

Report of Trip to Meet with Bulgarian Partner Libraries, June, 2011, Nancy Bolt

This June I was able to visit Bulgaria and meet with staff in nine libraries, including seven of our Partner Libraries. Going with me was Patti Bateman from the Aurora Public Library who Partner Library is the Silistra Public Library and Cher Czyzewski, a retired school librarian who had a partner school library, also in Silistra.

We arrived in time for the May 24th celebration of Sts Cyril and Methodius, the inventors of the Cyrillic alphabet. These are the patron saints of education and libraries. The biggest celebration is that the Bulgarian National Library (Library "Cyril and Methodius," of course) where the President of the country places a wreath of flowers and then everybody crowds around the statues and does the same. It is as if Barak Obama placed a wreath at the Library of Congress during National Library Week and all the stores close.

In general, Bulgarian libraries have both feast and famine. The feast is very good. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation grant is finally being fully implemented with computers being delivered and staff being trained. The Gates Foundation grant has or will transform Bulgarian libraries into true community network centers.

On the famine side, the Bulgarian economy is in no better shape than the American economy. Some libraries are also experiencing cuts in their budgets. Some libraries have had staff furloughs as long as a month. Some have no funding for new books. The Regional Libraries that provide consulting services to local libraries in their region, however, were given one new position to help develop and implement a training program. Despite budget cuts, however, Bulgarian library staff persist in their efforts to serve their users and the community as best they can. Some examples:

The Sofia Public Library, American Corners Library, has expanded from just serving children to serving adults as well, often with vibrant programming about American culture. In late June of this year they had a "Chicago Festival in Sofia."

The "P. Slaveikov" Public Library in Veliko Tarnovo is requesting a grant from the American for Bulgaria Foundation to plan a new building project. There have been no public library buildings constructed in Bulgaria in decades and only a few renovations. In Bulgaria, this is an extraordinary vision.

The "Panitza" Library at the American University in Bulgaria (AUBG) in Blagoevgrad moved into a new building on the new AUBG campus. It was funded by private grants including a large one from the American for Bulgaria Foundation. It is beautifully designed with a robust menu of services.

The “Ivan Vazov” Library in Plovdiv applied for and received a grant from the European Union to digitize resources. Stefka Ilieva, the training director is preparing a program on “Services of the Modern Library” for the libraries in her region.

Radka Kalcheva from the “Pencho Slaveikov” Library in Varna says that budget cuts have been “uncomfortable” but they are managing. Their big project is to become a regional data aggregator for digitization by the libraries in their region. They are also heavily involved in life-long learning with a European Union grant to offer courses for senior citizens.

We were able to spend a whole day visiting the “Biblioteka Partenii Pavlovich” in Silistra, the Partner Library of Aurora. Silistra is located on the Danube and former director Neli Stoilova, now an Assistant City Manager, Lidiya Dimitrova, the current library director, and Krasimira Njaolova, deputy library director, were great hosts, arranging a lovely short cruise on the Danube and a meeting and lunch with Aleksander Sabanov, the Chairman of the City Council, a young man dedicated to revitalizing Silistra. Patti describes our visit in this way:

The Silistra librarians are always a delight, so passionate about their work. There have been two new Library Directors since I first visited in 2005, and these two enthusiastic and highly positive directors have visibly changed the feeling and direction of the organization. Staff is friendly and eager to show the changes and improvements in their facility, programming plus increased interaction and outreach efforts with their community. There is now a public information desk located immediately inside the main public entrance, and the director's office has been moved from an obscure office on the second floor to the main floor near the information desk so the director is easy for the public to find. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has provided computers and software, both for public use and for staff, which is a significant improvement for a library that only had a handful of old computers for staff use a few years ago.

In general, all Bulgarian libraries visited in 2011 show the same changes as observed in Silistra. The librarians are working much more closely with the community to bring people into the facility, to make citizens more aware of services the libraries can provide, to reach out and identify needs the library can address, provide regular programming, and make the libraries more of an integral part of the community. Their enthusiasm and dedication is inspirational and awe-inspiring, as they do so much with so very little support.

We had a lengthy visit with our newest library partner (with Amy Phillips at the Colorado Technical Institute), the “Iskra” Municipal Library in Kazanluk, center of the Valley of the Roses and the Valley of the Thracian Kings. Anna Vasileva, the library director, and her staff met with us to share what has happened in the last year. This library is suffering from severe budget cuts from the local government so the library director, so Anna, sought other methods to raise funding. She convinced the local Rotary Club to organize an annual ball in support of the library. She said “it wasn’t easy but we told them how important the library was to the children in town.” She also held an art auction where local artists sold

works and shared the profits with the library. Anna prepares a list of books that the library needs and circulates the list among local businesses asking them to donate the cost of one of the books on the list.

Anna says “If you want money you must first show why the library needs the money and provide excellent activities so people know how the library uses its money.” Last year, the “Iskra” library sponsored 245 cultural events to bring people into the library. There were 22 literature evenings with local authors making presentations on their books and a summer reading program for the children. Anna said she is very proud of her staff and the work they do.

After our visit with our partner libraries, I presented a two-day workshop on grant writing for the Bulgarian Library and Information Association (BLIA). BLIA has received a large grant from the American for Bulgaria Foundation to conduct training for Bulgarian librarians. This was a pre-conference to the BLIA annual national library conference. I had 25 librarians from school, public, academic, and special librarians. I has asked them to come in teams and with an idea that they wanted funding for and there were about 8 teams present. They learned all the elements of a successful grant application and possible sources of funding in Bulgaria and the European Union. They left with a detailed outline of a grant proposal.

Our work in Bulgaria continues to be appreciated by Bulgarian librarians. Our ABLE project spurred much new thinking and activities in Bulgarian libraries. They are pleased that we continue our work with them.