

**For 40 years the Stasi, East Germany's state police, accumulated secret files on one in three of the population. Elaborate and pervasive espionage was a national industry. Last weekend, for the first time, the Stasi headquarters in Berlin were open to the public. PAUL ROWINSKI joined thousands of visitors turning over the stones of the past**

**A** CROWD gathers around a table on which lie sealed jars containing cloths. Around us are piled nearly 6,000 sacks full of torn-up paper, torn so small you can't read what's written on them. But these are files, millions of them. Files on the people the Stasi spied on. During interrogations, the Stasi made their prisoners wipe their genitals with the cloths, to give the sniffer dogs something to go on should the need arise once the unfortunate individual had been released. The Stasi. The former East Germany's "state security" force.

The crowd continues to swell, keen to cram into the Stasi headquarters in Berlin, open to the public last weekend for the first time since human rights activists stormed the complex in January 1990.

Whole families are queuing to see these pieces of history. A young father with long straggly hair and multi-coloured American baseball jacket, the mother tottering on her heels. Their kids are the only ones making any noise. The family's green chrome Jaguar is parked around the corner. It and the Panasonic speakers were bought on west German bank credit. Behind them stand an elderly couple. The woman clutches his arm. He checks his flat cap is still on, and then again. Nobody talks, everybody listens to the archivist. A hollow nervous silence which speaks sadness and fear still. You don't talk out of turn with Stasi. Their ghosts still haunt these spying halls. The crowd stare disbelievingly at the piles of paper bags ceiling high. Each page would have told a story.

When the Berlin wall fell in November 1989, Stasi workers began tearing up files by hand, knowing it was only a matter of time before the crowd, the citizens of the former East Germany, would come looking for the orchestrators of the

**T**he complete card system contains nearly 36 million entries. The population then was some 17 million

police state they had lived under for 40 years. Tearing by hand became necessary when the hundred or so paper shredders working around the clock to destroy the evidence of a totalitarian past backed up through overwork. The activists recovered about 17,000 files. The Stasi successfully ruined 6,000 of them, and they lie before us now.

Wolfgang Janisch, a graphic artist by profession, was among those who stormed the Stasi headquarters before the staff tore up more of the truth. A human rights activist, he applied to see what

