



The Sejm Library 1919 – 2009

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Abstract:

The establishment of the Sejm Library followed Poland's regaining of independence in 1918 and the parliamentary election of 1919.

The Library was set up at the end of the same year and, after many organizational changes, it began to perform the functions of the Sejm and the Senate library and archives.

In 1939 the Library's collection amounted to 78 000 volumes, including parliamentary and official publications as well as books and journals on law and social, economic and historical sciences.

In September 1939, a fire destroyed part of the collection, while the remaining 62 000 volumes were transported by the Germans to Berlin where they disappeared in circumstances which were never clarified. Only a small part of the collection, deposited before the end of the war in a Czech castle Houska, returned to Poland.

In a one-chamber Parliament, set up after World War II, the library functioning under the name of "the Sejm Library" had to build its collections almost from scratch. In 1991, the Library took over the 145 000 volume library collection of the former Archives of the Polish Left and, in 1993, the Sejm Archives was incorporated into it.

2009 marks the 90th anniversary of the establishment of the Sejm Library, the oldest establishment providing services to the legislative chambers, and, except for the German occupation period (1939-1945), the only one that has retained its tradition and organisational form for so many years.

For the purposes of a brief lecture, it seems reasonable to divide the history of the Sejm Library into four periods reflecting the milestone dates in Poland's history. The first one includes the two decades between 1919 and 1939, referred to as the Second Republic period,

when the Library was established and managed both to build extensive collections and a strong position among Polish libraries. The second one is the World War II disaster (1939-1944), experienced by the Library in a literal sense, as the Library had no institutional existence at the time. The third period is that of the communist rule (1944-1989), when the Sejm was the supreme body of state power, formally from 1952, while in fact it was deprived of any decision-making power and was given merely a token role, for which neither a library nor expert resources were particularly necessary. Finally, the fourth period, after 1989, when democratic changes triggered a real growth of demand for information fuelling political debate and the law-making process, and the decision centre moved from the communist party to constitutional bodies, which included the parliament as well.

In the Second Republic 1919-1939

At the time parliamentary libraries were being established in Europe, Poland did not exist as an independent state (1795-1918), and the stormy experience of 19th century parliamentary bodies in the Polish territories was not conducive to the development of any sustainable facility supporting deputies' work. While the autonomous Galician National Sejm (Galicia was a crown land of the Habsburg Monarchy and enjoyed considerable autonomy) or the Polish Group in the Russian State Duma had its own reference book collections, catering *ad hoc* for the needs of the deputies, no full-fledged library was set up.

It was not until Poland regained independence (November 1918) and the first Polish Sejm to be elected in democratic elections was assembled very soon (February 1919), when a group of deputies of the Polish Peasants' Party (PSL-Piast) submitted a petition to the Marshal of the Sejm, requesting that "the Sejm library be established and provided first with the most necessary works, and then be gradually expanded" (March 1919). The petition expressed a conscious need and concern of the law-makers for the establishment of a research and documentation base necessary to support legislative work that was to give shape to the reviving state.

In organisational terms, the library was a part of the Sejm Office, and as long as the Legislative Sejm was a unicameral parliament sitting as a Constituent Assembly, it was called the Legislative Sejm Library (1919-1922). When the second chamber, the Senate, was finally set up at the end of 1922, it took over the role of the Sejm and Senate Library, but it was financed from the Sejm's budget. At the turn of the 1930s, after twelve years of the Sejm's activity, it became necessary to organise the growing archival resource consisting of both the records of parliamentary work, mainly the legislative process, and administrative files produced by the offices. The Library's structures were used for this purpose and in September 1931 it was transformed into the Sejm and Senate Library and Archives by the order of the Sejm Marshal. It was described as an auxiliary body supporting the Sejm and Senate, and, as such, it stored a collection of various publications concerning the activity of the Sejm and Senate, with special focus on publications in the field of social sciences, legal and economic sciences. The Library was to provide relevant information and materials, operate a reading room of daily newspapers and periodicals, and to collect and store all files and documents produced and to be produced as a result of the proceedings of the Sejm and Senate. The Library and Archives was headed by the director, who reported directly to the Marshal of the Sejm in administrative matters, and received instructions regarding the book collection and the archives from the Sejm and Senate's Marshals. The staff consisted of officials and lower-

rank employees filling job positions under different contracts within the limits set by the budget of the Sejm.

