

Our Library Trip to Bulgaria, June, 2013

Our small group of librarians from Colorado and Iowa had been looking forward to this trip for a long time and have been preparing for our conference in Sofia at the end of the trip. But first we planned to visit five public libraries around the state. Our group consisted of Amy Martin, Pueblo (CO) Public Library, Cher Czyzewski, retired school librarian from Denver, Susan Henricks, Dubuque Public Library, and me, Nancy Bolt, Nancy Bolt & Associates. Also with us was Bob Hofmann, my husband, and Genevieve Henricks-Lepp, Susan's daughter and also a librarian.

We arrived on May 24th but not in time for the Rose Festival. We did walk around that afternoon and were able to visit the National Library and saw the lovely wreath that had been put there that morning.

Stara Zagora

Our first library visit was to the Chitalisthe Library "Rodina" in Stara Zagora. The Rodina Library has a large collection of 300,000 books. Slava Draganova, the Library Director, is very talented at getting grants and has emphasized assistance to the blind and mentally challenged. They have an online catalog and are trying to put their older books in it. Their current big project is to digitize older regional newspapers and make them available to the public fully indexed for maximum access. Slava's biggest problem is space. The library is very small; a computer room and reading room downtown and a children's library and storage center for the 300,000 books further away. When I asked if she would be able to get a new library building, her assistant rolled her eyes and smiled and Slava paused and said "Hope is the last thing that dies."

Sosopol

We spent the weekend in Nessebur and were able to take a side trip to visit the Chitalishthe Library "Otec Paisii" in Sosopol. We met with Library Director ????and librarians Valentina Raikova and Elisaveta Drenkarova. The library is part of a municipal building and there was a big festival in the courtyard so the library was mostly empty. It is a large library with a lovely children's section. The Library is part of the Global Library program so we were able to see Global Library posters in the library and spent time looking at their computer system and the amazing amount of information that is on it. We had lunch with the librarians to compare programs in the US and Bulgaria.

Shoumen

Having spent two days on the seaside, we head inland again to Shoumen. Susan Henrick's library was a partner of the Shoumen Library in the ABLE project and Irina Koleva spent five weeks there. It had been seven years since they had seen each other so it was a warm reunion. Rozitza Doheivo (?) is the new library director. We met and talked for over an hour with Irina, Rozitza, and Tanya Vratova. They are digitalizing all newspapers in the regional before 1944, multiple summer reading programs, and training as part of the Gates Global Library Project (their elderly training program has a waiting list of 80 people). They have 100 computers, 25 from Global Libraries. When Stephan, our intrepid guide and often translator, finally said we are 20 minutes behind schedule, we set off for a tour the library. One of the really impressive rooms was where they are scanning old newspapers and books to create a searchable database and the colorful mural in the Children's' Room.

This is much different than the other libraries we have seen in that they have the entire building. There are three floors above ground and four more below. The entire central core is storage for 760,000 books. They are a national depository of all books published in Bulgaria and required to keep them all. There is an adult room with books that can be checked out, a reading room with some of the depository books that cannot be checked out, a lively children's room, a room full of computers, a computer training center with a class on job hunting going on. It was a dynamic library. Shoumen is a regional library with responsibility for training other libraries in the area.

They said 90% of people in Shoumen have computers in the home so we asked why they think people come to the library. Their answer: to study as a group, to use the library's printers and scanners, and to get reference help when they can't find something. We asked if they have intellectual freedom challenges: yes, for religious books (not sex as in the US.) The library considers itself becoming a community and cultural center. Irina summed up what we see as the issue facing libraries in both Bulgaria and the US when she said: "We are trying to find a place in changing times in order not to just check out books."

