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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

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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.

As no one in this room needs to be told, the awesome image before you depicts the Vijećnica 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*.

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 Vijecnica, 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 Vijecnica 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.

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, inclu-

ded 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.