

War and Recovery: One Initiative to Help Bosnia's Libraries Rebuild

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It is an honor to find myself before you today, and I wish to thank Kemal Bakarsic for inviting me to speak. I do feel like a rank interloper in so far as I am not a Slavic librarian. I manage large photograph collections at Harvard, the purview of which is the Islamic world and the Middle East. Still, the Balkans in general and Bosnia in particular play a role in my work due to their participation in the Ottoman tradition. The focus of my talk is only obliquely related to the broader themes of this conference since I am here, in the main, to describe the Bosnia Library Project, born in early 1996 in the wake of the Dayton Accords, which, however flawed, made this effort possible.

IMAGE 1: the Vijecnica burning

As no one in this room needs to be told, the awesome image before you depicts the Vijecnica in flames on August 25, 1992, the site of the National and University Library here in Sarajevo. Aside from the horror and pity this image evokes, it has another significance: it was the only photograph of this terrible act of destruction published in the United States at the time of the event. It was an Associated Press image carried only by the *Chicago Tribune*. It was accompanied by a caption--only by a caption. No informed story conveyed the enormity of this event or placed it in the context of the war of aggression against Bosnia or the history of outrages against humanity's cultural heritage. At the same time, *The New York Times* carried a brief story without picture buried in its back pages. Why should this be so? In part it was due to the fact that Hurricane Andrew had hit South Florida the day before, creating the worst natural disaster in recent American history, causing \$30 billion in damage, dozens of deaths, with 250,000 rendered homeless. This was the story Americans were interested in and the American press was covering. Even without such distractions, the ignorance of the American people and detachment of their leaders in Washington cannot be denied.

On March 31, 1993, an appeal was published in the *New York Times*, signed by nearly 300 American academics and librarians. Prepared by three colleagues of mine and me it was entitled "Cultural Genocide in Bosnia-Herzegovina", and its center-piece was this photograph, which had thus finally made it to the *Times*, although too late to have the kind of impact it should have had. A while later the appeal was published in *The New York Review of Books*.

IMAGE 2: NUBBiH, reading room before the war

This serene image depicts the reading room of the National Library at a better time. In a decent world, this is what the pursuit of education and a higher purpose in life would look like everywhere.

At war's end in early 1996, more than three years since the wrecking of Sarajevo's principal cultural institutions, there was no specific international agreement that this damage had to be made right by concerted action and no actors who took long-range responsibility for such an undertaking. The major players seem to have felt that their task was done when the portions of the former Marshall Tito Barracks dedicated to be a temporary National Library, but containing only 35% of the pre-war space in the Vijećnica, were physically restored to a functional state. Even this took years fully to accomplish, using funds from the World Bank, USAID, UNESCO and Soros. A German donation of stacks provided a place to put surviving and donated books. Despite a UNESCO assessment report published at the beginning of 1996 promoting comprehensive staff training and development, collection rebuilding, automation and connectivity among major libraries, only the most limited funds were ever provided toward these ends.

No internationally coordinated initiative was undertaken to assist in the rebuilding of destroyed and damaged library collections either. Among other unfortunate efforts, one misbegotten book drive had already resulted in tens of thousands of largely useless books fetching up in a warehouse in Maribor, Slovenia, dealt with by our host, Dr. Bakarsic, while the siege still raged. In this vacuum, the Bosnia Library Project was conceived in early 1996 at Harvard by Andras Riedlmayer and myself, and I became its coordinator. In brief, we solicited and received the support of Neil Rudenstine, then President of Harvard, and, through him, a commitment by the Harvard University Press for two

copies of every title on its list. This was quickly followed by like commitments from the University of Chicago, MIT, Princeton and Johns Hopkins presses with lesser donations from 16 other American scholarly presses. Replacing what had been lost to the fire was never going to be possible; the very cataloguing records had been consumed with the collections, but I was convinced that this caliber of donation would go a long way toward creating useful academic collections. We made every effort to avoid the usual pitfalls of book donation projects: yesterday's pulp fiction, self-help books, outdated reference materials, stray journal issues, and hopelessly arcane subjects were to be avoided. The heads of Harvard's vast library system agreed to permit volunteer librarians to select from the tens of thousands of duplicates generated by Harvard's huge library system through gifts and other means. Some other institutional and many private donations periodically augmented these primary sources, the most valuable being complete scholarly collections and long runs of journals. Two years of lobbying and some fund raising resulted in four full sets of the *Library of America* being donated to libraries in Sarajevo, Tuzla and Mostar. All told, nearly 100,000 volumes will have been shipped.