Veliko Tarnovo

From Shoumen we headed to Veliko Tarnovo to spend the night and have dinner with local and visiting librarians. We were joined by Ivan Alexanderov, Director of the Regional Library "P. Slaveikov", Kalina, Ivanova, Deputy Director, Igor ???, from the Ministry of Culture and Desislava Marinova from the Global Library Project. We ate at a restaurant with a great view of the cultural monument, Tsarevets, where they present a spectacular light show – except we were in the middle of a thunderstorm and no way would they do that tonight. Nature was providing its own spectacular light show. However, Mr. Alexanderov was able to plan the light show anyway and the lightening from the sky and lights from Tsarevets made an even more amazing show than usual.

The Regional Libraries are engaging in advanced training of the libraries in the area as part of the Global Libraries program. As I understand it, original training focused on technology, how to use it, how to train others. More recent training is focusing on the role of libraries in a broader context. When we arrived, the Veliko Tarnovo Library was in the midst of training on the role of libraries in e-government and other electronic information. Kalina's presentation occurred the day before our arrival so I missed it. She did ask me to greet the participants on day 2 of the conference before we took off for our next destination. I was also very surprised and honored to receive an Award from Mr. Alexanderov as a Library Ambassador to Bulgaria. I have truly enjoyed my work with Bulgarian libraries and feel the ABLE project helped make a difference in their future.

I have been to the international rosé festival at least 15 times maybe more. It's an annual pilgrimage. I never tire of it. It is always the same and always a surprise as something changes. For three out of the last four years we have visited the "Iskra" Public Library in Kazanluk and talked to the director Anna Kozhuharova and her staff. The library has its own building on two floors with the now familiar reading rooms, children and adults, and now a computer room as well. They have a summer reading program with new books donated by a bank. Anna has recently formed an Ambassadors for the Library group with a charge of advocacy and fundraising, similar, I think to US Friends of the Library. Anna keeps good statistics and told us the library presented 287 programs last year. Anna is succeeding in getting the library staff out of the library and involved in community activities. Anna's staff are also monitors the crowd at the Rose parade on Sunday and Anna wrote the script for the parade announcer. She gave us an English language version which was invaluable on Sunday. A highlight of the visit was the agreement

that Amy on behalf of the Pueblo Library District and the Anna on our behalf of the Kazanluk Library have agreed to be our newest Partner Libraries.



Anna Kozhuharova and Amy Martin, new partner libraries.

Plovdiv

Before returning to Sofia, we stopped in Plovdiv and visited the Plovdiv Public Library “Ivan Vazov.” The new Director was out of the city and we met with Antoaneta (Tony) Lessenska, the new Deputy Director, Nely Petrova who had been to the US as part of the ABLÉ project, Stefka Ilieva who had been to the US as part of a Mortenson Center IMLS project, and Zlatka Ivanova. All but Nely were part of the Methodological Department, or had been, since Tony Lessenska had just been promoted and I had met all of them many times. Other staff members also came in and out while we talked. The Plovdiv Library is also a Global Library so is also doing the same kind of training we saw elsewhere, for blind and physically handicapped, on e-resources, and digitizing cultural heritage documents. They are also contributing to the Europeana database of millions of digital images and are participating with the city to become a Cultural Capitol of Europe sometime in the future (as are many libraries participating in this effort.)

They are adept at getting grants, mostly dealing with preservation and access to historical documents. It turns out that the Plovdiv Library has the third largest collection of 12th to 18th century manuscripts in the country and they have a grant to “present them completely.” As a regional Global Library they work with 49 libraries who received computers from the Gates Foundation. The smallest library got only three; Plovdiv got 24, including a nicely equipped training center. They do extensive training of librarians in the surrounding communities (300 libraries in total) in the areas of library management, library services, IT, communication, and advocacy.

For the second time on the trip I heard the concept of the library as a Third Place after home, school/work, and then the library has a place to hang out, learn, and work. I think the Gates

Foundation is pushing this and it's catching on. They are also focusing on customer service, to make it easier for people to register at the library to use it.

But as with most other Bulgarian libraries, funding is a problem. 80% of their funding is from the state, 20% from the municipality.

