



Libraries for children – free access to different cultures: examples from Poland

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Abstract:

After World War II, Poland has become a practically ethnically uniform country. In 2002, 1.23% of citizens (471.5 thousand people) declared to be of other nationality than Polish. Changes in the ethnic structure brought about political, social and economic transformations at the end of the 1980s and at the beginning of the 1990s, and a growing scale of openness of Poland after its accession to the European Union.

Those changes resulted in a higher interest on the part of public libraries, including libraries for children, in issues related to multiculturalism. Below are several examples proving the fact that Polish librarians understand the matter of acquainting young people with global cultural and ethnic diversity:

- 1. Since 1993, the Department for Children of the Municipal Public Library in Oświęcim has amassed collections of foreign-language books (currently, it has 13 ones), based on which various activities are taken in order to familiarise young people with the culture of other countries, such as competitions, writing poems and short stories, soirees, etc. The collections are a kind of “moving exhibitions” – other libraries in Poland can borrow them to carry out similar programmes. As a result of that activity the library was nominated for the IBBY/ASAHI award in 1999.*
- 2. Young volunteers from the “Youth” European Programme work for public libraries in Olsztyn and Wrocław – they give classes devoted to the culture of their country, run language cafes etc.*
- 3. When the French concern Michelin took over the rubber plant in Olsztyn, a large group of French-speaking people came to the city, including families with children, for whom the “Abecadło” library for children started to collect books in French and conduct promotional activities around children’s books.*
- 4. Polish libraries also joined in international projects favouring mutual understanding of many cultures – they included, among others, the BARFIE project – executed by the public library in Warszawa-Ursus and the Czech project called “A Night with Andersen”.*

5. *As part of cooperation of libraries from the “Nysa” Euroregion – Jelenia Góra (Poland), Dresden (Germany) and Liberec (the Czech Republic) – children from the three countries developed a joint legend of the Euroregion of the Ghost of Karkonosze and a trilingual brochure concerning libraries for children was published as well.*
6. *The Lower Silesia Public Library in Wrocław has cooperated with a group of Gypsies for many years – however, it was a very difficult partner. In 2009, the department for children of the library made use of the support provided by the Korean concern LG aimed at renovating the facility – which resulted in the establishment of a place called “Window on Korea” and will certainly result in further cooperation.*

Undoubtedly, serving foreigners in Polish libraries still is a poorly explored subject. We should hope that the “The IFLA/UNESCO Multicultural Library Manifesto” adopted by the Polish Librarians Association in December 2009 will cause that more attention will be paid to the matter.

After World War II, Poland became a virtually ethnically homogeneous country. In 2002, as little as 1.23% of the residents of Poland (471,500 out of the total 38,632,000¹) declared that their nationality was not Polish. Although these data are 10 years old now (no more recent information is available), one should expect that the trends observed so far will even get stronger. The most numerous ethnic groups in Poland at the time of the census included: Germans (152,897), Belarusians (48,737), Ukrainians (3,095) and Romani people (12,855). The other groups of more than 200 persons include: Russians, Lemkos, Lithuanians, Kashubians and Slovaks. All of the above groups can be described as “old” minorities, i.e. they are indigenous to Poland or they found themselves within the Polish borders as a result of the post-World War II changes. Vietnamese people are the largest “new” minority (nearly 2,000)², followed by French people (over 1,600), Americans, Italians and Greeks. These recent changes in Poland’s ethnic structure were fostered especially by the political, social and economic changes that took place on the turn of the 1980’s and the ever-greater opening of Poland after it has joined the European Union (2004). At that time Poland became a rather attractive country for immigrants from Asia, the former Soviet Union countries and Turkey. Nevertheless, Poland still remains a relatively ethnically homogeneous country.

As a result of the above-described changes, public libraries, including children’s libraries, took greater interest in multicultural issues. In 2008, Poland had 8,420 public libraries, including 978 libraries for children and young people³.

