

UNSEALED

Shoah archives unlocked

Now that Germany has made public some 50 million records on 17.5 million Shoah victims and survivors, a number of longstanding questions have been answered for their families. **CHANTAL ABITBOL** speaks to Australians who have shed light on the fate of loved ones.

IN June 1944, 12-year-old Ivan Devai watched as his father walked out the door of their Budapest home to run an errand to the post office just a few houses down. It was the last time he ever saw his father.

For more than 64 years, Devai wondered about his father's fate, but did not have much to go on – just his father's name, date of birth, and a frayed black-and-white photo of him taken around 1943 in the family's front yard.

But thanks to the newly opened Bad Arolsen archives – one of the world's largest collections of Nazi German documents – the mystery is over.

Devai, now 76, from Vacluse, became one of the first people to receive Nazi documents under new access conditions, after they had been locked away for years from the public.

The records showed that his father, Ferenc Deutsch, prisoner 83736, spent his final months in concentration camps Auschwitz and Dachau and died on November 21, 1944, of enterocolitis, a gastrointestinal disease.

Clutching copies of his father's death certificate and prisoner card scrawled in handwriting, Devai rereads the records in disbelief. "I never thought I would lay my hands on this," he told The AJN. "I knew my father wasn't alive, but I was absolutely shocked that they had such documents."

Officially known as the International Tracing Service (ITS), the archives contain more than 50 million records on 17.5 million people, including concentration camp prisoners, slave labourers and displaced persons.

But until recently, the records – housed partly in a former SS barracks in the sleepy central German town of Bad Arolsen – had been off limits to the public.

Under a 1955 international treaty, the records are owned by a commission of 11 countries and funded by the German Government, but had been exclusively managed by the International Red Cross to trace the missing and dead for survivors' families.

However, over time the system appeared to struggle with operational problems. The backlog of victims' tracing requests had piled up, with survivors complaining of waiting years for any word and historians feeling shut out from carrying out integral research.

Finally in 2006, the commission bowed to public pressure, despite pri-

vacy concerns, and agreed to open access. The archives were officially opened to the public in April.

Under the agreement, victims are now entitled to receive copies of documents on which their name appears – including list material that was previously considered protected material.

Each member state of the commission – including Belgium, France, Germany, Greece, Israel, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Poland, the United Kingdom and the United States – is also set to receive digital copies of the records.

ITS spokeswoman Kathrin Flor told The AJN the service had already embarked on the titanic task of transferring files. About 70 per cent of the documents at ITS have been scanned and portions of the archives are already accessible through Yad Vashem and the Holocaust Museum in Washington DC. "The entire archival holdings are expected to be digitalised by 2011," Flor said.

In the meantime, ITS has worked with a staff of about 400 to reduce the backlog of tracing requests from 149,270 to 47,929 in 2007. "The backlog will have vanished by this year," Flor added.

With the archive's opening, a daily onslaught of researchers and historians to its Bad Arolsen headquarters has commenced.

Among those making the trip were Rieke and Peter Nash, from Sydney, who in May joined a team of more than 40 genealogists to research their family tree.

The records proved to be a treasure trove for the Nashes, who both lost grandparents in the Holocaust. They found documents on more than 40 relatives from Eastern Europe and discovered distant cousins they never knew existed.

"It was very emotional," said Rieke Nash, president of the NSW Australian Jewish Genealogical Society. "You don't know who you're going to find, or what they might have about them. In some of these documents, there are actually photos."

Their research was inspired in part by a sense of duty to the victims. "If you've lost people in the Holocaust, you have this urge to document them and give them a name so they're not



Thomas Blumenthal as a child with his father, Zoltan Blumenthal.

just gone and never recorded," said Rieke Nash.

The Nashes said they saw great potential in this type of family research, but were keen for Australia to gain local access to the archives. At present, Australia is not among the member states scheduled to receive digital copies.

"I'm grateful for what I've got. I can now light a yahrzeit [memorial] candle for my father on the day of his death. It's some consolation that it is closed."

THOMAS BLUMENTHAL

"It will require more pressure and demand from Australia," said Peter Nash. "You can write [for information], but you never quite achieve as much as when you're on the spot."

As humanitarian requests are whittled down, and the focus changes to historical research, it is quickly becoming evident that ITS' days as a tracing service are numbered.

Its future role and structure, however, is currently up for debate.

Konrad Kwiet, adjunct professor of Jewish studies at the University of Sydney and resident historian of the Sydney Jewish Museum, told The AJN that a number of options are possible.

Among them is setting up the archives as a separate branch of the German Federal Archives, otherwise known as Bundesarchiv, or establishing them as a European-integrated institution funded by the European Union.

Prof Kwiet, who visited Bad



Ferenc Deutsch, Ivan Devai's father, in 1943.



Thomas Blumenthal waited 66 years to learn his father's fate.

Arolsen in June with a team of historians, said he favoured the latter and said it "would be the best solution because all countries in Europe are affected by the [archives]. It's not a purely German institution," he added.

Meanwhile, the debate over privacy issues related to making the records available online rages on.

"How do you handle these very intimate and private medical records of individuals who have perished or those who have survived and have no interest in their private files being accessible in cyberspace?" asked Kwiet. "There's no general consensus on how to handle that because each country has different privacy legislation in place. It has loopholes. Quite a few people, including myself, believe not everything should be made accessible."

At a recent annual meeting in Warsaw, the International Commission set up a working group to tackle that and other challenges. A first progress report on the group's findings is expected by May 2009.

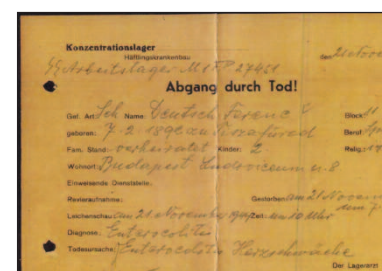
For survivors, such as Thomas Blumenthal, 72, from Canberra, it has always been about finding closure.

He was only six in 1942, when his father was shipped off from their hometown in Slovakia to a Nazi labour camp and never heard of again.

Shortly after, the family went into hiding. When they finally emerged after the war, they commenced their search in vain. For years, Blumenthal said, he held out hope that his father could somehow still be alive. "I did not accept his murder by the Nazis," he said. "I had heard of many inmates



Ivan Devai holding a photocopy of his father's prisoner card.



A photocopy of Ferenc Deutsch's prisoner card.

escaping from camps and being somewhere as prisoners of war and returning home much later. My only wish was to see my father," and "when I later tried to assemble my family tree, around 24 names were missing."

Two years ago, he appealed to his local Red Cross for information, and waited. Finally, in April, he heard back.

The long-awaited news came in the form of a death certificate. His father, Zoltan Blumenthal, had died on December 30, 1942 in Majdanek.

Blumenthal was disappointed the search did not turn up more, but said it was better than nothing after waiting for so many years.

"I'm grateful for what I've got," he said. "I can now light a yahrzeit [memorial] candle for my father on the day of his death. It's some consolation that it is closed."

For more information, write to email@its-arolsen.org or visit www.its-arolsen.org.