The nucleus of the collection consisted of about 3000 volumes previously put together for the purposes of the Parliamentary Constitutional Committee of the Provisional Council of State. It was a body appointed in 1917, whose mission was to prepare the foundations of Polish statehood. The new library was taking over collections (usually parts of them) from liquidated institutions previously operating in the annexationist states, for which the Polish state was a successor. A part of the library of the former Poznań Province (a Prussian regional administration body) was taken over, as well as a collection of official journals from the library of the National Department (autonomous government of Galicia) in Lvov. In spring 1924, about a dozen thousand volumes were brought also from Lvov, previously held by the library of the Governorate (i.e. an office representing the Emperor of Austria in Galicia). A small number of books were also brought from the library of the former Ministry for Galicia in Vienna. Finally, in autumn 1925, the book collection of the Polish Group in the former Russian State Duma was recovered. A considerable number of items came from Warsaw library duplicates – mainly the Public Library for the Capital City of Warsaw and from the library of the Warsaw School of Economics. The Sejm Library was also supplied with donations from private individuals, often deputies and senators.

Intensive efforts made by the director of the Library, Dr. Henryk Kołodziejski, aimed to increase library acquisitions, soon yielded results. The Library was granted a mandatory copy of each official publication, and a meeting of booksellers and publishers, convened on the initiative of its director, resolved to provide it free of charge with one copy of each publication dealing with subject matters corresponding to the collection profile. In 1921, Poland ratified the Brussels Convention of 15 March 1886, which enabled it to develop the exchange of official publications with many parliaments. Enhanced cooperation was also stimulated by the establishment in 1925 of an editorial office within the Library, for the publication of “*Exposé sommaire des travaux législatifs de la Diète et du Sénat Polonais*”, containing complete texts or abstracts of Polish legislative acts translated into French. The publication helped to overcome the language barrier, and it was welcome and highly appreciated by foreign partners. The editorial staff consisted of outstanding lawyers, and the director of the Library was the secretary of the editorial office. By 1936, seven volumes appeared, covering legislation enacted between November 1918 and August 1937.

Apart from parliamentary documents, publication journals of a number of states were collected. With regard to the former annexationists (Austria, Prussia and Russia) and several Western European states (Belgium, France, Great Britain), historic collections dating back to the beginning of the 19th century were purchased. The Library was the Polish depository of the publications of the League of Nations and the Carnegie Foundation. It also received publications of the International Labour Office, the International Institute of Agriculture, the International Institute of Trade, and many other organisations. The resource was expanded with a collection of Martens’ treaties (1494-1926), a collection of French diplomatic documents (the Yellow Book 1856-1923) and a collection of diplomatic documents of the German Reich (*Die Grosse Politik der Europäischen Kabinette 1871-1914*).

The Library strictly adhered to its collection profile. It collected books in the field of law, with special focus on public law, as well as economics, politics, social sciences, and the modern history. Special emphasis was also put on political doctrines and the history of parties

and political movements. Among other items, as early as mid-1920s, there was a 900-volume separate collection of books on Bolshevism.

In 1927, the book collection consisted of about 35.000 volumes, and the regular acquisition of periodicals included 473 publications in Polish and 309 in foreign languages. At the end of the period concerned (1938), the Library had about 48.000 volumes of books and 30.000 volumes of periodicals. When the new parliamentary buildings were commissioned in 1928, the Library's operating conditions also improved significantly. It had two reading rooms – the main one situated in the immediate vicinity of the plenary hall, and a periodical reading room, popular with the deputies, housed in the new building. The resource storage facilities were also arranged in the new building, with modern metal shelving and appropriate fire protection equipment. Staffing also increased to meet the growing needs. Initially, beside director Kołodziejski, a qualified librarian and a messenger were employed. In 1921, there were already 6 persons employed, in 1928 – 13, and by 1939 the number increased to 20 employees. The personnel were periodically supported by 2-3 trainee librarians, and assistance was also provided by voluntary workers.

In late 1920s and early 1930s, two teams (sections) were set up in the Library for auxiliary work on parliamentary bills, justification of proposals and preparation of substantive speeches – the Legal Section and the Socioeconomic Section. The duties of the Library's employees included the collection of statistical data, preparing comparative summaries, drawing up budget statements and performing other work commissioned by deputies or senators. The parliamentarians were highly appreciative of the Library's information work, who viewed its achievements as the beginnings of a future “preparatory work office for the deputies and senators”, which was to evolve towards today's parliamentary expert bureaus. The course of historic events prevented full implementation of this idea.

