

The Public Library as Sphere for Intercultural Communication

Author of the case study: Jakob Hurrle

Abstract in English: Reflecting the very special situation in the Czech city of Cheb, which is known for its large Vietnamese minority, the case study informs about the activities of the local Public Library. Based on the assumption that public libraries are predestined places for inter-cultural communication, this library seeks actively to target the Vietnamese and other migrant communities. In addition to this the library seeks to improve the knowledge of the migrant communities' cultural background among the majority population.

Area: Media

Kind-category of project: Library

Kind-category of actor: Public body

Country: Czech Republic **Year:** Ca. since 2002

5 key-words: Vietnamese minority, inter-ethnic relations, public library, lectures, exhibitions, media

1. THE PRACTICE

1.1 Description of the project

Project Initiator:

Městská Knihovna Cheb (Municipal Library Cheb)

Obrněné brigády 18, 350 37 Cheb, Czech Republic

Website: <http://www.knih-cheb.cz>

E-Mail: info@knih-cheb.cz

Contact person: Mag. Marie Mudrova (marie.mudrova@knih-cheb.cz)

Objectives:

- To widen the knowledge of the majority population about the cultural background of the city's ethnic minorities. This should help to fight stereotypes.
- To reach out to the city's new inhabitants (ethnic minorities)
- To create a space for inter-cultural exchange

Activities and Results:

Aiming to make the public library become a space for intercultural exchange and communication, the library targets both the majority population and the ethnic minorities (especially Vietnamese) living in the city.

In respect to the majority population, the library

- organises series of public lectures about the culture of each minority living in the city
- organises thematic exhibitions and related events

In regard to the minorities living in the city, the library

- has begun to include books in Vietnamese language in the library's stock
- invites members of all minorities living in the city as speakers and "living exhibits" to cultural events

1.2 When and how long: Structure and Steps of the Project

See part on methodology

1.3 Place and Social Context

Despite its relatively small size, 35,000, and a rather remote geographical location the [city of Cheb](#) is today one of the Czech Republic's most multicultural cities. This is mainly because of the presence of a large Vietnamese community, who are mostly involved in the trade of Asian-manufactured goods. They had come to Cheb because of the city's proximity to Germany, from where most of the visitors to the large Vietnamese markets come from.

As described in greater detail in the [Interculture Map background report](#) (include hypertext link), the Czech majority and the Vietnamese minority do co-exist in Cheb fairly harmoniously, but with very limited social interactions. The reasons for the lack of interactions are manifold. Most Vietnamese lack the language skills that are needed for complex communication. Due to their extreme workload, they also have only a little time to engage in social and cultural events. Yet the reasons can be found not only on the side of the minority. As socialist Czechoslovakia was a culturally relatively homogenous country with hardly any migrant communities, most inhabitants of Cheb had few experiences of interaction with people from other cultures before the arrival of the first Vietnamese in the 1980s. Knowing the city's new Asian inhabitants almost only in the position of vendors on the markets, the majority population was inclined to develop stereotypes while knowing in fact very little about the Vietnamese community's cultural background.

1.4 Target

Vietnamese minority, majority population, other ethnic minorities living in Cheb

1.5 Project Methodology

The project targets both the majority population and the ethnic minorities (especially Vietnamese) living in the city.

In respect to the majority population, the project methodology contains the following elements:

a) Organisation of a series of public lectures on the culture of each group of minorities living in the city

These lectures were prepared in cooperation with professor Hofman of the Cheb branch (faculty of economics) of Plzeň Zapadočeská Univerzita. Mr Hofman is a specialist on Asia and invested much time and enthusiasm into the co-operation with the Municipal Library. In principle, the library aims to inform the public about the culture of all ethnic and national minorities that can be found in Cheb. Both because of the strong presence of Vietnamese and (to a much smaller extend) Chinese migrants and due to the personal interest of Mr Hofman, the events organized by the library focused mainly on Asian countries. However, the library also organised lectures on the culture of Roma and about Africa. Some of the lectures were hold by renowned specialists; in other cases the library invited members of the ethnic communities to present information about their culture.

b) Organisation of thematic exhibitions and related events

Even though the library has limited space suitable for exhibitions, the library sought to combine public presentations with other events, such as openings of smaller exhibitions and / or the presentation of food from the presented country.

