

NATIONAL AND UNIVERSITY LIBRARY OF BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA DURING THE CURRENT WAR²

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NACIONALNA I UNIVERZITETSKA BIBLIOTEKA BOSNE I HERCEGOVINE ZA VRIJEME TEKUĆEG RATA

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U svom tekstu posvećenom NUB BIH tokom rata i njenom razaranju augusta 1992.godine Munevera Zećo je posebno ukazala na tragičnu sudbinu nekih djelatnika biblioteke, koji su tokom rata izgubili život. Riječ je o Aidi Buturović, Mirku Azinoviću, Adeli Leota i Anti Kovačiću.

The National and University Library of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the most important depository of the national and cultural history of the country, was destroyed on August 25-27, 1992. Since the start of the war in April 1992, and particularly after the destruction of the library, the living and working conditions of the librarians, as well as other citizens of Sarajevo, have been influenced by the brutality of the war. The author shows particular examples of librarians' determination to preserve what was left of the library and to continue the library services during the siege of Sarajevo. The article gives a firsthand observation of the human and cultural destruction in this tragic period. It also describes examples of responses by the international community, types of assistance, and current support for the librarians of the National and University Library.

The National Library of Bosnia and Herzegovina was founded in May of 1945 [1, p. 653],

² Translated from Serbo-Croatian by William B. Tomljanovich.

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immediately after the end of the Second World War. Its mandate was to assume the role of a national library for the newly established Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina within the Federal Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia.

At its beginning, the primary preoccupation of the library was recovery from the war. Its first goal was to gather collections of books that had been scattered throughout Sarajevo and Bosnia and Herzegovina. With the opening of the university in Sarajevo in 1949, the National Library assumed the role of the university library and also functioned as the central research library of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In 1951, the library moved to one of the most beautiful and, at the time, one of the largest buildings in Sarajevo. This pseudo-Moorish building, which was constructed from 1881 to 1896, during the period of Austro-Hungarian rule, was designed by the famous architects Aleksander Wittek and Ciril Iveković [2, p- 28; 3, leaf 18]. Their rich stylistic details can be seen not only on the facade but also in the central atrium, on the staircases, and in the ceremonial auditoriums, which were later used by the library as reading rooms, through which passed generations of student and scholars. Because it had an especially large seating capacity, an exceptionally beautiful and pleasant interior, and a very well organized service for assisting readers, many students spent all of their time studying for their exams there and continued to come after finishing their studies to work on their own scholarly research.

In the period of Austro-Hungarian rule, the building had been the city hall, or *Vijećnica* in Serbo-Croatian. This name stuck throughout the existence of the building, so that the name *Vijećnica* itself became a synonym for the library, and its formal name was only used officially. The building itself was a symbol of the city and was the pride of all Sarajevans. Tourists from the world over frequently visited and admired its truly imposing appearance, especially its central hall. This main hall, on account of its outstanding acoustic, was often used for holding concerts and also for varied exhibits that were organized by the librarians.

Soon after its foundation, the library took on new tasks and duties. In 1952 technical training in the form of the systematic organization of courses,

seminars, and the like was begun by the Library Center of the Council for Education and Culture of Bosnia and Herzegovina [4, p. 3], and later these duties were passed on to the National and University Library. In addition, in accordance with its function as a national library, during its nearly fifty years of existence it was a depository library. The library undertook the collection and conservation of obligatory copies of the entire output of books of Yugoslavia [5]. The National and University Library started to publish the current and retrospective national bibliography in 1953 with *Bosansko-Hercegovačka bibliografija knjiga i brošura 1945-1951* [6] and continued in 1954 with *Bosansko-Hercegovačka bibliografija knjiga: 1952* [7]. Subsequently the development of the Center for the Dissemination of Information, as well as the organization of the delivery of cataloging services, interlibrary loans, and international exchange programs took place.

The National and University Library had functions similar to those of other European research libraries. Its staff provided services that included collection development, cataloging, classification, information and reader services, reference, and so forth. The Department for the Study of Advanced Library Science was affiliated with the National and University Library. Special care was given to the description of Bosniaca literature, and there were several special collections, such as doctoral dissertations and unique manuscripts.