Here are but a few examples to prove that Polish librarians understand the issue of introducing young people into the world of cultural and ethnic diversity:

1. Since 1993, the Children’s Division of the Oświęcim Municipal Library has run a long-term programme under the name “Presentation of Foreign Cultures and Cultural Integration Through Books For the Young”. The Programme has been implemented through a number of foreign-language book collections (now the total of 13 collections), built up with the support

¹ According to the 2002 Statistical Yearbook of the Republic of Poland, p.100, 120; in 2009, the population of Poland totalled 38,136,000.

² The minority problems research worker Teresa Halik estimates that the Vietnamese population in Poland is as large as 40,000 people. In this publication, I merely cite the official government statistics.

³ Public Libraries in Figures. Statistical Yearbook, Warsaw 2010.

of, among others, the Polish Section of the IBBY. The main objective of the Programme is to systematically provide opportunities for young readers to contact literature written in Japanese, Swedish, Lithuanian, Hebrew, French, Czech, Slovak, German, English, Norwegian, Danish, Portuguese and books from Switzerland, as well as to learn about the culture, history and present day of the respective countries. It also serves the purpose of preparing children and youths for living in the modern, integrated world, developing the ability to overcome the barriers and prejudices existing in peer groups from different countries, inspiring dialogue, searching for common places and endorsing cultural and ethnic differences, building up constructive attitudes among young people, and improving the knowledge of foreign languages.

As part of the Programme, foreign-language book exhibitions and ones devoted to the history and geography of a foreign country are organized, and literary and reading workshops are held, using activation and play-pedagogy methods. During the exhibitions, lectures are given; people related to different cultures can be met; adaptations of national epic stories and legends are staged; knowledge, literary and art contests devoted to different countries are organized. Sometimes, the exhibitions are accompanied by seminars, conferences or scientific panels, of international or domestic scope, directed to children's literature circles. Each collection and its various accompanying events are presented over duration of 6 months. The materials collected serve as "travelling exhibitions": they are hired by different libraries and other institutions in Poland to support the realization of similar programmes. In relation to these activities, the Oświęcim Library got a nomination to the 1999 IBBY/ASAHI award.

2. In some public libraries in Olsztyn and Wrocław, namely in two media libraries for young people (aged 13-25) that were opened in 2004 within the framework of a Bertelsmann Foundation project carried out in partnership with the local governments and the municipal libraries, young volunteers from the European Youth Programme organize workshops devoted to their country's culture, or language cafes. The "language cafe" is a concept for people who are interested in improving their language skills with the help of a foreign language teacher or other native speaker. Apart from the practical foreign language learning, the participants have a chance to learn a number of other things concerning the country's culture. Every week a new topic is taken up, e.g. the national cuisine, music, history, or literature. The meetings are free of charge, and very popular. Besides, the volunteers take active part in the life of the library by organizing art, music and drama classes or exhibitions. They disseminate knowledge about their countries. For instance, a French volunteer has prepared for the library's readers a series of classes on the French region of Brittany, her place of origin. The children would learn a lot of interesting things; they would be making the traditional hats and dance to the traditional music of Brittany. All the forms of classes are beneficial to both the readers and the volunteers themselves who, in a number of creative ways, can pursue their interests and gain new experiences in contact with Polish youths and children.

3. Again in Olsztyn, after the existing rubber industry plant had been purchased by the French corporation Michelin, a considerable group of francophone population, including families with children, arrived in the town, for whom the children's library "Abecadło" (The Alphabet), established in 2006, started collecting books in French and promoting the world of children's literature. It is worth noting that the children's library "Abecadło" is one of the state-of-the-art public libraries in Poland. The success of the library is partly attributable to its unusual, as for Poland, location: the library is housed in a municipal shopping centre, named "Alfa".

4. Polish libraries have also actively participated in the international projects for mutual cultural learning. The BARFIE Project, carried out over the years 2002-2004 by a public library at the Warsaw district of Ursus, is among the most famous initiatives. This project, realized in 11 European countries, was aimed at promotion of inter-cultural education through children's books and the media. Among the most important Project activities was the creation of a European children's and youth book catalogue, which contained books addressing some difficult topics. Six Polish books found their way to the catalogue, including "Jeż" (The Hedgehog) by Katarzyna Kotowska, which addresses the problem of child adoption, and "Magda.doc" by Marta Fox, about an unexpected adolescent pregnancy. Some educational publications for the teachers who use the catalogue books supplemented the Project.

