

THE BURNING BOOKS OF SARAJEVO: THE DESTRUCTION OF THE NATIONAL AND UNIVERSITY LIBRARY OF BOSNIA HERZEGOVINA

During the night of Tuesday 25 August 1992 the National and University Library of Bosnia and Herzegovina (NUB) fell victim to gunners occupying the hills surrounding Sarajevo. The fire ignited by their grenades completely destroyed the historical library building and most of its collections. Of the total collection, which represented the national heritage and identity of Bosnia and Herzegovina, only 10% could be saved. In the following article I have tried to give more information about the NUB at war and the plans for its reconstruction. I have based this article on interviews and discussions with Dr Enes Kujundzic, Director of the NUB and Dr Wolfgang Löhner, Director of the Division of the General Information Programme, UNESCO. I am very grateful to them for giving me their precious time so I could learn from their first-hand experience of the situation in Sarajevo.

The National and University Library of Bosnia and Herzegovina (NUB)

In 1945 the NUB was established by the Parliament of the Republic of Bosnia Herzegovina. In 1948 the library shifted to the town hall of Sarajevo ("Vijecnica"), an historical building completed in 1896 when Bosnia and Herzegovina were still part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. This impressive building, marking the city of Sarajevo, had been built in a pseudo-Moorish style on the banks of the Miljacka river. On 28 June 1914 the town hall had witnessed the dramatic start of World War I when Archduke Ferdinand of Austria and his wife Sofie were assassinated on its premises.

Before its destruction the collections of the NUB amounted from 1.5 to 2 million items ranging from historical books to manuscripts and incunabula reflecting the multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious character of Bosnia Herzegovina. Among the most valuable parts of the collection were a unique, through legal deposit obtained, collection of books produced in Bosnia ("Bosniaca") and a large collection of Bosnian serial publications dating from the middle of the 19th century to the destruction of the library.

In the former Yugoslavia the NUB co-ordinated the purchase and international exchange of scientific journals and reference literature. Up till May 1992 there was active interlibrary co-operation with other libraries in the region. As soon as the situation in Sarajevo becomes more stabilised Dr Kujundzic hopes to resume these activities.

Although the NUB was and still is an independent institution it also serves the Sarajevo University. Its user's group includes a wide range of readers, varying from university students and scientists to general public. According to Dr Kujundzic the Sarajevoans can be characterised as "passionate readers of books".

The NUB at war

On 25 and 26 August 1992 the NUB was attacked by gunners. 90% of its collections and the complete interior of the building were destroyed. 10% of the collections could be saved, of which many documents suffered severe water damage. The greatest loss was the destruction of 600 titles of Bosnian periodicals. Of the building only the skeleton remained largely intact. Ironically, a view from the outside does not give the impression that inside so many valuable things have been destroyed. During the war the library also lost four of its staff members.

At present the remaining part of the collections is stored at different locations in Sarajevo, of which some are safer than others. The library's office is housed in a separate building. The remaining collection is not yet accessible to the public. All of it still needs to be taken stock of and since the central catalogues have been destroyed everything needs to be recatalogued.

The question remains whether the enemy intended to destroy the library as such. Was it a military target, or did the library "happen to be in the line of fire"? I understand that, due to political reasons, the Director of the NUB was not in a position to comment in this regard. Although in times of peace libraries often do not get the priority they deserve, I can imagine that in times of war the enemy may want to destroy not only all the national and cultural heritage of the opposition, but also any important technological information available to the other party. In this regard libraries could thus become strategic targets. In addition to the destruction of the NUB, the university library of Mostar has been hit by the same fate.

Needs and international assistance

When identifying areas of support needed for the reconstruction of the NUB, the consequences of the destruction really become clear. It is a library that has to be built up again from scratch. All the basics for establishing a library are needed. According to Dr. Kujundzic and UNESCO the highest needs are a temporary location for the library and basic office material and equipment to process books and journals and to serve the users. Training of the library staff in conservation techniques, new information technologies and collection rebuilding are additional support items.

Not only the pure library technical issues have to be taken into account when planning a new accommodation or reconstruction of the old location. As a result of the war there are a large number of handicapped people in Sarajevo. Apart from infrastructural requirements for those having difficulty walking, a special collection for people with a bad sight may have to be developed. Besides the logistic problem of infrastructure it is still a question whether the Bosnian authorities plan to house the library on its old premises again. So far no decision has been taken, but it seems that the town hall's main future function will not be exclusively that of a library. According to Dr. Löhner of UNESCO's General Information Programme, who has visited Sarajevo on an expert mission, the former town hall is not really suitable for housing a library. However, since its historical and national value, the Bosnian authorities will probably give priority to the restoration of the building, which

may also have a positive effect on the reconstruction of the library.