Over the course of years the library continued to expand. Its collection of books grew through depository copies, gifts, and exchange programs, especially those with the United States, Italy, Austria, and the Soviet Union. Thus the necessity arose for a larger space. In 1974 the library had 639,534 volumes or 261,486 titles, while in 1992 it had over 1,500,000 volumes and 600,000 serials.

In the early 1980s, efforts to undertake the construction of a new library building began. In addition to the proposed building providing for the expansion of the library, there were recommendations for the acquisition of state-of-the-art equipment necessary for the operation of a modern library. Soon a location at Marijin Dvor was selected on which a large complex would be built, which would represent the cultural center of the city and in which the National and University Library

and the city archives would be united. A maquette was displayed in the library, and I remember how often we stopped to admire it and how secure of our future we felt when we looked at it.

By the outbreak of the war, the library was almost completely modernized. It had switched to online cataloging, had begun to automate other services such as bibliography and acquisitions, and had expanded the reference center.

But on April 4, 1992, war suddenly broke out all over Bosnia and Herzegovina, marking the beginning of a terrible period in the history of the nation and its people. Bosnian Serbs who refused to acknowledge the sovereignty of the multiethnic Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and who wished to create a separate, all-Serb republic within the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina, seized all approaches to the city of Sarajevo, and electricity, water, gas, and food supplies were cut off on their orders. Sarajevo was turned into a besieged camp, and from the neighboring hills and mountains heavy artillery shelled the inhabitants of the city as well as their houses, apartments, hospitals, nurseries, schools, markets, and all well-known and important buildings. In short, the entire city and its inhabitants were exposed to systematic destruction.

Immediately after the beginning of the war, on May 17, 1992, the Bosnian Serb forces, in their desire to annihilate all Islamic cultural institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, destroyed the Oriental Institute, where many valuable collections had been stored. In less than two hours they shelled the institute's building down to its foundations and annihilated its immeasurable and irreplaceable cultural wealth. The destroyed holding included an important collection called *Manuscripta Turcica*, including more than seven thousand documents from the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries, a collection of judicial documents from the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries, and a collection of deeds from nearly all districts of Bosnia and Herzegovina in the nineteenth century. Also destroyed were civil record (for example, records of births, marriages, and deaths). In short, the destruction of this institute, which was one of the major research centers for the study of the Balkans, represents an irreplaceable loss.

Three months after the destruction of the Oriental Institute, at four o'clock in the afternoon of

August 25, 1992, the annihilation of the National and University Library and its holdings began.⁴ Serb forces launched the attack by firing shells from four positions on the surrounding hills. Twenty-five mortar shells struck the building, along with forty shells that were dropped on nearby streets in order to prevent the fire department from reaching the Vijećnica [8, p. 13]. By the morning of August 27 the library and its books, the great cultural and historical treasure of Bosnia and Herzegovina and its people, had vanished.

On becoming aware of this new misfortune that befell the city, the inhabitants of Sarajevo, although already weakened by hunger and the personal tragedies that had befallen them, rushed to save the cultural heart of their city - their Vijećnica. But there was nothing that they could do. The Serbs in the surrounding hills continued to fire furiously and mercilessly. Through the long summer night, the entire city was lit up by the flames that destroyed the Vijećnica. The next day the sky was dark with smoke, while across the city, pages and small bits of burned books sailed through the air. Burning paper could be smelled throughout the city. Inhabitants of Sarajevo were in shock.

It is impossible to give figures on the number of destroyed books and other materials as precise as those I have given for the Oriental Institute. While the building of the Oriental Institute was completely destroyed and burned to its foundations, 10-15 percent of the library's books, mostly low-circulation books that had been relegated to the basement of the Vijećnica, were saved. It is, however, impossible to confirm the number or content, particularly because an additional number of books were stored in off-site locations within the city even before the war, on account of the limited space in the Vijećnica itself. The true quantity of destroyed books will only be known in time. At present, it is estimated that in the flames of August 25-27, 1992, over 1,200,000 books and 600,000 serials, as well as all the catalogs that had been constructed over the course of years, computer equipment, microfilm and photo labs, and administrative documents, were all burned [8, p. 14].