In processing the collections, the Sejm Library used a catalogue framework developed by director Kołodziejski. The decimal classification system was rejected as being too formal and inadequate for a parliamentary library. The catalogue comprised 3 main branches: law, socioeconomic sciences, and historical-political sciences. It encompassed 24 branches and more than 300 sub-branches marked with digits and letters. A catalogue of books was complemented by references to a special catalogue of periodicals and documents in the form of descriptions of major events covered by the domestic and foreign press. The catalogue framework was expanded as new issues were covered in writings.

According to the Library's rules of procedure, its resources were available at the reading rooms and materials could be borrowed mainly by the deputies and senators, and also by employees of the Sejm and Senate offices, journalists – members of the Parliamentary Reporters' Club, authorised officials of ministries and central offices, researchers, and even students authorised by university authorities and, under certain conditions, “ordinary people from the street”. The attendance of users was growing fast, especially in the 1930s. In 1933, there were 750 people a month, in 1935 – 900, and in 1937 – 1050 a month. Readership among the deputies was also growing, but at a slower rate. In 1935, they borrowed 517 items from the storage facilities (i.e. disregarding reference book collections), and in 1936 – 522 items. The custom of keeping the reading room open on plenary days until the end of proceedings consolidated at the time, and it is continued to this day.

Entering its twentieth year of existence, the Library, together with the Sejm and Senate Archives, was already a strong and dynamic centre of scientific information in the field of law and politics, well suited to perform its statutory tasks and continuously improving the methods of work for the parliament's purposes. It also enjoyed the opinion of a serious information and research facility in Poland, and one of the best-managed libraries in Warsaw. The outbreak of the war in 1939 put an end to its existence.

The disastrous years of the war and occupation

During the campaign of September 1939, most of the Sejm building was destroyed (including the plenary hall and the adjacent building with the main reading room, catalogues and inventories of the Library), while the periodical reading room and majority of the storage facilities situated in the modern building with reinforced-concrete floors survived. The lowest storeys accommodating archives were flooded with water from firefighting on upper floors. The surviving archive records were moved to a central repository designated by the Nazis, where they burnt in November 1944 when the city was systematically scorched to the ground house by house. As part of efforts to save the collections, the most valuable archival files were evacuated to the east at the beginning of September. They were seized by the Soviets, yet they survived the war and were returned by the Russian authorities.

When hostilities were still in progress, the Reich Main Security Office (RSHA – *Reichssicherheitshauptamt*), set up a unit called by the SS “The Operational Unit for the Protection of Scientific Values and Fine Arts”, best known as “*Kommando Paulsen*”, named after its commander, professor of history at the University of Berlin and SS Untersturmführer, Peter Paulsen.

The Kommando was instructed to “protect all cultural goods in Poland which are of any value and significance for the German cause, and to bring as many items from those resources to the Reich as possible”. At the same time, RSHA Department II, described as the “Ideological Research and Evaluation” department, conceived the idea of organising its own library to provide an information resource for the work carried on by the department. The library was to be built around “political” book collections brought from the conquered countries and those confiscated in the Reich. The instructions of RSHA Department II were to take out of the country “church and political, Marxist, Jewish or Masonic libraries, in Polish, German, French and English.” Indeed, Paulsen only packed and took away from Warsaw several small but “political” book collections of the Hungarian, Danish and French Institutes, the Jewish Institute, the Ukrainian Institute, and the Institute of Foreign Relations. Collections of the Sejm Library were the largest and most valuable loot of *Kommando Paulsen*. By the beginning of December 1939, the surviving book collection of about 48.000 volumes had been taken away to Berlin. Newspapers and magazines were partly burnt in the Sejm garden, and partly recycled at the Warsaw paper mill. In 1940, the metal shelving was dismantled and taken out to Germany, which was the Germans' frequent practice in the occupied countries.

