

# Librarianship in Germany and the World Congress of Librarians in Berlin (IFLA 2003)

by Georg Ruppelt



*From August 1<sup>st</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> 2003, the 69<sup>th</sup> General Conference of the International Association of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) will take place in Berlin. To mark the occasion, Olms in Hildesheim will be publishing a volume edited by the Federal Association of German Library Associations (BDB), titled „Portale zu Vergangenheit und Zukunft. Bibliotheken in Deutschland“ („Access Point to the Past and the Future. Libraries in Germany“). The authors are Jürgen Seefeldt and Ludger Syr . On the eve of the IFLA Congress, it is appropriate to reflect upon the situation of librarianship in Germany. The following paper is based on a lecture given by the author on January 31<sup>st</sup>, 2003 in the Central and Regional Library of Berlin and on his essay, „Krise und Aufbruch“, in the above-mentioned volume.*

The IFLA has entertained relations with Germany since its founding in 1927. No IFLA Congress was held in Germany, however, until after the Second World War. Martin Hallender pointed out in an article published in the (unfortunately) final issue of the „*Buchhandelsgeschichte*“ in December 2002, that an international Congress on Librarianship and Bibliographies had been planned for 1940 in Berlin and Leipzig: „Auf Wiedersehen 1940 in Berlin.“ Failed plans for the Third International Congress for Librarianship and Bibliographies“. This Congress did not in fact take place because of the war, but it is surprising nevertheless to see how deeply the appeasement policy permeated interna-

tional librarianship circles, and that serious consideration was being given to meet in Nazi Germany. But then again, the international organizers of the Olympic Games in 1936 had acted no differently.

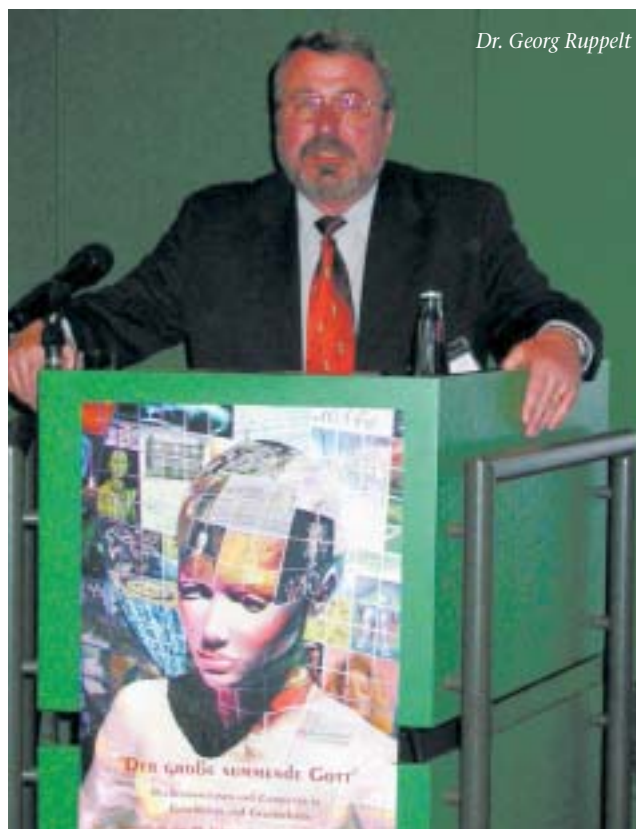
After the war, relations between the IFLA and Germany were always twofold, concerning as they did either the IFLA and West Germany or the IFLA and East Germany. Four IFLA conferences were held on German territory, i.e. in Munich in 1956, in Frankfurt on the Main in 1960, in Leipzig in 1981 and again in Munich in 1983. This twofold German commitment in the IFLA in the second half of the last century was significant. After the war, two Germans were elected to chair the IFLA, Gustav Hofmann (1958-1963) and Hans-Peter Geh (1985-1991). Mr. Geh's service to the IFLA was so much appreciated that he was also appointed Honorary President. Since then, many other German librarians have been active in the IFLA.

The relation of the IFLA to Germany since the mid-90s has been mediated, essentially, through the Federal Association of German Library Associations (BDB). The BDB has belonged to the IFLA since 1997, and it is especially thanks to then spokesperson Brigit Dankert, then member of the Executive Board Klaus-Dieter Lehmann and to Claudia Lux, that the BDB's efforts in August 1998 to have the IFLA-Conference held in Berlin in 2003, did indeed succeed.

The motto for the 2003 Congress in Berlin is: „Access Point Library – the Library as a Gateway“. This is a marvellous image, calling forth many associations: access to knowledge, to information, science, culture and education, all are evoked by the image of a gateway. When a port city calls itself a gate to the world, this has always meant being open to the world. Libraries today are, in principle, at everyone's disposal, provided the necessary means and knowledge are available. They are gates to the world of unlimited information.

