

OF LIBRARIES AND LIBRARIANS: THOUGHTS FROM AN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

Ioana ROBU

Director

Central Library of the University of Medicine and Pharmacy, Cluj

In June (1997) I returned from a 4-months visit to the United States, and I was immediately "buttonholed" by the editor-in-chief of *Philobiblon*. He wanted me to set down my impressions and thoughts right away, "before you calm down, while you are still angry and you have it all inside you," as he put it. Many of you who will read this will know exactly what he was talking about, as you probably have had similar experiences following a professional trip abroad or have been close to people who have had. The only thing I will say is that probably by the time this is published, I will have "calmed down," not changed (I hope!) and I shall also read it through other eyes. Anyway, I am grateful for the opportunity and I'm grasping it!

My visit to the U.S.A. was on account of my award of the 1997 Cunningham Fellowship of the Medical Library Association (MLA). Yes, there is a Medical Library Association in the U.S.A. - national and international library associations have medical sections or groups - which right from the start shows the importance and the degree to which medical librarianship has developed in America. And this is not just a whim of medical librarians in order to separate from other fields, but a necessity resulting from the specificity of health and biomedical information. In Romania the library associations do not even have a medical libraries section! The M.L.A. Cunningham Fellowship - a total of \$5000 - is granted once a year to an international librarian, through which s/he is invited for a 4-months working experience in medical libraries in the U.S.A. or Canada. The program and the choice of host American libraries depend on the interests expressed by the Cunningham fellow. The selection of the winner is done by a specially appointed MLA board and it is based on written applications from the candidates. I was asked countless times by my fellow countrymen if it was difficult and how I succeeded in being selected, which set me thinking . . . of how very few people in Romania know how to submit proper applications, to "sell themselves." I have come across a lot of cultured, intellectual people, many of them with remarkable scientific activity, who are unable to fill in forms or submit a proper letter or a *curriculum vitae* according to international standards. Even while I was there, I happened to see a few letters written by Romanian students or

doctors asking for information or applying for various grants, and I must admit I was ashamed! It is not the language - the degree of English language knowledge may be varied, but the actual form in which it was presented showed a total lack of education in this respect. The extreme side of this is that the mentality still prevails that applications are just a formality, a pure nuisance, and are treated as such. I have heard people saying things like: "I will only submit an application if I am sure I am chosen"!! The logic is frightening. This is an area where school education should definitely do something - or if not at high-school level, at least at university level. In my opinion this is the ABC of pro-active education.

Because I work in a medical university library and this is the main area of my professional interest, the program was focused on American medical libraries within an academic setting. However, it was only when I was there that I realized that the majority of medical libraries in America serve the health profession, not only medical education and research. In Romania all the prominent medical libraries are part of the higher education system and they serve the learning needs of the students, and the teaching and research needs of the academic staff. Current medical information is proclaimed to be very important, but in Romania it is still very little used for the actual medical practice. The information network of the health care system is almost nonexistent. The old structures, including the Medical Documentation Centre in Bucharest, are still in place, but are threatened to be shut down for lack of funds. It is also true that in conditions of very poor health-care budgets and a crumbling health-care system, in which basic facilities, drugs or hospital food are main issues, health information can only be pushed to the bottom of the priority list, if even included! However, in the American health care system it is considered of paramount importance: no American doctor will prescribe any treatment to the patient without consulting the latest information in literature. The patients, on the other hand, have full access to medical literature and they have the right to question the doctor's decisions if they think the latter has not taken into consideration all therapeutic alternatives. This makes medical libraries play a prominent role in the entire health care system, and in fact all the medical libraries I have seen are placed in the busiest areas of hospitals or medical centres. It is not uncommon for the medical librarian to be part of the team that does the daily hospital rounds, in order to be able to provide the latest information in the shortest time possible. However, this is a much more complex matter and perhaps could make the purpose of a more medically oriented article.

My program included visits and working experience in more than 25 libraries all over the USA, from North Carolina, Washington, D.C., Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Seattle, WA, Los Angeles, New Jersey and New York. Most of them were medical university libraries, but also other medical institution libraries. Two important "sites" did not strictly belong to the medical field, namely OCLC (Online Computer Library Center) in Ohio - the well-known international library

services agency, and the School of Librarianship and Information Studies in Urbana-Champaign, Illinois. If the first month of my program was mostly spent observing the various library services and talking to the librarians, the last three included working on specific projects assigned by the respective library.