Some of the books looted in Warsaw were incorporated in the RSHA library organised since 1941. Its collection fell into 3 groups: “German Reich and General”, “The Opponent” and “Foreign Countries”. We do not know how many books from the Sejm Library were incorporated in that library, how many were retailed as duplicates, and how many were deemed useless. The copies that returned to Warsaw after the war bear shelf marks “Ausl”

(Foreign Countries) or MI (German Reich and General), assigned according to criteria that are not quite clear. Probably, in view of increasingly heavy bombing of Berlin, books from the RSHA library were evacuated and hidden at the Houska Castle in the Czech Sudeten. According to different sources, between 6.600 and 8.300 volumes, i.e. about 14% of the resource looted in 1939, were brought from there to the Sejm Library in 1946.

The Sejm Library under the communist rule of 1944-1989

In view of the fact that the Library was almost completely destroyed by the Germans, post-war reconstruction started from scratch. With the opening of the Legislative Sejm in February 1947, the Library was also commissioned. Its customary name, the Sejm Library, became its official name, as in the 1946 referendum rigged by the communists the Senate was abolished and until 1989 the parliament remained unicameral. In organisational terms, the Library was perceived as one of the parliamentary administration offices and it reported to the head of the administration, and not directly to the Marshal of the chamber, as was the case in the interwar period. The regulations adopted in 1952 provided that the Library would consist of autonomous sections: General, Acquisitions, Collection Processing, Reading Room, and Reference Library.

The acquisition policy sought to maintain the line set before the war by director Kołodziejcki, and until the end of the 1940s it was admitted that the “present Sejm Library is drawing on the tradition of an excellently organised pre-war library”, while there were also differences arising from a different structure of state power, with political leadership being exercised by the communist party. As the communist dictatorship was gaining foothold, references to the pre-war tradition disappeared, and the acquisition policy placed an increasingly great focus on what was then called Marxism-Leninism, which included not only the classics, but also lesser eulogists of the regime, such as Vyshinsky, Molotov or Zhdanov.

By the end of the 1940s, more than 100.000 library items had been gathered, of which about 70.000 were incorporated in the collection. Such a great increase of resources over a short period of time seemed to be quite plausible, as apart from purchases, donations and exchange, in the period immediately following the end of the war, libraries benefited from what was called “allocations”, that is administrative handing over in of complete book collections from former German libraries, collections abandoned by private owners or taken over from organisations liquidated by the communists. In 1953, the Sejm Library held about 100.000 volumes of German books, 60% of which were intended to be incorporated in the resource. Selection, disinfection, and partial processing were planned, but the work progressed slowly. In 1959, unprocessed publications from that group still consisted of over 19.000 volumes. Nearly 8.000 of them were handed over to the State Library of the German Democratic Republic, and it was not until the 1990s that remaining items from that collection were put to order. One of the acquisition methods peculiar to the communist period, which gives a good idea of the atmosphere of those days, was the acquisition of books and magazines from the Main Control Authority for the Press, Publications and Performances, or, simply speaking, the censor’s office. In 1953, the office supplied 15% new book acquisitions and a sizeable number of copies of newspapers and periodicals. The way the Press Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs supported the foreign press acquisition process was similar, albeit much more laborious for the librarians. Once or twice a year, 3-4 tonnes of newspapers and magazines were brought, from which issues missing in the Library’s resources were carefully selected or complete series were formed.

Major difficulties were also involved in the exchange of publications. While the 1886 Brussels Convention was formally in force, the communist authorities were trying to control and reduce the scope of its application to a minimum necessary for propaganda purposes. In 1960, an exchange committee was set up, chaired by the Chief of the Sejm Chancellery, who was to ensure appropriate, albeit incomplete, political supervision over its activities. For example, each dispatch of materials to The New York Public Library and each piece of correspondence with it required a separate approval granted by the Chief of the Sejm Chancellery. He even released a special instruction on the exchange of the Sejm's publications. In consequence of political pressure, the Committee also decided to stop sending Polish parliamentary publications to the Bundestag Library. For 4 years the German partners continued supplying their materials, but having received no response to their letters and no Polish parliamentary document, the Germans ceased supplying the Bundestag documentation. An attempt at restoring the contact was harshly opposed by the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which banned the renewal of exchange "under the present political situation". There are countless examples thereof.