OCLC, the Online Computer Library Center, Inc., undertook a search of 36,000,000 library records and came up with 103,983 records of Bosniaca in American libraries. In the event that microforms needed to be created of any titles to replace losses. Although this file was sent in late 1996 to the National Library Sarajevo, it was established in 2004 that it was never received, probably resulting from the unpredictable state of the postal system of the post-war period. This snafu has been remedied. OCLC also agreed to provide bibliographic records from the ISBN lists submitted by the scholarly presses of their donations to the Bosnia Library Project to assist in the daunting cataloguing task awaiting the librarians here in Sarajevo.

From the beginning, the Bosnia Library Project operated in partnership with the Sabre Foundation of Cambridge, Massachusetts, which had had many years' experience in book donation projects and the knowledge of logistics in warehousing, transport and distribution of donated materials. With its assistance, several academic and institutional libraries in Sarajevo and Tuzla have benefited from our donations. In recent years, Sabre's Sarajevo partner has been the local branch of the World University Service.

The last shipment of this project, which formally came to an end in February of this year, exemplifies the sorts of materials sent over the years. 202 boxes destined for Sarajevo were picked up at Harvard by the Sabre Foundation. The contents of this last shipment provide a good indication of the range of recipients benefiting from this initiative over the years:

- National and University Library, Sarajevo: 25 boxes (primarily reference works)
- Oriental Institute, Sarajevo: 18 boxes
- Faculty of Economics, U. of Sarajevo: 27 boxes
- Faculty of Philosophy, U. of Sarajevo: 96 boxes (mainly art history)
- Faculty of Architecture, U. of Sarajevo: 12 boxes
- University and Public Library, Tuzla: 24 boxes

Their contents also included thousands of 35 mm slides of art works for the Faculty of Philosophy and even larger numbers of architecture slides for the Faculty of Architecture, and joined many more boxes already waiting at the Sabre warehouse.

Finally, a wonderful library of 3,500 titles, largely in the humanities, was donated by the brother of a scholar who died at a lamentably young age. Her library is a particularly rich one and was gladly accepted by the Faculty of Philosophy Library. It is being sent directly to the Sabre warehouse by the donor.

This represents the successful aspect of this Project. Although I had not set eyes on the UNESCO report at the time, in 1999 I enlisted colleagues in Sarajevo, Maribor and London in creating a proposal aimed at a comprehensive renaissance of Bosnian academic libraries. It would have provided funds for systematic professional development, for hardware and software necessary to create Bosnia-wide interconnectivity to enhance cataloguing, collection management and user access, for continued donations of publications at a high level, and for a preservation department for the National Library. Of these, the latter, provided independently by the Spanish National Library, and a visual library for the Faculty of Architecture, support for which was solicited by me from IFLA, was all that was achieved. I was unable to find an interested foundation or granting agency. This was largely due to timing--too long after the events-- my inexperience, lack of the necessary

contacts, lack of fit with the funding profiles of the foundations approached, and, as I understand now, a lack of clarity regarding who would be receiving the grant. The sad thing is, these needs remain largely unmet.

Even sadder are recent events, of which you are all probably aware. The diminished Bosnian national government, undermined by an inherently unworkable administrative system imposed by the Dayton Accords, and run by politicians of limited vision and compromised standards, has progressively decreased funding for the National Library and other national institutions. The same lack of national will that has kept the gutted Vijećnica from being restored has caused Bosnia's national institutions of cultural memory to languish. First the National Museum and then the National and University Library closed their doors to the public this past October. They could not pay their staffs and heat their premises following continuing drastic cuts in their budgets. It required protests from European ambassadors, the Office of the High Representative and the Council of Europe to effect the allocation of minimal budgets just sufficient for them to reopen, if only temporarily.

