in the Soviet zone.

People's Solidarity and the Tracing Service

The whole world is suffering the consequences of the disastrous Hitler war. It will take a long, long time before the wounds have healed. In addition to the great material losses, which must be made up for, the war has brought infinite emotional suffering upon the entire world. Millions lost their life or health in extermination and concentration camps, jails, and war factories, not to mention those killed by the direct effects of the war itself.

Hundreds of thousands of nationals of the so-called enemy states were deported to Germany to work and starve in the war factories. If they were resistance fighters, they were deported to concentration camps. The Jews were even given over to complete extermination. The right of the family, sanctified since time immemorial, was trodden upon – they took away the father or the mother and sent the children to do compulsory labor and chased them to countless places all over the world, where they were exposed to an uncertain fate. Millions of members of the allied nations suffered this. But many hundreds of thousands of Germans also suffered that fate. Beginning with the "Back to the Reich" movement, the relocation of factories, the evacuation of territories and cities threatened by war, the evacuation of children's homes, schools, hospitals, the wartime captivity of German soldiers all over the world, and, finally, as a consequence of war, with the mass flight before the victorious onslaught of the Allied armies and with the Allied-decreed resettlement of peoples from the East and Southeast, large parts of the East were broken up and any contact with the family was ruptured. Hopelessness filled the hearts of these people, who, alone in some corner of our German fatherland, in the midst of a foreign environment and among foreign – sometimes unfriendly – people, looked longingly for the possibility to rejoin their families or at least hear something from their loved ones.

All this was further exacerbated by the division of Germany into various zones and the absence of suitable agencies, institutions, or organizations that could have brought order to this chaos.

These were the circumstances, after the collapse, in which religious and charitable agencies, organizations, and private agencies appeared and made it their task to help. Gradually, bureaucratic bodies took over this work. Thus the central zonal offices of the Tracing Service for the American, British, and French zones were born in the West, as was as the Tracing Service for Missing Germans, which was founded [here] in August 1946. Today, about 15 million Germans live as outsiders, that is, they no longer live in their native lands, but have been scattered to other regions by the chaos of war.

This number allows us to gauge how many familial ties have been severed, as well as the enormity of work that is necessary to solve this human and economic problem. This is truly an enormous task. It can be solved only if the entire population participates vigorously. One agency alone cannot master this task. The help of many offices is necessary. What needs to be done is to give the resettlers, the returnees, the parentless children, and many others a new home, which means not only finding them a permanent place to live, but also finding their families again.

The Tracing Service for Missing Germans has made considerable efforts since August 1, 1946, and has had some success. With help from the press, the *Suchzeitung*, the radio, and film, and with support from many agencies, the cooperation of the zonal headquarters of the West, and the help of Allied agencies, it was possible to run an educational campaign and make the purpose of our work clear. The secret lies in establishing such a close connection between the Tracing Service and the population that it is rooted in the people, understands their troubles, and accomplishes as much as it can, given what exists in terms of material resources and ideas.

But the press, radio, and film are not enough. They are not sufficient to penetrate the tiniest village and to tell every last resettler, every last person who is looking for his lost loved one, which path to take to achieve results. Ways must be found to provide even more information than before about the work of the Tracing Service. What we need to do is activate transmission lines from the agency to the population, whose task it is to help wherever the reach of a central agency does not extend far enough. The mass organizations, be they unions, cultural organizations, political parties, organizations devoted to the welfare of the people – they all have the opportunity to help here. One of the most important of organizations is “People’s Solidarity” [*Volkssolidarität*], the organization of solidarity for the people.

We can happily note that *Volkssolidarität* has already helped us a great deal, whether it was resettlers, or impoverished elderly people who had no contact with their children, or children who had to be placed into homes – everywhere we felt the helpful arm of this organization.

We want to make special mention here of the laudable initiative of the state of Saxony, which, in collaboration with the Tracing Service, issued a booklet of parentless children. We hope that this

initiative will reach all the states and will be centrally guided, so that here, too, the greatest possible success can be achieved in productive cooperation with the state organizations of the *Volkssolidarität*. The help that the *Volkssolidarität* is extending to parentless children must be supplemented by the joint efforts of the relevant agencies to do everything possible to follow all traces to find the parents, parent, or relatives of the children who still have not heard anything today. [. . .]

From Kaliningrad, the former Königsberg (Prussia), 3,200 children who lived in orphanages have arrived in quarantine camps in the Soviet occupation zone. The Tracing Service now faces the difficult task of determining whether any family members of these children might still be living, and if so where. So far, the Tracing Service has found the parents or relatives of 323 children. How much joy the Tracing Service has given to mothers or relatives who were filled with anxiety about their children! It must be a human duty for everyone to restore these children to their families, if possible before Christmas.

Anyone who can provide information about the location of the parents or relatives of the children listed below should pass it on to the Tracing Service for Missing Germans [*Suchdienst für vermißte Deutsche*], Berlin W8, Kanonierstr. 35. Search requests for children should be directed to the *Suchdienst für vermißte Deutsche* through official search postcards, which are available at every post office in the Soviet occupation zone.

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Source: August Mayer, "Volkssolidarität und Suchdienst" ["People's Solidarity and the Tracing Service"], *Volkssolidarität. Mitteilungsblatt für alle Ortsausschüsse und Aktivisten der Volkssolidarität* [*People's Solidarity. Newsletter for all Local Committees and Activists of People's Solidarity*]. December 1947, no. 9, p. 7.

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