On June 5th, we celebrated the 10th anniversary of the ABLE project at an international conference in Sofia. In 2003, the US State Department gave a grant to IRIS, an Iowa non-profit in cooperation with the then Colorado Library Association and the Union of Librarians and Information Officers (both have since changed their names to the Colorado Association of Libraries, CAL, and the Bulgarian Library and Information Association, BLIA.) Thus was created the American Bulgarian Library Exchange, or ABLE.

ABLE's goals included advocating for the role of public libraries as community information centers in Bulgarian cities, towns and villages and helping Bulgarians libraries experience modern library services through partnerships and exchanges with American librarians. When the project ended after ten years, we felt we had made a real difference in Bulgarian and American libraries and librarians. After 10 years, could we tell if ABLE made a lasting difference?

Part of that question was answered in our visits to Bulgarian libraries over the week we traveled around Bulgaria. We saw that the concepts we advocated for had occurred, in both ABLE and non-ABLE libraries, greatly augmented by the resources and training provided generously by the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation. In preparation for the conference, Ana Popova asked Bulgarian librarians if they thought ABLE impacted the development of Bulgarian libraries. The Bulgarians said that ABLE had a very positive impact on raising awareness, training librarians, strengthening the profession, and paving the way for future development.

I won't describe all the presentations. They will be posted on both the BLIA and CAL websites. Here's a quick summary of the main topics: Digitization (Amy Martin from Pueblo and Radka Koleva from Varna); community information centers (Nadja Grueva from Stara Zagora); engaging young readers (Cher Czyzewski from Golden); Art in the Library and Green Libraries (Susan Henricks from Dubuque); from ABLE to the present (Kradi Nyagolova, Silistra); Global libraries (Kalina Ivanova, Veliko Tarnovo); a e-books (Amy Martin, Pueblo) and future issues facing libraries (me). Amy got the most questions about her e-book presentation.

One of the highlights of the conference was a greeting by Iskra Mihailova. Ten years ago, Iskra was a librarian who became the able project director in Bulgaria (I was the American project director.) Now, Iskra is the Bulgarian Minister of Environment and Water. The conference was paid for in part by the US Embassy in Bulgaria and by the CAL Bulgarian Project Fund.

I continue to feel that ABLE changed people's lives, in Bulgaria and in the US. I know it changed mine. As I looked around the room at the friendly faces of almost all of our able partners, I could see how it changed their lives as well. We ended the day with a huge reception for everybody at a nearby restaurant and a good time was had by all.

Final thoughts.

I wrote this final section in the Sofia airport in the Lufthansa Lounge – where they have rakia (I always end my sojourn in Bulgaria with a little rakia at the airport.) A Bulgarian on this trip asked me why I like

Bulgaria so much and come back every year. I don't think there is a simple answer. Certainly the people. They are warm and friendly, most are willing to help tourists, giving advice on watching my purse or what to see. And I've become friends with talented craftspeople who invite me into their homes to purchase what they make. It's also the heritage. I have seen, touched, artifacts that are 8000 years old, books from the 16th century, seen and often walked in Roman ruins in every, and I do mean every, Bulgarian town. America is a baby compared to this ancient history. This country is at the hub of three continents and has been invaded, conquered and recovered its freedom many times. Bulgarians are survivors although they don't always recognize it in themselves. Certainly it's the libraries and librarians. I feel I've been a part of a great change in Bulgarian libraries. I was privileged to work with a group of visionary Bulgarian librarians like Vanya Grashkina, Snezja Ianeva, Iskra Mahailova, and all the librarians from the partner libraries who were willing to take a chance and travel to the US for 5 weeks to learn about American librarianship. After I had been coming to Bulgaria for a couple of years, Iskra used to meet me at the airport by saying "Welcome Home." I do feel at home in Bulgaria (no matter that I still can't speak Bulgarian). So I'll be back next year.