**IMAGE 3: Dr. Enes Kujundzic before the
entrance to the new National Library at the
ex-Marshall Tito Barracks**

Worse was to follow. One of the few genuinely enlightened measures undertaken by the beleaguered Federal Government of Bosnia-Herzegovina at the end of the war was the donation of the Marshall Tito Barracks to the University of Sarajevo. Few acts after so much destruction were so in the spirit of the Biblical injunction to turn swords into ploughshares than this decision to give over the huge Austrian-built, siege-scarred edifice to the enterprise that most directly provides the foundation for a productive and enlightened Bosnian future: higher education. Both the National and University Library and the Oriental Institute found a haven on the premises of the Barracks.

So what does the US do? It asks the Bosnian government to hand over the site of the Barracks for a new embassy, and to clear it of the Barracks for good measure, all this for the trifling sum of approximately \$9,000,000.00 net. In what can only be described as a desperate effort to curry favor with a great power whose attention has turned elsewhere, the Bosnian government capitulated, followed by the parliament, despite a thousand students protesting in the

snow outside. One can begin to measure the extraordinary damage to this nation's self-conception caused by the dire events of the 1990s inherent in these developments.

This American plan can only be considered arrogant disregard for the welfare of Sarajevo and of all Bosnians. Although not an architectural masterpiece, the Barracks remains a central monument of old Sarajevo and a vital part of the city's institutional life, closely related physically and functionally to the University. The Americans can afford to build anywhere, but with usable space at a premium after so much destruction, where will the National and University Library and the Oriental Institute, plus any other functions performed there go? The US will build a bunker in the center of town that will be a blight on the cityscape and a reminder to all that the US gets what it wants, regardless of the cost to others. The United States should be committed to the welfare of other, weaker nations, to which its narrow self-interest--as opposed to genuine needs--should take a back seat. It should support the proposition that might does not make right, the contrary being implicit in this sorry process. I only hope that this plan can be stopped before any actual damage is done, but I am not sanguine of a positive outcome.

The Bosnia Library Project was made possible by the labor of numerous dedicated volunteers over many years. It has been a profound and personally necessary commitment for me. The final paragraph of the first letter I ever sent to members of Congress, the US government, foreign embassies and National Public Radio, dated 11 June 1992, included the passage: "Further delays will only result in further devastation. The necessity for liberation will not go away, but it will be a great shame to end up liberating leveled cities and decimated populations." Well, the cities were not leveled, but they were devastated, and the cost in human lives and in the cultural patrimony of Bosnia-Herzegovina is beyond measuring. The USA, England, France, Germany, Russia and the UN brought lasting shame upon themselves. I hope that the Bosnia Library Project will be understood as a small act of restitution in acknowledgement of all that cannot be replaced.

**Appendix (1):
Tenth Anniversary of the Assault on the National and
University Library, Sarajevo, August 25-26, 1992**
- Letter from Jeff Spurr (Friday, 23 August 2002)

Dear friends,

The time is at hand to mark an important anniversary: the tenth since the attack on the National and University Library of Bosnia and Hercegovina in Sarajevo on August 25-26, 1992. It was not the first great outrage of that war of aggression; the collections of Sarajevo's Oriental Institute had been utterly destroyed in May and concentration camps such as Omarska and Keraterm were taking their place among other twentieth century sites of evil memory such as Auschwitz and Kolyma.

However, the assault on the Vijećnica, the splendid Moorish-revival building that had been founded under Austrian dispensation as the seat of government and transformed into the National Library after WWII, deserves special attention.

