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November 28, 2007 -- Updated 0232 GMT (1032 HKT)

Nazi archives finally made public

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

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- Archive's index refers to 17.5
- Until now only available to tra

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AMSTERDAM, Netherlands (AP) -- After more than 60 years, Nazi documents stored in a vast warehouse in Germany were unsealed Wednesday, opening a rich resource for Holocaust historians and for survivors to delve into their own tormented past.



The archive's index refers to 17.5 million people in its 16 linear miles of files.

The treasure of documents could open new avenues of study into the inner workings of Nazi persecution from the exploitation of slave labor to the conduct of medical experiments. The archive's managers planned a conference of scholars next year to map out its unexplored contents.

The files entrusted to the International Tracing Service, an arm of the International Committee of the Red Cross, have been used to find the fate of missing persons or document atrocities to support compensation claims. The U.S. government also has referred to the ITS for background checks on immigrants it suspected of lying about their past.

Inquiries were handled by the archive's 400 staff members in the German spa town of Bad Arolsen. Few outsiders were allowed to see the actual documents, which number more than 50 million

pages and cover 16 linear miles of gray metal filing cabinets and cardboard binders spread over six buildings.

On Wednesday, the Red Cross and the German government announced that the last of the 11 countries that govern the archive had ratified a 2006 agreement to open the files to the public for the first time.

"We are there. The doors are open," said ITS director Reto Meister, speaking by telephone from the Buchenwald concentration camp where he was visiting with a delegation of U.S. congressional staff members.

Survivors have pressed for decades to open the archive, unhappy with the minimal responses -- usually in

form letters -- from the Red Cross officials responding to requests for information about relatives.

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"We are very anxious," said David Mermelstein, 78, an activist for survivors' causes in Miami, Florida, who wants to scour the files for traces of his two older brothers whom he last saw as he passed through a series of concentration camps.

"Now I hope we will be able to get some information. We have been waiting, and time is not on our side," said the retired businessman.

The [U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum](#) in Washington and the Yad Vashem Memorial in Jerusalem began receiving digital copies of the entire archive in August, allowing survivors and historians more access points.

Izzy Arbeiter, 82, the head of a survivor's organization in the area of Boston, Massachusetts, said he hoped to go to the museum next month to browse the files.

"My goodness, I don't know where I would start, there are so many things I am interested in," he said. "The history of my family, of course. My parents. One of my brothers is missing. We never knew what happened to him."

Yad Vashem said the opening of the archive was "a breakthrough" for survivors and others.

"Our understanding and knowledge of the personal story of [the Holocaust](#) will be deepened," said Yad Vashem's chairman Avner Shalev.

The records are unlikely to change the general story of the Holocaust and the Nazi era, probably the most intensely researched 12-year period of the 20th century.

But its depth of detail and original documentation will add texture to history's worst genocide, and is likely to fuel a revival of academic interest in the Holocaust.

Among its files, seen by The Associated Press during repeated visits to Bad Arolsen in the last year, are the list of deportees from the Netherlands to Auschwitz on which Anne Frank's name appears, the list of employees of Oskar Schindler's factory who were sheltered from death, medical records showing the number of lice on the heads of prisoners, the list of inmates evacuated by the Nazis from the Neuengamme labor camp who later died on prisoner boats mistakenly bombed by the British air force.

Defying its orderly appearance, the archive is a labyrinth of paper that has never been organized by a historian or even by a professionally trained archivist. Its main database comprises 50 million entries of names, often duplicated in different spellings, referring to 17.5 million victims of [Nazi](#) persecutions.

The Bad Arolsen facility, which has received 50 applications this month alone from researchers and institutions seeking to examine the archive, has opened a visitors room with 10 computer terminals to enable searches of files that have been scanned. But less than half of the 50 million pages have been digitized and are available on computer.

Though the archives are now open to the public, Erich Oetiker, the ITS deputy director, said anyone seeking specific information would need professional assistance and all visitors are asked to make an appointment in advance.

While it is not set up to receive unannounced visitors off the street, he said, "we will refuse nobody, but we have very limited staff to provide support." Guided tours are also available.

Visitors have to show ID and cannot access a special category of documents -- correspondences between the ITS and private or official inquirers that are less than 25 years old. Researchers must sign a waiver stating that they are personally responsible for respecting privacy laws.

The ITS gets about 700 requests each month for information about relatives, and has not yet cleared away a backlog of inquiries that reached nearly half a million a few years ago.

The Tracing Service, the Washington museum and Yad Vashem intend to hire new staff to help to ferret out specific documents.

"The challenge now is organizing the material in such a way that people can easily find what they want and



what they need," said Paul Shapiro, director of the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies at the Washington museum.

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The museum took the first step by creating a database to search an inventory of more than 21,000 collections of documents, each ranging a few pages to thousands.

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Allied forces began collecting the documents even before the end of the war, and eventually entrusted them to the Red Cross. The archive has been governed since 1955 by a multinational commission that normally met once a year.

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Access to the archives had been closely guarded by Red Cross officials who viewed requests for academic information as a distraction from what they saw as their humanitarian task of answering requests about individuals.

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In 2001 the State Department, urged on by the Holocaust museum, began pushing the 11-member governing commission to open the doors to the rapidly dying survivor population and for research.

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The decision was adopted in May 2006, but it took 19 months to complete the required ratification process.

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