In Ancient Rome, on doors, gates and passages, one would often find the divinity of entrances, the two-faced Janus, one face friendly, the other, unfriendly. Janus was the symbol of a physical as well as a temporal passage, from past to future. For an observer in 2003, the past and the present of German librarianship will alternately bring a smile to his face or darken his countenance in sadness. We shall make that point clearer by looking back, decade by decade, to certain events, and examining their relevance to our present time. In the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, we first observe in 1913 an event which is useful for our purposes, i.e. the opening of the Deutsche B cherei (German Library) in Leipzig. It had been founded one year before on the initiative, it should be stressed, of the German book trade association, rather than the German State! Whereas in other European countries, national libraries had been at the centre of librarianship for de-

ades or even centuries, it was not until the 20<sup>th</sup> Century that Germany founded a central institute to gather all printed matter. Considering that 40 years were to elapse between the founding of the German Empire and that of the Deutsche Bücherei, one cannot but conclude that supporting central library tasks was not the focal point of the science and education policy of the German central government. Some might discern here a continuity in German history in spite of the great upheavals of the past 100 years.



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The traditional independence of the German Länder in cultural and educational domains has, of course, produced a great variety of cultural monuments, emphatically including libraries, something quite unknown in highly centralised States. Thomas Mann, in his 1947 novel „Dr. Faust“, captured the German emphasis on and esteem for regional, or even local, culture, in his description of the fictitious city Kaisersaschern: „but Kaisersaschern, a railway junction, is, with its 27 000 inhabitants, totally happy with itself and, like every German city, deems itself to be a cultural centre endowed with its own historical dignity. It is nourished by different industries (...) and possesses its own historico-cultural museum, that boasts a room filled with crass instruments of torture, and a valuable library with 25 000 volumes and 5000 manuscripts“. However much one may appreciate and admire the variety stemming from this cultural independence of the regions as

well as from the Länder's control over culture and education today, it does show how difficult it is, in times of financial crisis, to develop or establish the central facilities required for librarianship. Where such structural problems are compounded by political short-sightedness, decisions will tend to be made, such as the one at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century authorizing the gradual closing of the German Library Institute in Berlin, founded only in the early 70s. The quarrels over the Länder's cultural control which arose during the

debate at the time, coupled with yet more political short-sightedness, have very recently led to the decision not to go ahead with the Innovation Centre for Libraries (IZB), although it had already been planned down to the details. Now, in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, nationwide planning and assistance for libraries is no longer possible, and it is up to the associations under the aegis of the BDB, which had valiantly, but unsuccessfully, protested against the closing and/or miscarriage of a central institute, to assume the arduous task of saving or establishing anew what re-

mains of central assistance for libraries.

Ten years after the opening of the Deutsche Bücherei in Leipzig and after Germany's defeat in the war, the very survival of research libraries was in question, because of the exorbitant inflation. They did not have the basic means to make purchases, in particular of foreign literature, and many research libraries considered themselves fortunate to be compelled, or in some cases have the opportunity, to give away duplicates from their inventories, against cash or as exchange items. Under the Versailles Treaty, these duplicates had to be delivered by Germany to replenish the University Library at Leuven, destroyed by German artillery.

In those years of inflation, the „Notgemeinschaft der deutschen Wissenschaft“ (Emergency Association of German Science), later known as the Deutsche Gemeinschaft zur Erhaltung und Förderung

der Forschung, or for short Forschungsgemeinschaft (Research Council), was founded. Still today, German libraries can thank the DFG (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft), as it has been called in the post-war period, for their quantitatively and qualitatively valuable, far-reaching support, including the special subject fields programme.

This program was made possible by the close cross-border cooperation of libraries in the Länder. One positive effect of Germany's federalist structure is that libraries as well as library governing boards do wish to work together and to network. We have, for instance, the successful model of interlibrary loans, or establishment of computer links or even the BDB (Federal Association of German Library Associations), the umbrella association of not only library boards but also, since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the Goethe Institute Inter Naciones, the Bertelsmann Foundation and ekz-bibliotheksservice GmbH. In German librarianship, the federal structure (excepting non democratic times) shows how successfully libraries can work, and above all cooperate, in their clientele's interests.

In this context, we should mention the project Bibliotheken 2007 (Libraries 2007), launched by the BDB and the Bertelsmann Foundation to work out recommendations as to how librarianship in Germany should be organised in the future. This should spark a technical and political discussion on how to optimise library structures and services and is intended to initiate a comprehensive strategy process on the federal, Land and local levels.

So while the friendly face of Janus beams down on cooperation among German libraries and governing boards, an observer looking back in time would rather turn away from the awful events of those twelve years starting in 1933. Of course, this is just what we should not do, we must confront our history. May 10, 1933, the day on which books from German public libraries were burned, will forever stand as one of the most ignominious dates of German librarianship. Historical research has appraised the processes of „purges“ and „elimination of opposition“ as concerns libraries. However, one chapter has largely escaped the attention of the public, including the library world. This concerns items which ended up in the storerooms of our libraries after being confiscated or stolen from Jewish citizens or from the politically persecuted. With the exception of a few libraries, and individual enquiries, there has as yet been no overall investigation into this, and consequently, no restitution of those items.