For those in need of reminding, Serb nationalist forces commenced firing incendiary phosphorus shells at the Vijećnica on the evening of the 25th. The grand and elegant stained-glass skylight over the atrium made a perfect target. The ensuing conflagration was unstoppable in spite of desperate efforts on the part of Sarajevo's firemen, shot at throughout their efforts to put the fire out, leaving hoses sprouting leaks everywhere. Although a significant number of rare manuscripts and books were salvaged by the staff under daunting conditions (and collections of tertiary value, stored off site, were spared), some ninety percent of the library's contents were consumed, including numerous special collections, the greatest collection of Bosnian periodical literature since its beginnings in the nineteenth century, and the archives of the various ethnic and cultural societies that had been consolidated there at the time of the library's establishment. The Vijećnica itself survived as a shell, its fine marble revetments burnt to lime, its lovely rooms laid waste.

This was not only arguably the worst single case of deliberate book burning in history in absolute terms, with the loss of well over a million volumes; it was also a blow to the heart of a whole nation, an incalculable loss whose magnitude is beyond the imagination of most people to encompass. The library's collections enshrined the strivings of generations, the products of that hopefulness which is at the foundation of all knowledge, all progress and those liberal values that invigorate our civilization. In toto, those collections put the lie to the exclusionary arguments of the nationalist extremists for they demonstrated that multi-ethnic, multi-confessional Bosnia had thrived under centuries of Ottoman rule and then decades of Austrian and Yugoslav rule, its inhabitants of whatever background able not simply to live next to but also with each other. To create facts suited to their narrow ideological program, the extremists had to create a new present by erasing the past.

The National and University Library has faced daunting odds in rehabilitating itself. It has been provided one wing of the Austrian-era, latterly-named Marshall Tito Barracks, along with its stables. Funds from Soros, UNESCO, USAID and the World Bank have enabled the restoration of the barracks in a manner suitable for a library. A German donor provided the stacks. Although the collections are much diminished, despite new growth, the current library provides only thirty-five percent of the space available in the old library. Sadly, funds from major donors only addressed the requirements of the physical space and many other needs are not yet met, despite efforts of the Director, Dr. Enes Kujundžić, and, independently, of the Bosnia Library Project to seek sources of support. Even worse, the National Library has been

dealt a terrific blow recently: its budget has been cut by a catastrophic 60%. The devolution of government and the lack of a Minister of Culture in the national government (what there is of it), means that there is no natural constituency amongst people of influence for this institution so long as the national identity is undermined at every turn. Evidently, the IMF told the Bosnian government that it had to get its house in order and it preferred to gut the budget for the National Library than cut services it deemed more basic. What is to be done about this and whether it can be ameliorated, I do not know at this point.

In my childhood, Nazi Germany provided the very image of evil in the world for me. This condition was exemplified by certain iconic features of that regime: the swastika, goose-stepping, Gestapo torture chambers, collective punishment, death camps, and book burning. Book burning came to seem the very sign of intolerance, despotism and unenlightened thinking, wherever one might find it. It is no accident then that the megalomaniacal autocrat who rules contemporary Turkmenistan, who has dubbed himself "Turkmenbasi" (Father of the Turkmen) and who has recently renamed the month of January after himself, has closed the national library of that unhappy country. He perceived it as a hotbed of independent thought and so, declaring that all true Turkmen required was Turkmen literature, he simply shut the library down.

Although doubtless an adventitious connection, I have thought there to be something profound in the identity of two basic Latin words: Liber for book (as in library) and liber for free (as in liberty and liberality). It is literature and scholarship, freely available to all who wish access, especially in the form of books, often enshrined in libraries, that makes us truly free by affording us the understanding to support free institutions and humane values where they exist and desire them where they do not.

