January 1992

Transylvanian Connections: Report from the Colocvii de Bibliologie, Brasov, Romania, 10-12 August 1991

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Almost two years ago, we watched in horror, on the evening news, as flames destroyed the Central University Library in Bucharest. With the offices of Nicolae Ceausescu’s secret police occupying the top floor, the Library was a focal point in a bitter battle. In the end, the Romanian Army and the people of Romania won control of their country, but lost thousands of books and periodicals. In a country where books are treasured and reading encouraged, this loss was overwhelming.¹ In response to this disaster, the American library community has donated some quarter of a million books and periodicals, with the help of the U.S. Information Agency.

These efforts in aiding Romanian librarians have taken a new turn with the exchange of personnel and professional assistance. Most notably, a group of American librarians visited Romania in August before the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) General Conference in Moscow to teach a workshop for Romanian librarians. I had an opportunity to be a member of this group, sponsored by the Romanian Ministry of Culture, the International Research & Exchanges Board Inc. (IREX), and the American Library Association (ALA). There were twelve members in this expedition—Marilyn Miller (University of North Carolina-Greensboro), Opritsa Popa (University of California, Davis), Anita Brelan (IBM), Vinod Chachra (VTLS), Robert Doyle (ALA), S. Michael Malinconico (University of Alabama), Jordan Scepanski (California State University, Long Beach), James Moldovan (Biblioteca Centrala Universitara, Bucharest), Joseph Boisse (University of California, Santa Barbara), Nancy John (University of Illinois at Chicago), Lucinda Covert-Vail (San Francisco State University), Elaine Svenonius (UCLA) and me.

I acted as a counterweight to many of the discussions by my American colleagues, by providing demonstrations of library-specific software and compact discs, such as the Grolier Electronic Encyclopedia and Facts on File News Digest. I decided to use my own equipment for these demos, and so, with great fear, I delivered to the ALA offices in Chicago, boxes for shipment containing my Macintosh Portable, a compact disk drive, an external hard disk, a projection device, software, and power strips and converters. I was very concerned over the fate of this equipment both in transit and in Romania. We were visiting a country which had suffered greatly under the recently deposed Communist regime, where even the most basic teaching materials were scarce. Indeed, we also shipped two overhead projectors and six spare bulbs, on the advice of the U.S.
Embassy in Bucharest, as this sort of standard equipment was unavailable.

We arrived in Bucharest on Thursday, 8 August, and were greeted at the airport by staff of the National Library and Ministry of Culture. The next day, we were taken on tours of Bucharest and the National Library, and briefed on the state of Romanian librarianship. We traveled on the morning of Saturday, 10 August, to Brasov, in Transylvania. We were met by an anxious and enthusiastic body of some 100 librarians, many from public libraries around the country. While my colleagues met and spoke to our Romanian counterparts, I started the nervous process of unloading my equipment and setting up an area to see if it survived the journey.

There was a certain sense of anticipation as I unloaded the equipment. Help came from all corners on the first floor of the University Library in Brasov as I moved a table in place near a circuit to plug in power strips and surge protectors, to line up adaptors, and organize my computer and peripherals for testing. Their operation after the long trip was a relief to me and to those in the room, who looked over my shoulder at the screen, and started to ask a torrent of questions in English and French.

Schedule changes seemed inevitable, as we tried to accommodate the needs of our students as well as those of our hosts. The following day, 11 August, we decided to use a vacant classroom across the street from the Library for the demonstrations and so we carted the equipment. Little did I know that this migration meant that I would discover, through trial and error, some of the problems with the highly variable power in this part of the world. As the chairs filled, so did the tension, as power strips and circuits failed, as one device after another decided to blow a bulb or add the sickening scent of melting rubber, plastic and copper to the air. Luckily the Macintosh Portable and the files providing access to compact discs (for the Grolier Electronic Encyclopedia and the Facts on File News Digest) did not fold under the pressure of massive electrical spikes.