In this context, the regional library of Lower Saxony together with the Landtag held a symposium in November 2002 in Hanover on the theme, „Books Owned by Jews as Booty“ (the correct term is „Stolen Goods“), which attracted international attention. As a result of that symposium, the Hannoversche Appell („Hanover Appeal“) recommended that a systematic search be made through German libraries for stolen items, that the findings and experiences be disclosed, and that the items that could be identified be returned to the legitimate heirs of those robbed and, most often, murdered. In addition, the Hannoversche Appell recommended that library training centres reintroduce into their curriculum the history of libraries, including that of the Nazi period.

Mention of this training in the Hannoversche Appell directly intersects a discussion that has been raging in Germany over the past few years. The issue discussed is whether one should continue to equip libraries with conventional media, that is books and periodicals, or to move over entirely to digital media. In a certain sense, this discussion touches upon a phenomenon that Ray Bradbury described 50 years ago in his book „Fahrenheit 451“. Bradbury portrayed, in 1953, a society in which books were forbidden and burned, and readers persecuted. (Fahrenheit 451 corresponds to 223 degrees Celsius, the point at which paper burns). The people in this city were exclusively informed and entertained by television and electronic media. In this way, in Bradbury's novel, a mass society was developed without political force, in which the word individualism was taken as an insult.

Naturally, German democracy at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century in no way resembles the city described by Ray Bradbury. Nevertheless, certain indications suggest that a fascination with, and the need for, electronic media has led to a situation where libraries and their governing bodies are in danger of neglecting their own past and, with that, the tremendous intellectual treasures they are responsible for. A certain contempt of or considerable lack of interest in pre-digital resources seems to have become quite pervasive. This could lead to a lack in Germany of media specialists capable of preserving these historical treasures.

Fifty years after the publication of „Fahrenheit 451“, striking weaknesses are visible in the German education and training systems. International as well as national studies have found that many young people in our great industrial nation are poorly educated; the data on reading skills, for example, are alarming. That is why the BDB, the Reading Foundation and

many other political, cultural and social groups are urging a sweeping educational reform. At the same time, libraries must be supported much more now than before, in spite of or perhaps because of the crisis in public funding. To promote reading remains an essential task for our libraries, especially since one can only acquire media competency if reading has been mastered.

Thirty years ago, the situation in the western part of Germany was characterized by great hope and an environment propitious to a fresh start. In the library plan of 1973, promising standards for equipping public and research libraries were set, and close cooperation among the different areas of librarianship was encouraged. Although, in the ensuing years, the required standards were rarely completely met, for example in smaller towns, there was nonetheless a marked improvement in public libraries. As for academic libraries, many new ones were opened in institutes of higher education.

There are two achievements in the past 30 years that German libraries and their representative boards can look back on with satisfaction and pride. German reunification in the early 90s, as concerns libraries, was very effective, swift and pleasantly smooth. One contributing factor may have been that German librarians in both parts of the country, political and material barriers notwithstanding, had never completely lost contact with one another over the intervening decades, whether on the professional or the personal level. An essential role in this growing together was played by the associations under the BDB's aegis.

Ten years ago, the BDB produced a first and altogether very positive assessment of librarianship in reunified Germany, in the then as now indispensable volume „Bibliotheken 93. Strukturen, Aufgaben, Positionen“. This volume describes in full the state of affairs in German librarianship on the eve of the new century. An extension of electronic data processing and international networking were urged not only for research libraries, but public libraries as well. And that is the second area in which German libraries have made great progress in the past ten years.

Research and public libraries in Germany today are a component of the global digital information community, and keep pace with international comparison. On the one hand, the demand of „Bibliotheken 93“ that Germany take on a leading role in production and use of electronic media and networks has, in the main, been met – although that is of course a standing requirement. On the other hand, fulfilment of the other points in the 1993 catalogue

give rise to serious doubts which, unfortunately, are still with us.

„Public libraries are not among the mandatory tasks of a municipality – accordingly, when cash is low, cuts are first made here. In the universities, when financial means stagnate, but prices for books and, more especially, periodicals, rise, as does the need for electronic media, then the deficit of the offer increases at an alarming rate. At the same time, there has never been so urgent a need for libraries and their services, because it is decisive for our future:

- that children and youngsters, in spite of the constant stream of television, learn to master reading;
- that diverse opinions remain freely on offer in libraries, in a broadly representative selection for everyone,
- that pupils and students, workers and professionals, teachers and researchers readily receive and use technical and academic works in sufficient number, including items on specialized themes.“

The fact that the difficulties of German libraries are openly discussed at the present time in many places shows that the problems are known, whatever the preconditions for solving them may be. No one doubts however that Germany has a highly effective and well-run network of libraries. The historical and contemporary intellectual treasures these libraries hold make it worth our while to keep them accessible and open to the public. Through its public libraries, Germany can greatly contribute to education and to bringing together various cultures. This is doubtless one of the reasons why the IFLA is holding its Congress in 2003 in Berlin. For reunified Germany, it is a great honour and a pleasure. It is to be hoped that, through this Congress, a dynamic will be created that will strengthen international cooperation among libraries and cultural understanding in peace, collaboration and perhaps even friendship.

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