The Bosnia Library Project has been dedicated to assisting in the renewal of Bosnia's libraries. We can never hope to regain what is lost, but we can aspire to develop useful collections that, by giving today's students some of what they need to understand the world and find their place in it, will help to provide a viable future for Bosnia and its citizens. To read more about what the BLP has been up to please see the appeal at the following url. Thanks to three generous donors, its immediate goals were reached; however, its future will rely on further support.
<http://www.applicom.com/twibih/appeal.html>

Yours truly,
Jeff Spurr
Coordinator, Bosnia Library Project

Appendix (2):
Bosnia Library Project: Final Report, 16 February 2005
by Jeff Spurr

On Monday, 31 January 2005, 202 boxes were picked up by the Sabre Foundation to be taken to their warehouse in advance of being sent to Sarajevo, 54 from my office in the Fine Arts Library, 148 from the stacks of Littauer Library. This shipment marks the ninth and, I say with some regret, the final shipment of the Bosnia Library Project, at least directly from Harvard. The BLP was founded here at Harvard in early 1996 after the Dayton Accords, however flawed, created a situation admitting to

direct assistance, with the support of President Neil Rudenstine, the Harvard University Library, the Harvard College Library and the Harvard University Press.

The contents of this last shipment provide a good indication of the range of recipients benefiting from this initiative over the years:

- National and University Library, Sarajevo: 25 boxes (primarily reference-related)
- Oriental Institute, Sarajevo: 18 boxes
- Faculty of Economics, U. of Sarajevo: 27 boxes
- Faculty of Philosophy, U. of Sarajevo: 96 boxes (mainly art history)
- Faculty of Architecture, U. of Sarajevo: 12 boxes
- University and Public Library, Tuzla: 24 boxes

Of these, all contain books or journals, save for 1 box of slides of art works for the Faculty of Philosophy and 3 boxes of architecture slides for the Faculty of Architecture. The bulk of the latter comprise the remarkably rich lifetime collection of Wolf von Eckardt, who had a prolific career writing on modern architecture, design and urbanism (HOLLIS shows 28 records for him).

Aside from these materials, 4 photo cabinets were donated to the Faculty of Architecture to replace the four originally sent to them along with a collection of mounted photographs of architecture (once at Smith College), which had been transferred to the wrong institutions in Sarajevo.

Finally, a wonderful library of 3,500 titles, largely in the humanities, was donated by the brother of a scholar who died at a lamentably young age. Her library is a particularly rich one and was eagerly accepted by the Faculty of Philosophy Library. It is being sent directly to the Sabre warehouse by him now that the rest of the shipment is on its way.

There are many causes for bringing this project to a close, at least in its Harvard dimension. The HCL Gifts and Exchange Department, mined so profitably by volunteer retired Harvard librarians, has ceased to exist. Littauer Library, which has provided an indispensable venue for processing selections and donations for several years now, will move sooner or later, depriving us of a place for these activities. Using my office as a cache for local donations created some problems, if largely cosmetic. For the last three or so years, the Sabre Foundation, with which I have worked to make this project a reality, has asked that I personally raise all funds necessary for these shipments (as much as

\$18,000.00 per), a very taxing process for one not professionally engaged in such work and with many other commitments. My work to benefit Iraqi libraries has inevitably taken time and attention away from Bosnia. Finally, we have been quite successful. The Oriental Institute has received and will soon receive as many books and journals as their present site can possibly handle. The overburdened and underpaid National and University Library staff remains far from completing the cataloguing of all of the many thousands of titles donated to them. Our donations to the library of the Faculty of Philosophy come late in the process but are large and of extremely high quality. The library at Tuzla was exceptionally happy with the donation of the 10,000 volumes they received, and are receiving more on this occasion as well. My only regret in this context is that the situation in Mostar was such that no effective lines of communication could be sustained and no institution prepared to handle significant donations was available that did not have intolerable nationalist political associations. The new and struggling Dzemal Bijedic Universitet did receive a complete set of *The Library of America*, at least, as did the National and University Library and the library of the Faculty of Philosophy.

My prolonged efforts to find a funding institution for a comprehensive rehabilitation of Bosnian academic libraries, a proposal I had developed in collaboration with colleagues in Sarajevo, Maribor Slovenia and London, particularly but not exclusively focusing on automation and interconnectivity, proved unavailing. This was largely due to my inexperience, lack of the necessary contacts, lack of fit with the funding profiles of the foundations approached, and, as I understand now, a lack of clarity regarding who would be receiving the grant. The sad thing is, these needs remain largely unmet. I did succeed in soliciting funds from IFLA to pay for the infrastructure of a visual library for the Faculty of Architecture, and there were other small achievements along the way.