⁴ The library was already closed; the wartime early closing schedule was in effect. That was very fortunate, because otherwise many lives would have been lost.

Before the war roughly 150 people worked in the library. There were about sixty professional librarians. About 10 percent of the staff went over to the side of the Bosnian Serb nationalists. In addition, some library workers left Sarajevo as refugees. The men went into the army of Bosnia and Herzegovina and are now serving at the front lines. Today only fifty of our workers remain at work, and thirty of us are professional librarians. The staff members who now work in the new location of the library are members of all nationalities: Serbs and Croats as well as Moslems.⁵ Interpersonal relationships are the same as they were before the war: without any ethnic divisions.

Those of us who remained continued to go to work every day even after the destruction of the library, as long as there was not an all-out attack on the city. When there was no transportation to bring us to work, we went of foot, and those of us who live in the suburbs of Novi Grad - Ali Pašino Polje, Mojmiro, Vojničko Polje, or Dobrinja - myself included, walked as far as ten miles in both directions. While we walked shells fell around us, and we were the constant target of snipers. On our way to work we saw our fellow citizens wounded and killed. We were determined to continue our work despite all of the difficulties. We were hungry because we had little or nothing to eat. We were cold because we did not have heat or electricity, and very frequently we were shelled as we were waiting in line for water at the wells, water reservoirs, or the water tanks that were brought in by the fire brigade or United Nations soldiers.

Despite all of this, we succeeded in bringing the books out of the basement of the destroyed library and moving them to a rented storage space in the Bosnian Cultural Center on the Branilaca Grada Street. Over the course of the past two years we have managed to organize the basic services of the library, and we have very intensively undertaken the recataloging and the reclassification of the books that were saved. We also work on cataloging in publication of the new wartime materials that are being published in Sarajevo. At the same time we are building new author-title and subject catalogs.

⁵ The library staff moved to the new location within the Pedagogical Institute at 3 Otokar Keršovani Street. Ten small rooms were allocated to the National and University Library.

We have begun to serve patrons, especially with new publications that local publishers regularly deliver. We still have not obtained a suitable building for the library, but this situation is understandable, taking into account that the war is still going on and that a large number of important buildings, not only ours, have been destroyed. Some international organizations, and especially Unesco, have pledged their help in rebuilding the old library, but as long as the siege of the city continues, this remains a dream. At present it is impossible to bring into Sarajevo books published in other parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina, or foreign books, or any other equipment necessary for the marginally efficient operations of the library.

In our cramped offices we have none of the reference works that are indispensable for technical services. We have no copier, which is most unfortunate, because we cannot copy the catalog cards but have to type them individually in order to create the necessary sets. We lack even the most basic materials for work, such as paper and pencils. The library workers' living conditions are below any imaginable standards. We were paid two or perhaps three times last year, and that was in worthless Bosnian dinars. Moreover, prices for basic necessities are astronomical. For example, one liter of cooking oil costs twenty dollars. Groceries, shoes, and clothing are almost impossible to obtain.

In April of 1994, a number of us Bosnian librarians wrote a letter directed to twenty European libraries, asking that they help us meet our bare material needs. Beginning in August of 1994, positive responses started to arrive: from the National Library and theater workers in Berlin, the National Library in Turin, the National Library in Ljubljana and from some humanitarian organizations in France. Thanks to this aid, from August 1994 until my departure from Sarajevo on February 15, 1995, we received altogether roughly ten thousand deutsche marks. We divided this equally among ourselves, and we even included our librarian-soldiers who are at the lines, because their material conditions are just as difficult as ours. Through our appeal for assistance we were able to receive about two hundred deutsche marks for each worker over these five to six months, an enormous help.

It is my moral and human obligation to mention the workers of the library who lost their lives over

the course of this brutal war. It is especially poignant that most of them were killed on their way to or from work.