On 13 November 1993 the General Conference of UNESCO adopted a resolution (no. 4.8) in which UNESCO has been given the mandate by the international community to assist in the restoration of the NUB. The overall objective for this assistance is "the opening of cultural, educational and scientific exchanges between Sarajevo and the international community". Short-term and medium-term objectives include:

- transportation of persons and material to Sarajevo;
- provision of basic reading material and primary office equipment;
- reconstitution of the collection;
- training of personnel;
- establishment of the central functions of the library as a national and university library.

In order to avoid duplication of efforts, UNESCO co-ordinates other initiatives for assistance to the NUB. An International Expert Commission has been setup to compose a library development plan. Several activities have already actually been initiated by UNESCO. These include:

- allocation of US\$ 100,000 for the purchase of reading materials and basic office equipment;
- provision of a computer and a CD-ROM;
- shipment of UNESCO publications to Sarajevo through UNHCR;
- organisation of an exhibition on the NUB in Leipzig and Paris;
- production of a videofilm on the history and destruction of the library;
- launching of an appeal to the international community by Mr Frederico Mayor, Director-General of UNESCO (see box on the next page);
- provision of an IFLA-membership to the library.

From 14 to 17 June 1994 a joint expert mission by UNESCO and the Council of Europe was organised. The mission underlined the basic needs expressed by Dr Kujundzic. With regard to collection rebuilding the mission emphasised the essential need for reference and bibliographic material. Meanwhile some of this material has already been provided. In its role as a national library it is important to re-establish the collection of Bosnian bibliographic productions (the "Bosniaca") and the Bosnian serial publications. Other libraries in the region, but also elsewhere in Europe have been asked to check their collections upon these items. Thanks to the long history of Bosnia Herzegovina Dr Kujundzic expects that much Bosnian produced material or material about Bosnia Herzegovina will be available in other countries. The UNESCO library development plan for the NUB will also include recommendations on library automation and the cost-benefit of electronic document delivery services. As long as the situation in Sarajevo is not stabilised, collection rebuilding for the NUB may take place at other locations in Europe.

Appeal launched by Mr Frederico Mayor on 13 April 1994

"At the time when the force of arms and hatred seems to be giving way to that of reason, it is important that the intellectual and moral solidarity of humanity for which UNESCO is working should express itself vigorously.

The intellectual isolation imposed for nearly two years on Sarajevo is as dangerous as the shortages of electricity, water or medicines from which this shattered town is suffering. What better symbol to express solidarity and to break the isolation than a library - a national and university institution moreover? A place of teaching and research, of culture, of information and of intellectual exchange, the library furthers access to knowledge and helps to preserve cultural identity while consecrating the local community's participation in universal civilisation. The destruction of the National and University Library of Sarajevo was an act of barbarism perpetrated in the context of a whole series of assaults on the national heritage.

This beautiful building in the Moorish style - which was a town hall in the nineteenth century and had become a familiar monument in the centre of Sarajevo - has been severely damaged: the equipment and apparatus necessary for the proper running of a large library are no longer in working order. In addition, countless irreplaceable treasures of Bosnian and world culture have been destroyed by fire.

The Library of Sarajevo must be reconstructed. It must then be given the equipment to enable it to establish its data bases and to have access to European and international information networks. It must finally be provided with reprographic laboratories, audio-visual equipment and the means to restore, conserve and safeguard its collections (those remaining and those needing to be reconstituted) as well as modern facilities for educating and training information specialists.

I therefore call on all States, international governmental and non-governmental organisations, public and private institutions, funding bodies, associations of librarians, archivists and documentalists, and private individuals to participate through voluntary contributions - in the form of funds, equipment or services - in the reconstruction of the National and University Library in Sarajevo and in the reconstitution of its collections.

I call all intellectuals, artists and writers, historians and scientists and all those whose business it is to inform, to help focus world public attention on this project.

I express the hope that contributions will be commensurate with the task involved and that all those who are concerned to see the universal documentary heritage preserved and to promote its widest possible utilisation by researchers and general public alike will play their part in the reconstruction and equipping of the National and University Library of Sarajevo."

Dutch assistance

Last January Dr Kujundzic and Dr Löhner visited the Netherlands, which is also represented through the Royal Library in the International Expert Committee of UNESCO. Dutch support will include temporary storage of reading material (Royal Library), provision of the Dutch National Bibliography (Royal Library), the provision of journals in librarianship, provision of Biomedical journals (Royal Dutch Academy of Sciences, KNAW), composition of title lists for acquisition purposes, assistance in the restitution of "Bosniaca" (Royal Library) and provision of fellowships and study tours.

Through this article Dr Kujundzic likes to express his appreciation to the representatives of the Royal Library and the other institutions that he visited during his visit to the Netherlands. According to him "he felt almost as in Sarajevo among them".

Those readers who want to make a financial contribution to the reconstruction of the NUB can transfer an amount to the Postbank account 425131 of the Royal Library in The Hague, mentioning "Sarajevo".

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Consulted literature:

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