Now, the Warsaw-Ursus library is engaged in another international project to stimulate communication through books for young people: the EPBCII – The European Picture Book Collection II.

Many children's libraries, especially those in the region of Silesia, participate in a Czech project named "A Night with Andersen". This is a one-time in the year event. Children spend the night of Andersen's birthday in the library, listening to fables and stories or watching films; through the Internet they can communicate with the other participants, also those based in other countries, mainly the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

5. In 1991, the Neisse-Nisa-Nysa Euroregion was established at the junction of Poland, Czech Republic and Germany, the first institutionalized form of cross-border cooperation. In 1997, the libraries of Jelenia Góra (Poland), Dresden (Germany) and Liberec (Czech Republic) published, as a joint initiative, a three-language guide to the Euroregion libraries. The authors of this publication acted on the assumption that "if you know little about your neighbours misunderstandings are easy to arise". Thus, the awareness of the cultural and educational offers of the Polish, Czech and German libraries gives an opportunity to mutually inform and educate the inhabitants of the Euroregion. In 1996, a joint art and literary contest was organized for children from the three neighbouring countries, devoted to the figure of "Rübezhł-Rzepiór-Karkonoś" (Mountain Ghost), the character from a legend common to all inhabitants of the Euroregion. The children would compose their own versions of the legend and drew portraits of the Ghost. The most recent initiative included a publication of a three-language brochure about children's libraries (2004). A number of children's librarians' conferences and seminars were another sign of the ongoing cooperation within the Euroregion and served as places where opinions concerning the work with children and youths could be exchanged.

6. In the 1980's and 1990's, Dolnośląska Biblioteka Publiczna (The Low-Silesia Public Library) in Wrocław cooperated over a significant number of years with a group of Romani residents from the neighbourhood. The children to visit the library were usually aged 4-12, most of them boys, who treated the library as a youth club: it was a warm place with nice male and female personnel; a sandwich would sometimes be offered and some Gypsy fables would be read out, like "Gałązka z drzewa słońca" (A Twig from the Sun Tree) by the renowned Gypsy folklore expert Jerzy Ficowski; you could also draw, enjoying the unlimited quantities of crayons and paper provided. The boys would cease to show up in the library when the Romani group moved to another location and a shopping gallery was opened, where attractions were more numerous and the space was equally warm.

In 2009, the same children's division of Dolnośląska Biblioteka Publiczna in Wrocław received assistance from the Korean corporation LG Display while renovating the premises. Due to its décor, the institution was nicknamed "the library of seven continents". A place called "Window on Korea" was organized inside the library, where in Korean are collected and lent out. The library plans to start cooperation with a school attended by young Koreans. This kind of cooperation is just starting, but hopefully it develops in some interesting ways to let the barriers between the two nations disappear. Now, the language- and culture-wise hermetic, though internally excellently organized, circles of Asian immigrants sustain their own book circulation (own newspapers and magazines) and their own libraries, run mainly at major bazaar sites. Libraries of similar character are available for immigrants from the former USSR.

The well-known Polish writer Ryszard Kapuściński, in his book "Podróże z Herodotem" ("Travels with Herodotus"), wrote the following passage about the problem of otherness and the multi-cultural society: "Full of the enthusiasm and admiration of a child, Herodotus learns about new worlds. His most important discovery: there are many of them. And each one is unlike any other. Each one is important. And you must know them, because these other worlds, these other cultures, are mirrors in which we and our culture look at ourselves. Thanks to which we better understand ourselves, because we cannot define our own identity until we do not confront it with others. Thus Herodotus – having made his discovery, the discovery of culture as a mirror in which, every morning, we can look at ourselves to better understand ourselves – tirelessly sets out on a journey again and again."⁴

Undoubtedly, the issue of services rendered to foreign citizens in Polish libraries is scarcely raised. However, one should hope that the "IFLA/UNESCO Multicultural Library Manifesto", adopted by Stowarzyszenie Bibliotekarzy Polskich (Polish Librarians Association) in December 2009, will bring more attention to this issue.

⁴ Ryszard Kapuściński, *Travels with Herodotus*. Znak Publishing House, Kraków 2004, p. 249