

Researchers to view millions of Nazi files

By STEPHEN GRAHAM, Associated Press Writer *2 hours, 42 minutes ago*

Millions of Nazi files detailing the suffering and deaths of inmates at labor and concentration camps during the Holocaust will be opened to researchers under an agreement signed Wednesday by Germany and seven other countries.

Historians campaigned for years to overcome privacy concerns that restricted access to the more than 30 million documents in the vast, war-era archive to Holocaust victims and their relatives.

The accord was reached in April by the 11-nation governing body of the International Tracing Service, the arm of the International Committee of the Red Cross that oversees the archive in the western German town of Bad Arolsen.

Israel, the United States and Britain were among the nations that signed Wednesday, and three others are expected to do so by Nov. 1.

"There are many questions where we don't have the answers and I hope researchers will be able to clear things up with the aid of this material," Israeli Ambassador Shimon Stein said.

The protocol still needs to be ratified by most of the 11 signatory states before the archives can be opened. German Justice Minister Brigitte Zypries has said researchers would have access by Dec. 31.

German Deputy Foreign Minister Guenter Gloser called the process "long and sometimes cumbersome" but said the result represented a "big success for researchers."

"For Germany, the signing underlines the importance it attaches to dealing with the past," he said.

The Nazis were meticulous, documenting everything from the mundane, like how many meals a forced laborer received, to the horrific — describing a concentration camp prisoner's death in painstaking detail.

Much of the information is simple, solemn fact, such as a name on a concentration camp death list. Other pages discuss mental illness, homosexuality, medical treatment and even head lice.

The April accord lets each of the 11 countries house a digital copy of the documents in their own archive. Access will be granted according to privacy laws in each country, though the records will not be made available online, the German Foreign Ministry said.

Germany and Italy resisted the opening, citing concerns that sensitive information about people who are still alive needed protection. Under the provisions of a 1955 treaty, third parties can access the files only with the written consent of a victim.

But aging Holocaust survivors and victims' families pressed for the change, arguing that histories of their loved ones might never be told otherwise.

"Those who suffered from the Holocaust will welcome access to these archives as they hope to answer long-standing and agonizing questions about the fate of family members and family property," U.S. Ambassador William Timken Jr. said.

The International Tracing Service was founded after World War II to trace missing persons. Later, survivors eligible for compensation applied to the archive for documentary evidence of their mistreatment.