Lucinda Covert-Vail started the session with a comprehensive and intriguing overview of compact disc technology in libraries. At the end of her session, I once again tried to overcome the fumes, the dead bulbs, and failed circuits. The Portable managed to keep on working, so I invited the class to gather around the computer as I searched through the Grolier and Facts on File for information about Romania. The Romanians became agitated, excited, and quite vocal in their enthusiasm, pressing closer and closer to the computer. I knelt before the machine and moved closer and closer to the table, as they pressed around the screen. In the Encyclopedia we searched for information on Transylvania, Bucharest, vampires, and Moldavians. In Facts on File we pulled up article after article on the recent political history of the country. The students were endlessly fascinated with summaries on the events of 1988 and 1989. We called up maps of eastern Europe and focused on Brasov and the surrounding area. Conversations turned louder as several Romanians pushed closer to the screen, explaining to their colleagues in translation from me a particular way of searching for facts, of pulling down a menu, of highlighting a portion of text.
Eventually the Romanians took over the stage, playing with the Portable and the screens. All I could do was look on and smile.

Over the past few years, I have taught workshops on computers for students who are in real life university vice-presidents, tenured faculty members, librarians, grammar and high school teachers, secretaries, undergraduates, and graduate students. In these classes I have fought boredom, computer “experts,” jokers, and anarchists, in order to make computing exciting and interesting. But I have never had a class where I was so happy to see the students take over and run the show. Their enthusiasm and infectious geniality made me wish there was a way that I could bottle up these spirits and carry them home, to use on a rainy day when I am battling a class of gremlins and know-it-alls back here in the States. With this sort of attitude, the Romanians will use technology, not treating it as a sacred cow, but as a tool, like their once banned and registered typewriters, to recreate their libraries as catalysts for change in their country.

The Colocvii ended sadly on 12 August with farewells to all, and a hope that we and others would return to help this community of librarians grow and once again join their fellow professionals around the world. Romania is a country without a library school, a national professional library association, or the funds to purchase many basic and essential materials for their avid population of readers. In a country where books are prized — where we were proudly shown the first printing press and Romanian incunabula — it is unfortunate that the library profession suffered so greatly at the hands of politics and economics. It made me grateful for those tools and resources that I have at my fingertips, and, at the same time, made me look forward to my return to Romania. In the meantime, though, there are ways in which I can help my Romanian colleagues.

One simple but effective way is by joining my library with a like institution in Romania. This sort of library twinning has recently been proposed by IFLA’s Professional Board as a way for individuals and their libraries to help colleagues around the world. I see it as a means to recycle information — books, periodicals, equipment, expertise. In Romania there is literally no money to purchase books and periodicals, especially scientific and technical literature, which often ranks as the most expensive. One librarian moaned over her inability to pay 150 lei for a book, the equivalent of less than a dollar. So naturally, books and periodicals are an obvious choice. But there is also equipment. I often found card catalogs in Romania filled with hand-written entries, because typewriters were scarce. Under Ceausescu, typewriters were considered weapons — each and every typewriter had to be registered with the State. The sorts of typewriters that we might call fossils, replaced by laser printers and computers, would be prized in Romanian libraries. And finally, there is personal contact with fellow librarians, filled with questions on how we manage our own operations. In return we may be able to track down an obscure reference to an Eastern European periodical; locate a provincial newspaper; or discover a long-neglected author. But the real benefit will be in helping an information-hungry society
bring libraries and their staff back into focus, in providing to their patrons the tools they need to reconstruct their country for the next century. We all might be able to say that we helped lay a cornerstone or two in the process.  

Notes

1. "The hunger for information in Romania is perhaps best illustrated by a scene that took place in January 1990: When the first Red Cross trucks reached a devastated, post-revolutionary Bucharest, people asked why no books were among the humanitarian supplies. For information-starved Romania, books were as important as food, medicine, or blankets." From: Popa, Opritsa D.; Lamprecht, Sandra J. Western campaigns to provide scholarly materials to East Europe require care and quality control. Chronicle of Higher Education. 37(42): B1; 1991 July 3.


3. Portions of this article will appear in the Newsletter of the Apple Library Users Group.

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