

INTERCULTURAL MAP: BACKGROUND REPORT

LIBRARIES AND THEIR ROLE FOR THE INTEGRATION OF IMMIGRANTS

– *EXPERIENCES FROM THE CZECH REPUBLIC AND OTHER EUROPEAN COUNTRIES*

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Research carried out in Denmark in 2001 revealed that out of all institutions, migrants are most often in contact with public libraries. This may come as a surprise to many of us, as we often tend to see libraries as nothing more than “rows of bookshelves.” On the other hand, it is helpful to realise that unlike schools or government offices, libraries represent a neutral space, a door to information, further education and culture. The Czech Republic’s library network is very dense, with public libraries in almost all towns; furthermore libraries are public institutions expected to serve all with no exceptions. Hand in hand with the changing structure of society in all European countries, the role of libraries also changes, together with their growing role in integrating all groups of people into the life of society.

The process of altering the function and role of public libraries started in the United States and Canada at the end of 1970s. At that time, libraries had to decide whether to adapt to the changing ethnic structure of society and make multicultural services one of their priorities or to maintain the status quo and face the risk of soon serving only a limited section of the population. It was then that public libraries came to realise that they can play an immensely important role in providing equal access to collections, information and services to all people regardless of their age, education, economic status, origin and religion.

In the 1990s, European libraries began to include multicultural services in their portfolio, with Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands leading the way with a number of inspirational projects. As early as 1974, Germany witnessed the opening of its first Turkish library (Namik-Kemal) under the leadership of a Turkish director. At the first National Congress of Public Libraries in 2002, Spanish librarians declared the need to serve immigrants and discussed integration opportunities in libraries. Since 2004, the Roma high school in Pecs, Hungary has had a specialised Roma library. However, many European countries lack national plans defining the new role of libraries in multicultural societies and it is therefore library associations that are taking the initiative, both on national and international level, including for example the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), the organisation behind the booklet *Ten Reasons to Offer Multicultural Library Services*.

Inspiration from abroad

So far, public libraries outside the Czech Republic have only occasionally provided multicultural services. However, some EU member states have launched very successful integration projects that could serve as inspiration for the Czech Republic and librarians there, including multicultural projects from Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands where multicultural librarianship has a long tradition. Denmark is unique for its nationwide project *Library – Gate to the Danish Society* wherein four regional advisors visit libraries across

Denmark, introduce multicultural issues to librarians and advise in the preparation of multicultural activities.

Most often, countries in Western Europe organise activities to improve language skills of all generations of immigrants. Knowledge of the majority language is considered the key to the integration of minorities and more and more often prescribed as one of the basic criteria for obtaining a residency permit. In this case, we are not talking about buying dictionaries: libraries often establish self-learning centres equipped with computers, cooperate in education of pre-school children or join forces with volunteers to provide various supplementary advisory services (such as help filling out job applications, creating CVs or searching for information).

It is quite usual today for libraries to offer multilingual websites and information brochures and also to acquire books in the languages of local minorities. Well-motivated libraries create learning centres where they provide a wide range of social services in cooperation with other institutions, gradually transforming libraries into community centres.

In regards to integration activities, which foreign libraries perceive as the most difficult, these first and foremost include programmes targeting women from minority environments, as their integration is the most challenging. One Danish library organised 3-hour meetings of female immigrants three times a week, giving the women an opportunity to read newspapers together in order to strengthen their language skills and to better find their bearings in their new society. Having met regularly for some time, the women gradually entered into dialogue, striving to overcome feelings of social exclusion.

For the most part, integration activities abroad take place in locations where coexistence of various cultures is everyday reality and the share of immigrants and other minorities is fairly high. Libraries are seen as neutral places open to all regardless of age, sex, religion, education or social status and for this reason they can become places where cultures meet and minorities integrate.

Multicultural librarianship in the Czech Republic

Multicultural librarianship is a fairly new topic in the Czech Republic (It is worth noting, however, that Czechoslovakia's very first Law on Libraries of 1919 set an obligation for libraries to respect the ethnic make-up of population and to base their acquisition of collections correspondingly). The Strategy of Library Development in the Czech republic for 2004-2010 (government resolution No. 679, 7th July 2004) states that public libraries are a "tool of practical application of the basic human right to equal access to information (for all with no exceptions, i.e. for the rich and the poor, women and men, people from cities and villages, the handicapped and the healthy, minorities and the majority), free exchange of information, learning and free opinion." However, activities of libraries in this area have so far been rather random or unconscious, not strategic.

A survey that we carried out in 2004 in 500 libraries across the Czech Republic showed that using materials about national minorities, undertaking themed events or having direct cooperation with minorities, foreigners or immigrants, is far from common in today's libraries. Libraries do not have a sufficient supply of materials and cooperation with local organisations representing target groups is the exception rather than the norm.

Nevertheless, there are some libraries that have taken an active and creative approach, organising events about other cultures, buying books for minorities and producing multilingual websites, using their own initiative. The most common service provided by libraries to ethnic minorities and foreigners involves loans of foreign language magazines; other libraries provide information services tailored for minorities or organise cultural events for them. Based on the experience of the Multicultural Centre Prague, which has been monitoring multicultural activities of Czech libraries for a long time, information provided is unfortunately exaggerated and far from the reality.

Foreign language magazines are not always targeting minorities, as they are mostly in the major languages. Statements to the effect that libraries provide information services to minorities may be similarly misleading. Often, librarians state that their knowledge of foreign languages is not adequate. As regards further education, libraries would appreciate more information about the life of minorities, ways of intercultural communication and organisation of educational events about minorities. It is also baffling to find that only one library in the survey had an application form in a language other than Czech. (For more information about research and activities of Czech libraries in the area of multiculturalism, please consult *Libraries for All*, a booklet published in Prague in 2005.)

One unique initiative that introduced multicultural services in Czech libraries for a number of years is ***Diversity in Libraries***, a project of the Multicultural Centre Prague. Their aim is to use the project as a means of providing librarians and library patrons with as much information as possible about all cultures, ethnic groups and national minorities living in the Czech Republic and at the same time help to turn public libraries into unique places where diverse cultures can meet. During the first three years of the project, a total of 500 public libraries in the Czech Republic received a free set of books covering a wide range of multicultural issues. Thanks to the project, readers are now able to go to their local library and borrow books providing information about the past and present as well as the customs and traditions of diverse cultures, ethnic groups and national minorities or examine current multicultural issues. In selected libraries, they have organised accompanying cultural/educational events about minorities for children and the general public. They have been expanding the project's activities (to include exhibitions, contests for children, etc.) and gradually also focusing on multicultural training of librarians and information officers in public libraries. Behind all these activities is their belief that only well-informed individuals are open to discussion about mutual coexistence of people of different language, religion, customs or family traditions in one country.

Public libraries play an important role in the development and culture of local civil society and that society needs to further strengthen its role of information, educational and cultural centres open to all citizens. If libraries adapt their services to the cultural diversity of our society, they can become inspiring, creative, attractive and indispensable institutions for immigrants, foreigners and the general public alike.