In regards to minorities living in the city, the project methodology included the following elements:

a) The inclusion of books in Vietnamese language (donated by the Vietnamese embassy) into the library's stock

The decision to include books in minority language into the libraries stock reflects the vision of the public library as a communication sphere for all inhabitants of the city. It is also a reaction to the above-mentioned observation that many of Cheb's Vietnamese inhabitants lack the language skills that would be required to make use of the Czech holdings. At the same time, the books are an offer towards young Vietnamese who attend Czech schools and increasingly have problems with the native tongue of their parents.

b) The invitation of members of all minorities living in the city as speakers and "living exhibits" to lectures, exhibition openings and related cultural events

Due to the city's modest size and the Czech Republic's relatively homogenous population, the library personnel will usually learn soon if a new minority "appeared" in Cheb. Depending on the profession and social environment of the foreigners living in the city, the library would use different strategies to contact the individuals. In case of foreigners studying or teaching at the university, the contact was established through the university. In case of the Vietnamese minority, Vietnamese students studying at the university or in the city's high school helped to establish contacts.

The library informs about its activities with usual information material (flyers, posters, press announcements). They are popular among the population. A large part of the audience attends the events regularly.

2 Collaborations and Networks

On the local level, the library co-operated closely with professor Hofman from the Cheb branch (faculty of economics) of Plzeň Západočeská Univerzita. The persons involved in the project initiatives greatly supported the founding of Cheb branches of the Czech-Vietnamese, Czech-Chinese, etc. societies, which in many cases acted as institutions to fundraise the (modest) financial resources that were needed for the programme realisation. In addition to this, the persons involved co-operated with various Czech academic institutions, NGOs, and the embassies of the migrants' countries of origin to find interesting lecturers and content for the exhibitions.

3 Experiences

3.1 Strengths

The majority-targeting project elements can be considered highly successful, as indicated by the relatively large number of people that are regularly attending events on the cultures of minorities. It is impossible to quantify exactly how these events changed the perception of the Vietnamese and other minorities in the city. However, it seems obvious that they improved their knowledge about the cultural background of the migrants. It is safe to assume that increased knowledge will help to avoid the emergence of stereotypes and cultural misunderstandings.

Is the project innovative? Certainly, it will be possible to find all project elements described in another minority-targeting / intercultural project within the European Union. In the case of this project, the innovativeness should not be seen in the project elements per se, but in the library's pioneering role in targeting the Vietnamese minority in the Czech Republic. In the city of Cheb, the Municipal Library is one of very few cultural institutions that target the Vietnamese inhabitants. The project can be considered a successful attempt to challenge the popular view of the Vietnamese as people, as nothing more than vendors on the market.

3.2 Critical points

According to the librarian interviewed, the project was successful in targeting the majority population but failed to reach adult members of the Vietnamese minority. Contrary to initial expectations, the minority members showed hardly any interest in the acquired literature in Vietnamese language. Interestingly enough, this is also true in regard to Vietnamese children, who otherwise are regular guests of the library. Being mostly educated by Czech nannies, the Czech-born Vietnamese students in elementary schools and the high school prefer Czech literature over Vietnamese.

There might be a number of reasons why Vietnamese adults did not react more responsively to the offers of the library. The most important one seems to be the enormous workload of most Vietnamese families, which leaves little time for such “luxuries” as a visit to a library. Considering the most urgent problems of the community include lack of language skills, exploitation by “bosses” of the clans, uncertain economic future and a growing educational and linguistic distance between them and the Czech-born younger generation one might argue that the library activities failed to identify the true needs of the project beneficiaries. However, the point has to be made that most of the mentioned problems are beyond the competence of a municipal library. The library’s role would probably increase if it could act as one element within a network of institutions, which deal with the integration of the Vietnamese minority. As long as such a network is not existent, the described project is at least a positive attempt to break the community’s social isolation. In addition to this, it seems possible that the interests in books in Vietnamese language will increase when the life situation of the migrants has changed.

3.3 Lessons Learnt

- Despite of their large number in the Czech Republic’s border region to Germany, there are only very few projects that seek to target the Vietnamese minority.
- Due to the very specific life situation of some minorities, it is not always possible to integrate minority members only with the help of those institutions (libraries, social clubs, associations) that organise the social life of the minority. The library should nevertheless be considered a very suitable space for intercultural communication. It should actively target members of minority communities.
- The project is mainly the result of two active people, who knew how to contact interesting speakers, raise money, and were willing to invest a lot of energy. As it is often the case, this crucial role of individuals makes it difficult to transfer the practice to places where such a person is lacking.

Related texts: Background report Cheb (city portrait), interview with mayor of Cheb