The Sejm Library also fell victim of the withdrawal of books deemed harmful for ideological reasons. At the end of the 1940s, the Central Board of Libraries drew up a list of banned titles, and a special committee had them withdrawn from the Library's resource and scrapped. In the absence of documents, it is hard today to determine the scale of what the Library's director Zofia Hryniewicz later described as a "pogrom". In the 1950s, certain libraries (including the Sejm Library) were permitted to hold banned publications. They were processed and stored under numerous restrictions, and access was limited to a small group of individuals trusted by the regime.

A period of rapid growth of the resource was followed, in mid-1950s, by relatively stable acquisition of 3.200 volumes a year. In 1959, the overall collection inventory was 156.681 volumes, and in 1989 it reached 253.595. Despite difficulties and obstacles in the exchange of materials, the desirable acquisition model was successfully defended. Owing to its position linked to the Sejm, formally the highest organ of power, the Library was allowed a certain degree of autonomy in gathering foreign-language materials, as well as appropriate allocations of hard currency for their purchase. It is worth noting that more than 50% of the books acquired were foreign-language items, an uncommon phenomenon in the communist block. A mandatory copy of Polish official publications was also obtained. While the copies were sometimes hard to come by, almost a complete set was collected eventually.

Until the early 1970s, insufficient staffing was the Library's weakness, which prevented sustainable processing of a large inflow of materials. Librarians were often seconded to other work, engaging in communist production actions, such as cereal or potato harvesting. The situation became critical in the late 1960s/ early 1970s, when the collection processing backlog reached several years, and the number of completely unprocessed publications increased to about 30.000 volumes (almost 15% of the total collection). Taking advantage of the situation that arose after the ruling team was replaced at the beginning of 1971 by a more liberal one and more open to the West, the Library presented an expert's report, which stated in the summary that "if the Sejm Library is left in its existing state, (...) this will lead to deterioration of its capability to provide information. Only immediate support given to the Library by the authorities of the Sejm can ensure necessary conditions for its development". Owing to support from the librarian community and a friendly attitude of senior officials of the Chancellery of the Sejm, the employment rate was increased (from 17 in 1970 to 27 in

1974), a new parliamentary documentation department was established, and preliminary work was undertaken on a library automation concept and the development of an IT system for the purposes of the Sejm. The function of the Sejm Library was planned to be developed towards the formation of the Main Centre of Legislative Information. To implement the concept, the IT Section was established, which evolved 10 years later into the IT Centre, an independent unit which exists to this day. As work progressed, costs were calculated and necessary expenditure was compared with potential benefits with the use of the computer technology available at the time, elements of the monstrous system were abandoned one by one, and the plans eventually boiled down to an electronic address system on the current Polish legislation and that applicable in the past (back to 1918). In practice, the system was to answer the question which normative instruments contained legal provisions relating to a specific subject matter, and if and what instruments were available regarding the interpretation and application of those provisions. Apart from a register of normative instruments, the system was to comprise the Central Catalogue of Legal Literature containing information on books, serials and official publications in the field of law held in the collection of the Sejm Library and 17 other law libraries (including 8 libraries of university law faculties). In order to facilitate the coordination of work, in 1979 the Library was granted the Central Legislative Library status, which theoretically involved a number of responsibilities related to the acquisition and processing of collections, but as the general ideas were not backed by any funds, no special success was reported in the field. The crisis of the late 1970s brought further work to a halt, which rendered the original assumptions completely obsolete in view of the progress in computer technology.

For any parliamentary library, the number of deputies using its collections was an important indicator of its usefulness. We know that in 1959-1968 the Library was visited, on average, by 140 deputies (of the total number of 460 deputies) annually, and in the latter part of the 1980s deputies accounted for 6 to 11% of the users. From today's point of view, that level of the deputies' attendance may seem quite satisfactory, but it was considered poor at the time, and what was believed to be one of the reasons thereof was a lack of a separate reading room for deputies, more comfortable than the one accessible to the public. Nevertheless, the overall number of users showed a growing tendency, and in the years 1956-1989 it ranged between 7.500 and 13.500 users a year. Those were mainly government officials, academics, journalists and senior-year students.

Throughout the post-war period, the Library was struggling with a lack of suitable storage space and premises for employees. The storage space issue was dealt with through resource selection and by increasing the shelving height – of course within reasonable limits. While the post-war reconstruction plans provided for a separate library building in the Sejm complex, when it was actually commissioned, it was put to other uses, e.g. offices for senior officials and the central archives of the communist party. Today it houses the Senate.

