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■The following article shows how one person, Paul Shapiro, Director of the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies in Washington, DC, made a difference for all genealogists by helping to bring about the decision that allows member countries of ITS to obtain copies of the material held in Arolsen so they can make it available to the public in their own countries.

■As far as we are aware, this is the first time that his role is acknowledged publicly and we wish to salute him for his vision and determination.

■We invite IAJGS member organizations to cut and paste all or part of this article for inclusion in your newsletters.

An Unsung Hero: How Paul Shapiro's Vision and Determination Moved Nations

From the IAJGS Board of Directors, June 2006

On May 17 an event took place which will benefit all Jewish genealogists, and, indeed, many non-Jewish genealogists, as well. On that date, in Luxembourg, the eleven countries which comprise the International Commission of the International Tracing Service (ITS) unanimously agreed to permit member countries to obtain copies of ITS material and make this wealth of information, said to include information on 17 million individuals, publicly available in their own countries. These countries include every country represented by the International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies (IAJGS) and the overwhelming share of Jewish genealogists around the world.

If there is one common factor in the family history searches of Jewish genealogists it is the frustration faced in obtaining information on the fate of family members in the Holocaust. Even those researchers, whose immediate family members left Europe well before the Holocaust, know that other family members remained, whether or not their names are known. For those with closer family ties to Holocaust victims, the search has been more immediate and often painful.

Over the last few decades publicly available information on Holocaust victims and survivors has expanded exponentially through the work of Yad Vashem, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) and JewishGen, as well as many specialized research groups. However, the mother lode of information held in Arolsen, Germany by ITS remained impenetrable. Managed by the International Committee of the Red Cross and nominally under the supervision of the International Commission, the Swiss management of ITS resisted all attempts to access its holdings. This was true even though compensation claims for forced labor, and property and bank seizures required exactly the type of information held by ITS.

Beginning about five years ago, one individual, Paul Shapiro, Director of the Center for Advanced Historical Studies at the USHMM, began his struggle to change this situation. First, he had to convince his own government, and, in particular, the Department of State that this issue was worthy of attention even though it was certain to cause friction with Germany, the country which paid 100 percent of ITS costs and which was adamant against "opening" ITS. When direct efforts through the International Council failed to yield results, he turned to the International Task Force for Holocaust Education which was friendlier to this initiative. Gradually obtaining allies, such as France and the United Kingdom, the "issue" became less of "an American idea" and more of a multilateral European effort. Finally, as two of the last opponents, Belgium and Italy, ceased to object, Germany became the sole holdout. With growing international pressure and a change of government, Germany finally joined the international consensus. On April 18, standing on the stage of an auditorium at the USHMM, the German Minister of Justice announced that, at upcoming the May 17 meeting of the Council, Germany would support "opening" of ITS and that access to ITS material could begin even before formal international ratification would take place.

After a five year struggle, all of us will have an opportunity to search for closure and to determine the fate of our family members. For this, we have one person to thank, Paul Shapiro, for his struggle to develop the international consensus that made this possible.