

Libraries in distress

A special edition of the *Bulletin de l'Unisist* on Romania was distributed at IFLA in September. In it, Professor Federico Mayor, the Director General of UNESCO, draws attention to the plight of the Central Library of the University of Bucharest, which was totally destroyed in the struggle for independence earlier in the year. Mayor quotes a poem by Victor Hugo, from the cycle *The Terrible Year*, which commemorated the senseless burning of much of Paris in May 1871, during the last throes of the civil war — the Commune — that followed the siege of Paris by the Prussians.

The poem is just as chillingly relevant today. It takes the form of a dialogue. Mayor's quotation begins:

*Tu viens d'incendier la bibliothèque? — Oui.
J'ai mis le feu là — Mais c'est un crime inouï!
Crime commis par toi contre toi-même, infâme!*

You have just burnt down the library? — Yes.
I set fire to it. — But that is an unheard-of crime!
A crime committed against yourself, you unspeakable wretch!
You have just killed the light of your soul!
It is your own flame that you have just extinguished.
Your blasphemous mad rage has dared to burn
Your own belongings, your treasure, your dowry, your heritage!

...

You miserable creature, your blazing torch
Has sent all humanity up in smoke!

Alas, libraries and their priceless contents have always been terribly vulnerable, whether from the casual vandalism of war or from some natural disaster. The destruction of the great

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library of Alexandria in 646 A.D. by the Arabs, the fighting in Southeast Asia, the Cultural Revolution in China, have all wrought havoc with the cultural heritage of the nations concerned. We still feel a sense of loss when Umberto Eco burns his fictional library in *The Name of the Rose*, set somewhere in the mountains of Northern Italy in November 1327.

Such deliberate acts by humans against humanity seem somehow far worse than mishaps such as the flooding of the River Arno in Florence or the narrow escape that our own National Library experienced on 8th March 1985, from the fire on its top floor with all the associated water and smoke damage. There are fine stories,



A torrential downpour at the National Library of Cambodia (in the background) temporarily converts the entrance road into a canal.

for example from China or Cambodia (Kampuchea), of librarians striving to rescue their collections, sometimes at great personal danger. And in many instances now, after such disasters, other countries rally round in support.

The Australian Government is not helping in the restoration of the Bucharest library, although the need is enormous: 500,000 volumes — books, periodicals, manuscripts and incunabula — have been lost. IFLA is now

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coordinating the international effort there on behalf of UNESCO. Nor is it contributing to another UNESCO-supported project, the new library in Alexandria (where half of the \$120 million required has already been donated). It is concentrating on our local region and among other projects it is currently giving aid, in cash, skill and enthusiasm, to help salvage the National Library of Cambodia.

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UNESCO's assistance was sought earlier this year in Cambodia for a project to repair and restore the ancient monuments at Angkor Wat; and for help in re-establishing the Cambodian National Library. Professor Mayor has appealed to UNESCO Member States for contributions to this work. The National Library building in the capital, Phnom Penh, had been built in 1924 during the French colonial era and extended by the Government of Cambodia after achieving full independence in 1953. But after 1975 it was used as an animal shelter, and the extensive collections and catalogues were largely destroyed.

By 1979 it was possible to consider restoring order to the 20 per cent or so of the collections that remained, but there was a shortage of equipment and facilities, and no professional guidance. Experts with the Joint Australian Non-Government Organisations (JANGO) group in Cambodia estimate that basic repairs to the building could be done for around US\$12 000, and on-the-job training for library management and reorganisation of collections for US\$23 000.

In response to the UNESCO appeal, the Australian government has given \$30 000 to cover repairs to the building. Workers with the (Australian)

Freedom from Hunger group in Phnom Penh will oversee the project on behalf of the Australian National Commission for UNESCO.

...(these) people look after priceless treasures. They must be helped.

Neil Manton, from the Cultural Relations Branch of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade has just returned from Phnom Penh. He provided the photographs, and with his permission I quote from the draft of his report, which conveys a vivid sense of urgency and spontaneity.

Met the Director, who was one of the two survivors from the old staff, the rest being killed by the Khmer Rouge. He is not library-trained; nor is anyone else on the staff.

The library was badly treated and was used as a pigsty for many years. Most books and manuscripts were thrown into the streets, furniture and fittings were trashed.

Met Gail Morrison, an Australian volunteer whose faith and energy had

been restored by news of assistance from the Australian National Commission for UNESCO for a library restoration program.

A great deal of work has obviously been done to clean or replace library shelves and place the books on them, but in no real order. There is no catalogue, no inventory. There are no trained staff, no central admin. system — but people use the library.

Apart from essential repairs and the building itself — new roof, rewiring etc — any assistance which could be provided would be swallowed up.

I saw the Cornell University room (a small space with air conditioning) where the palm leaf manuscripts are being stored in boxes provided by the Cornell team. They are microfilming all manuscripts to provide Cornell with copies. Cornell is providing its catalogue of manuscripts held in NY and each library will end up with copies to fill gaps in each collection. The Cornell team will then move to the National Museum Library, where 60-70 more manuscripts are held.

The Library has a lot of gift collections of very dubious value. The works of Stalin and other benevolences from Vietnam and Socialist States are in pristine condition showing no signs of usage.

I saw a recently donated French library of translations of international authors. But staff made the following points:

- French language is unknown to young Khmers and general material in French is a waste of time.
- Other languages are not supported, not studied and not welcome.
- English language material is what everyone wants.

... We went up to the National Museum Library and met Gail Morrison again. Lovely remains of the library collection but in need of urgent conservation and restoration. Saw more manuscripts and staggering collection of photographs, glass plates and other records. There is a complete set of records of the Committee for the Conservation of Angkor Wat going back over 50 years. Conservation, copying, restoration and cataloguing are needed.

... A group of very pleasant and dedicated people look after priceless treasures. They must be helped.

Nobody could fault that conclusion.
Peter Judge

For some years now, the National Library of Australia has been helping the National Libraries of Laos and Vietnam. *InCite* will look at this assistance in a later issue, and if readers can contribute similar stories we shall be proud to print them. ■

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may, in the long run, be the loser. It is all a matter of choice, judgement and circumstance. Just like real life.

There are many reasons why people stand for the Presidency, and a lot of them are altruistic; I would not wish any candidate to be discouraged by the perceived workload from trying. Anyone who is fit to be a member of the Association ought to be fit to be its President; however, we may have to address more sympathetically than we have so far the need to encourage, to select, to school, likely candidates. We will have to take up seriously the notion of mentoring; many of us have been incidentally mentored, and this is the ideal. Some of us are lucky enough to be mentored all our lives, but others miss out. Perhaps this is one of the most important issues that any President, any healthy association, could address.

Lynn, thank you for your Frontline; thank you for having the courage to speak out on the Presidency, and thank you for having stimulated this unworthy candidate to pause and think about the Presidency and what it involves. I hope all your readers will have been similarly encouraged. ■

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