In free Poland – the Sejm Library after 1989

The partly free elections of 4 June 1989 led to a change in the position of the parliament within the system of state power. Once a meaningless body formally putting into effect directives of the communist party, the Sejm was becoming what seemed to be the most important place for resolving matters of key importance for the public and the state. An unprecedented intensification of work was witnessed of the parliament sitting in permanence (instead of the previous system of two sessions in a year). Due to those changes, demand for

information and for expert support increased markedly. It became necessary to set up both its own Research Bureau and to strengthen and unify the information and documentation facilities of the Sejm.

Following the pre-war tradition, the Sejm Library provided its services also to the new Senate together with its staff, mostly members of structures separate from the Sejm. In organizational terms, it remained a part of the Sejm Chancellery and was financed from its budget. The first years of transformation saw the expansion of the Library's structure through the annexation or establishment of new agencies.

In 1990, the idea of establishing the Museum of the Polish Sejm was abandoned, and the team involved for several years in its organisation was taken over by the Library, where it formed the Museum Division. The division has been involved in the collection and museum processing of works of art, cultural heritage assets and antique books related to the past of the parliamentary system. It has also been organizing temporary exhibitions, usually to mark important anniversaries celebrated by the Sejm. Currently, the Museum Division's resource is close to 6.000 pieces (works of art, documents, numismatic items).

In spring 1991, by the decision of the Chief of the Sejm Chancellery, the 145.000-volume library of the former Archives of the Central Committee of the communist Polish United Workers' Party was taken over. This arrangement probably saved the interesting book collection from dispersion, but it involved a huge organisational effort. A large part of the volumes was stored in piles in the basements of the building then being converted for the purposes of the Senate. After almost a year of organisation work, the resources were again made available to readers. What is more, a further development of the collection was planned, with special focus on the transformations taking place in Central and Eastern Europe after 1989, as well as left political and social movements. This makes reference to the pre-war tradition, when the Sejm Library kept a collection of works devoted to Bolshevism. The book collection forms a separate Social History Collection Division.

The Sejm Archives, incorporated into the Library in 1992, forms a separate division as well. Also in this case, reference was intentionally made to the tradition of the Second Republic, although practical concerns were also taken into account (e.g. elimination of multiple acquisitions of certain documents, easy access for archivists to source materials kept at the Library, etc.). The Archives holds, processes and provides access to materials produced by the Sejm, its bodies, deputies and their offices, and by the Chancellery of the Sejm. In 2008, the Archives' resources contained more than 1.000 running meters of files, about 54.000 audio and video recordings, and more than 1.500 sets of photographs.

At the time of intensive preparation for Poland's membership in the European Union, the European Information and Documentation Centre was formed as a new division of the Library, tasked with the provision of information support concerning the EU documents and legislative acts. A website was created, offering an extensive set of constantly updated information e.g. on the activities of the Sejm related to European integration. In the accession period (January-July 2004) it was visited by more than 87.500 users. The Centre also participates in the Interparliamentary EU Information Exchange (IPEX) project.

In response to the deputies' demand for media information, the Media Resource Centre was established in 1991. The Centre deals with recording, processing and presentation of audiovisual recordings of the sittings of the Sejm as well as major news and feature programmes broadcasted by several television channels. A press information section was also set up at the same time, which has been publishing daily and weekly press reviews about the Sejm in paper format, and since 2005 in an electronic format, providing direct access to press clippings with a full-text search facility.

The main challenge facing the Library in the past two decades was the automation of library work, defined as a total change of working tools, aimed at increasing the effectiveness and speed of user service, and expanding information access via web pages. In 1993, a medium-class integrated library system (ALEPH) was purchased, which fully satisfied the projected needs of the Sejm Library. The flexibility and modular structure of the system, corresponding to the basic library functions (acquisition, processing, provision and information on collections) made it possible to automate all the library processes, and at the same time to gradually put additional modules into service. After the Polish language version was developed, the operation of the system started with cataloguing new acquisitions, in order to make its most visible fragment – the catalogue of the latest collection – available to the users (and decision-makers) as soon as possible. By 1997, all modules of the system had been rolled out and soon 96% of the items searched by users were already to be found in the automated catalogue, which confirmed that the original assumption behind the project had been right. In 2008, the retrospective conversion of books in the main collections was completed, and simultaneously work has been in progress on a retro-conversion of descriptions for serials.