What really counts is that the original aim of the BLP, assisting in the rebuilding of destroyed and damaged library collections, has largely been a success. Many good individuals donated materials, modest and significant, over the years; however, it was the institutional gifts, first from 21 scholarly presses, most notably the those of Harvard, MIT, The University of Chicago, Princeton and Johns Hopkins, and later from the Harvard libraries on a continuing basis, that provided the great bulk of the remarkably high quality publications we were able to send to Bosnia's principal libraries, starting with the devastated National and University Library.

Of the many volunteers over the years, the two currently present at the HCL who deserve special thanks are Danila Terpanjian, who was one of the first two volunteers and who has facilitated our use of Littauer Library for many years now, and Donna Viscuglia, who has dedicated countless hours over many years to the processing of donated books. Their support has been indispensable to the Harvard aspect of this project.

Heartfelt thanks are due to Sidney Verba, Nancy Cline, Jeff Horrell, Barbara Halporn, Jean-Philippe Wheeler, and Diane Garner, all of whom assented to this project or an aspect of our work; retired librarian Alan

Erickson (who organized volunteer selectors); and Amanda Bowen, who was always generous with very high quality duplicates that became available over the years at the Fine Arts Library. Thanks are also due those outside the Harvard libraries whose support made this effort possible, including Jackie O'Neill, Neil Rudenstine, William Lindsay of the HUP, Tania Vitvitsky and her colleagues at the Sabre Foundation, and Sherry Hahn, who organized the lists from the records created by the volunteers processing donated books. Last but not least, my colleague and friend, Andr-s Riedlmayer, with whom I originally conceived of this initiative and who has been my fellow traveler into the thickets of Bosnia activism, deserves particular gratitude.

Of course, wonderful colleagues in Bosnia were critical to the success of this effort as well. Of them, I must single out two individuals. One is Dr. Enes Kujundzic, Director of the National and University Library, who visited in October 1994, at which time he was a guest in my home. Andr-s and I organized his contacts at Harvard, MIT, Simmons Graduate School of Library and Information Science, and the Boston Public Library. His moving and eloquent address at the BPL was a critical moment in the development of this idea, in part because it was witnessed by James Carroll, author and columnist in the *Boston Globe*, who, between that date and early 1996 wrote three splendid essays on the devastation of the National Library and assault on culture and memory by nationalist extremists in Bosnia, which brought critical publicity to this issue at a time when we needed support for this effort both within Harvard and without. The other is Kemal Bakarsic, Head of the Department of Librarianship and Comparative Literature at the University of Sarajevo, who provided much advice and active assistance, early and late in the process, including transporting the set of *The Library of America* for Mostar to that city himself. A third, Asja Mandic, a young Tufts-educated art historian and curator, was particularly instrumental in seeing that we assisted in the development of a section for art history at the library of the Faculty of Philosophy, and as go-between for the Faculty of Architecture, where her mother as Assistant Dean.

This has been a profound and personally necessary commitment for me. The final paragraph of the first letter I ever sent to members of Congress, the US government, foreign embassies and National Public Radio, dated 11 June 1992, went as follows: "Further delays will only result in further devastation. The necessity for liberation will not go away, but it will be a great shame to end up liberating leveled cities and decimated populations. I find it hard to believe that this is occurring in post-Cold War Europe. The United States government courts disgrace by effectively acquiescing in this tragedy." Well, the cities were not leveled, but they were devastated and the cost in human lives and in the cultural patrimony of Bosnia-Herzegovina is beyond measuring. The USA, England, France, Germany, Russia and the UN brought lasting shame upon themselves. I hope that the Bosnia Library Project will be understood as a small act of restitution in acknowledgement of all that cannot be replaced.

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<http://www.openbook.ba/icsl/papers/jspurr.htm>