The first thing that struck me from the very beginning, and was confirmed again and again throughout my whole stay, was the high level of professionalism of the librarians. All librarians - I mean only those with a university degree in library and information science (all other personnel working in libraries are library assistants) - have extensive knowledge in cataloguing, classification, indexing, bibliographic services, library management etc., but they also have almost all the skills of a computer specialist: they can work with spreadsheets, raw databases, statistics, and also deal with the basic troubleshooting problems of their machines and networks. Each library has a well-defined training program for librarians and nobody is omitted. Understandably so, under the great technologic pressure: new programs and machines require new skills almost every week. The training sessions take place in the library, in specially designed computer laboratories. However, the main purpose of these labs is to serve the training needs for the library users. Every library has a teaching program for its users (in the case of the university library for students and academic staff) - the teachers are librarians and the courses offered have a wide range: from word-processing, spreadsheets to database searching, INTERNET skills, or programming. Participation in the courses is by either simple signing up for an advertised course, or can be part of the students' curricula. The librarians' status in a university setting depends on the policy of each university, but it basically depends on the librarians' choice: they may be considered as professional administrative staff or full academic staff, having the same status as faculty teaching staff. In this case the library is considered one of the major university departments, and the chief librarian has the position of a "dean", usually called "Dean for Information". This situation may look very appealing to us, but it is also the most difficult: being assimilated with faculty and research staff means that librarians have to fulfill not only a number of teaching hours, but also a lot of research work, finalized in reports, published papers and hopefully attraction of funding from specific grants. The amount and the quality of scientific work required to fulfill this status is very high, and this is why many librarians prefer the more comfortable status of administrative staff. By no means does this reduce the esteem for librarians or the profession: they are considered highly qualified professionals, fulfilling an extremely valuable and specialized job.

Why is it so different in Romania, where the librarians are still considered as "auxiliary" personnel capable of little more than taking and putting books on the shelves? One basic reason may be the importance (rather the lack of importance) placed by society on current information as an element of social welfare and

progress. Information may be valued by certain individuals or groups as long as they can control and restrict its circulation in order to serve their own interests (scientific activity, promotion, status etc.). The minute information becomes public - being managed and circulated by a library - its value is perceived as being diminished by these individuals or groups. The mentality may be also due to the fact that in long decades of communist censorship and lack of information inflow from the west has shattered all confidence in libraries as institutions capable of offering valid, updated information. It is during this period that libraries were considered "dead" places where nothing happened, while librarians were seen as a strange species of failed teachers stranded on the libraries' "shore" for lack of anything better to do in life. A librarian was considered to require no special professional knowledge or skills, except perhaps "love for books and/or reading", which in my opinion has nothing to do with the profession of librarianship, no more anyway than any intellectual profession. In a routine questionnaire I administered to the fresh students of the newly opened College of Librarianship in Cluj, asking them the main reason why they chose this college, ninety percent of them stated "because I love books!" Honestly, I could scream. And this brings me to another delicate issue: professional education. For more than two decades special university education in this field has been absent, which made it necessary to recruit librarians from other academic fields. In 1990 the Faculty of *Bibliology(?)* and Information Science was (re)established in Bucharest. Many other little more or less accredited colleges appeared in the country in the next years. The College of Librarianship and Information Science began in Cluj in 1995. All these schools have decided to continue education in librarianship where it was abandoned over 25 years ago. More than half of their curricula includes history of all sorts, languages and literature. The logic of it could be also based on the sequence: *LIBRARIES --> BOOKS --> LITERATURE/HISTORY --> LIBRARIANSHIP*, which is all wrong, because libraries have long stopped being simple book repositories. Perhaps this arrangement serves the interests of the people who teach, but it certainly does not serve the profession. Librarianship is miles ahead of what it was 25 years ago, and there is no doubt that this "new" breed of young "librarians" will be absolutely useless in the new hi-tech libraries - the true gateways of world information - unless the curriculum too is revolutionized. While I was in America, I thought of our young students in librarianship: how completely different everything was, and how almost nothing of what they are taught in Romania would be of any use or consequence there, or anywhere in Europe for that matter! I wondered what would be the chances of a young Romanian graduate finding a job in an American library, and the answer was evident: NONE!

The librarians already working in a Romanian library would not be in a much better position either. They would only have their working experience to

speak in their favour, which is a valuable asset of course, but not enough: without specialized, systematic education the profession has been kept at the level of clerical skills and basic knowledge, without the overall perspective and understanding which defines any intellectual profession. Little is done in this area too. No postgraduate form of education in librarianship exists in Romania as yet, despite attempts to negotiate a franchise with the Library School of the University of Northumbria, Great Britain, for a Master Degree. The only library school in Romania that could organize this with all the official endorsements of the Ministry of Education is the one in Bucharest, but they are not accepted as sole Romanian counterpart by the British school so everything was left pending. Meanwhile, the librarians have very few training options, under circumstances of increased pressure. One of them is the newly issued "Statute of Educational Personnel" which states that librarians have to have specialized training. Where from?? The Ministry of Education does not say or do anything. It is high time that the Romanian Library Associations step in and elaborate detailed and structured training programs and credits for competence, as all library associations in the world do. In the U.S.A. the Medical Library Association for example have set standards for qualification in librarianship and organize continuing education courses which count for a certain number of credit points. It is up to the association and to librarians themselves to advertise and "sell themselves" to their employers. In Romania everyone waits for a hazy decision "from the top", namely the Ministry of Education, and of course this does not come because they have other important things to deal with and librarians are considered a second-hand profession. On the other hand, who is more competent about what should be done than the librarians themselves? But again it's this wretched, "inherited" mentality: sitting with our hands crossed and waiting . . . and moaning and whimpering that nothing is done.

There is much more to be narrated about American libraries and librarians, but these would be details - of buildings, settings, **hard** working habits, superb management etc. Perhaps some other time. As I said in the beginning, these are just the first thoughts that came to my mind. This does not mean that things cannot be changed. They can, but it takes a lot of collective willpower to be put to this cause, i.e. all the Romanian librarians themselves can only change the profession as it stands now!