Major challenges in the automation process included the choice of the information retrieval language corresponding to the needs of a parliamentary library. Following an analysis of several such languages, it was decided to develop a proprietary uniform information retrieval language, matching both the content of parliamentary documents and the requirements of the automated system. As a result, "Stebis", a uniform thesaurus system was created, based on Eurovoc, a multi-language thesaurus of the European Parliament. The system has been updated and developed ever since (about 11.300 descriptors in 2008), and ongoing cooperation with the Eurovoc thesaurus team includes, among other things, proposing new descriptors and delivering in 2005 an official Polish language version of the thesaurus (for the purposes of the European Parliament).

Currently, as many as 14 databases, including 10 ones accessible to the general public via a website, are maintained in the ALEPH system, which has been upgraded twice so far (versions "500" and "500-18"). In 2008, the number of records in all bases was 510.000, and the number of user visits exceeded 145.500.

In 2002, digitisation of the Polish parliamentary documentation was undertaken, which is certainly a component of the Sejm Library's mission, and at the same time it is a form of protection of the most frequently used materials. Parliamentary documents from the 1919-1993 period have been digitised (since 1993, a full-text database has been in operation), and there are plans to go back to the 1807-1918 period. The implementation of the programme should lead to the creation of a broad and, more importantly, public source database on the history of the Polish parliamentary system.

The rules organising and disciplining the collection process were defined anew in 1992. The writings collected according to content criteria mainly concerned law, in particular constitutional and parliamentary law, philosophy and sociology of law. Also publications concerning the state and political systems, international relations and organisations, political sciences, economics and history were acquired in complete sets or in extensive selections. Correctness of the acquisition profile has been confirmed by a minimal number of borrowings from other libraries on request of the deputies and senators. Foreign-language publications form about 40% of the acquisitions. In 1991-2008, the Library's resource increased by 94.500 volumes. At the same time, due to the selection procedure, nearly 59.000 volumes were removed from the collections. These figures mean that an enormous amount of work was done to keep the collections complete and up-to-date within the collection profile adopted.

After 1990, the number deputies visiting the Library increased (on average, 284 a year and about 2.150 visits). They account for ca. 18 % of all users. In practice, the Library is trying to pursue a "semi-open door" policy", serving individuals and institutions whose scientific, professional or information needs can be satisfied by the Library's unique collections. The average annual number of visits is 12.000 users. In recent years, the average daily reader attendance has dropped from 60 to 50 people, which is mainly due to an increasingly wide access to parliamentary databases over the Internet.

In the early years of transformation, the Library received support from Western parliaments. What proved especially effective was the assistance from the House of Representatives of the US Congress, known as Congressman Frost's program, carried out by a special team of the Congressional Research Service, called the Frost Task Force, under substantive management of William H. Robinson. Continued until 1996, the assistance provided to the parliaments of 12 CEE states included the supply of publications, computer hardware, delivery of training and seminars. Modernisation processes were also supported by the Library of the House of Commons and by the European Parliament. In the period concerned, the Library participated in many forms of international cooperation (IFLA, ECPRD, ICA, ICAU, ELVIL, IPEX etc.), always based on the assumption that it is necessary for the verification of the Library's own capabilities and that it provides a capability to draw on the knowledge and experience of other parliamentary libraries.

Since mid-1990s, the Library has been providing training and internships for employees of information centres and libraries from Eastern European and Asian countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Cambodia, etc.), driven not only by the desire to share the knowledge gained, but also by the memory of the assistance that we were given at the beginning of the past two decades.

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In its present organisational shape, which refers to the times of the Second Polish Republic, the Library fulfils three tasks (library, archive and museum), all of which form the information/documentation facility of the Sejm. The ample and carefully profiled library resources, meticulous archival records, and a collection of works of art and cultural heritage assets enable the parliamentarians and other users to find answers to most inquiries. The Library's collection has provided a basis for many major dissertations in the field of law, political science and history.

Along with the use of advanced forms of information, the Library is seeking to enable both the deputies and the general public to commune with manuscripts, antique books, original documents, and works of art. Memory of tradition combined with seeking to deploy state-of-the-art IT technologies is characteristic of the Sejm Library of today. We leave it to our readers to judge whether the synthesis presented herein is accurate.