The first to be killed was Aida Buturović, a librarian thirty years of age. The day before her death, she told us that she would soon marry her longtime boyfriend. But on August 25, 1992, the same day on which the library was attacked, only three or four hours earlier as she was returning from work, Aida was shot directly in the head by a sniper and was killed near her apartment. We wondered how anyone could have the heart to kill such a young, beautiful, and fragile woman, who looked more like a child than an adult. Not until the next day did her parents find her in the morgue. Ten months after Aida's death her father was also killed by an enemy sniper as he was going to her grave at the Koševo football stadium, just as he did devotedly every day, regardless of how dangerous it was to walk around the city.⁶

Mirko Azinović was killed in September 1993, as he too was returning from work. A shell hit him at the entrance of his own building. He was wounded and died three weeks later as a result of his severe injuries. A man in his sixties, he was already supposed to have retired, but he wanted to stay on a while longer to help the library. He was the chief of the library's stacks for many years, and because of his outstanding knowledge of the collection, he was perhaps the only one in a position to assess accurately how many books were left after the destruction of the library. But this longtime caretaker of our collection shared the fate of the books that were his life's work.

Then Adela Leota was killed in November 1993. She was a senior librarian and, as she was in her sixties, she was pensioned off over the course of the war. She was a leading local authority in library science, and had been the chief of the Service for the Advancement of Library Science, as well as the head of the Commission for the Technical Examinations of Librarians for all libraries of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Librarians from all over the country sought out her professional advice. She was killed by a gas explosion in her apartment. Such

⁶ There is no available place for burials in Sarajevo anymore. People are buried in parks and stadiums or right next to their homes.

explosions are still a common occurrence in the city, as the Serb nationalist forces controlling the city's gas supply turn the gas main back on without giving warning. People who have become accustomed to the absence of gas light matches in areas where gas has accumulated and thus accidentally set off explosions. Usually the explosions occur in the middle of the night, and so it was that Adela was the victim of such an explosion at four o'clock in the morning. She was burned over 90 percent of her body, and she died in great pain that evening.

After Adela, Anto Kovačić, the author of *Bibliografija franjevac Bosne Srebrene* [9], was killed in January 1994. He was one of the outstanding scholars of our library and of our city. Like many Sarajevans, he was an indirect victim of the fighting. During periods of heavy shelling, drivers seized by panic attempt to drive out of danger quickly, and thus often kill pedestrians. Kovačić was killed in such a way. Kovačić had a number of other works on library science in progress, but they remained unfinished. He was the father of two young children, one of whom was seriously ill, born with a birth defect and greatly dependent on her parents.

The death of our four workers of the library in Sarajevo are typical of those that occur daily among the general population of the city. The majority of the eleven thousand dead were struck on their way to work, riding the streetcar, waiting in line for water or bread, or at the cemetery as they were burying their dead. Many children have been slain while going to school or playing in front of their houses, and many have also been killed in their own apartments by shells that rained down from the Serb artillery in the mountains.

I myself left besieged Sarajevo for the first time on February 15, 1995. Getting out is very difficult, as the city is completely blockaded by Serb nationalist forces. I was helped out of the city under arrangements made by the United Nations (U.N.) and Unesco. French soldiers transported me in an armored U.N. vehicle through enemy-held zones to the city's airport.

Although the transport of travelers from the city of Sarajevo itself through Serb lines to the airport is undertaken under the auspices of the United Nations, there is no guarantee for the protection of the lives of the travelers, as no one ever knows if the

paramilitary Serbian nationalists will unexpectedly detain or shoot them along this road. Luckily, after my successful arrival at the airport and a short check of passports, documents, and luggage by U.N. personnel, I made it to a large airplane, painted white with the blue sign of the U.N. In the airplane itself were tracks upon which were placed two giant shipping containers, which are said often to contain tanks. For passengers, there are seats laterally arranged along the walls of the aircraft. There were roughly thirty of us traveling, U.N. soldiers and very few civilians, most of whom were foreign journalists.

When I arrived in Zagreb, Croatia, I saw a beautiful city, with undamaged and undestroyed buildings, countless cars on the streets, shop windows and stores full of food and fine clothing, relaxed and smiling people. Only then did I begin to understand how much Sarajevo and its people have endured. Tears began to run down my face, not so much for the destroyed city as for its people. In that moment I realized that although indeed one day the destruction of buildings and all other material things will stop, the loss of human lives, the crippling of human bodies, and the annihilation of cultural treasures in Bosnia are permanent. There are no truces, or treaties, or international agencies in the world that can replace the lives cut short or the records of human civilization reduced to ashes.

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