It is a genuine privilege for me to be with you today, in the great city of Sarajevo, on the occasion of the Second International Conference of Slavic Librarians. It is a privilege in part because I am not one of you. But as an historian, I am utterly dependent upon librarians. I am a consumer, a user, of the words and images that you as librarians identify, collect, preserve, and render accessible to the rest of us. I could not do my job as an historian without you. So this morning, I would like briefly to gaze into the future and speculate on what the changes in our professional lives might mean for our relationship.

If I may briefly transform our meeting room here into a large confessional booth, I confess to being more than a user of what you acquire and preserve. I am a voracious over-user of your products, AND a periodic irritant to word savers at the University of Michigan and other places, as Janet Crayne can attest if she is willing to be candid with you. I know each of you has at least one, and probably several, of me at your institution: You know the type: I need this and that; we need to acquire this (always very expensive) item; how can we possibly be a first-rate institution without having this in our library; and by the way, I need this yesterday. So while I confess today to being a heavy user and for periodically hounding my librarian colleagues for additional acquisitions, I do NOT promise to refrain from future infractions. In fact I foresee that I, like most consumers, will continue to stimulate the development of new, larger, more sophisticated, and more accessible products.

So I first conclude that the fundamental relationship between word savers and word users is unlikely to be fundamentally altered in the new world we are entering together. Our relationship has always been based on mutual dependence and support, but it has never been free of differences, friction, and the insatiable appetite of the community of users. We who are users are dependent on your diligent efforts, and we will continue making demands on you; it seems to me that we are likely to continue abusing your good offices on a regular basis. We are, as you know, both ungrateful and unimaginative. We raise demands for specific needs that call upon

by Robert J. Donia
University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, USA
you to devise comprehensive solutions. At the same time, our imaginations have not kept up with your innovations. We are grasping only slowly the vast potential for new methods and new modes of inquiry that you are making possible.

Gazing into the future brings to mind an episode from the recent past. For the past seven years I have been investigating Sarajevo’s history over the past five centuries. In 2002 I began exploring the origins of the Regional Museum (Zemaljski muzej), the omniibus institution founded in the 1880s as a library, archive, museum, and research institute by Habsburg authorities. Beginning in 1888, the museum published a journal in the local language – Glasnik Zemaljskog muzeja Bosne i Hercegovine – in Sarajevo, and in German as Wissenschaftliche Mittheilungen aus Bosnien und Hercegovina in Vienna from 1893 to 1916. The German-language edition of this journal contains selected articles from the local language version. It was widely distributed at the time and is held in many large libraries, but I held little hope that I would find the original local edition. I figured on consulting it on my next trip to Sarajevo. But in checking the holdings of the University of Michigan graduate library, I found a complete set of the journal, taking up about 3 feet of shelf space. I plunged eagerly into its early issues and found just what I wanted, the claim that “Bosančica” (the local alphabet) differed from “Čirilica” used in Serbia. I also sent an urgent e-mail to my good friend Kemal Bakarić, with whom I would normally plead to help me find such long-lost sources. I told him I felt as though I was gazing on the mask of Agamenon, so unexpected was my find deep in the recesses of the Michigan library.

Without doubt, many of the institutions that you represent also hold copies of the Glasnik Zemaljskog muzeja. Perhaps my surprise at my finding these volumes was born of a number of reasons. But whether my joy was naïve or not, I owe a debt of gratitude to an anonymous librarian of a previous century, probably underpaid and underappreciated like most of you, with the wisdom to acquire these volumes. He or she clued that this journal, published in a foreign language and dealing with an obscure region of the planet, merited preservation for future use. The incident brought home to me the most difficult of many tasks that each of you has: To acquire and preserve items for anonymous future users with unpredictable interests and utterly indeterminate needs.

Today, our respective worlds, yours and mine, are nearly unrecognizable from the time that anonymous librarian did me a great favor in an earlier century. In the region of our concern, entire political systems have vanished, and new institutions have proliferated. Each institution has invariably produced greater volumes of information than their predecessors, and many have introduced new complexities and variability in languages and vocabulary. And the digital revolution has facilitated a global explosion of information, while seemingly doing little to reduce the output of traditional paper media.

The ability to search documents at all tire collection means has opened up vast new...
opportunities, has begun to transform the pursuit of references from a physical to a virtual task. I will give you but one example. In 1997, when I first testified in a case before the ICTY, I spent an entire night between the first and second days of my cross-examination digging through 10 boxes of a 165-box collection of documents gathered by a former worker for Radio Free Europe, looking for press coverage of a single event. Today, each researcher at the ICTY, defense and prosecutor, has at his or her disposal a desktop computer that can search, albeit piecemeal, the Tribunal’s entire database for mention of a single name or word. In less than nine years, word keepers have given to word users the gift of instant access to a mountain of paper documents. Yesterday’s word user, often engaged in a solitary physical search through yellowing documents with dirty hands and paper cuts, has become today’s sedentary screen searcher. “Extra effort” for this new breed of word user means a few extra trips to the printer in the hallway; he or she then goes home to complain of a tough day at the office.

These changes are, of course, second nature to you as librarians. We consumers owe a huge debt of gratitude to you for having developed the means of access and for having guided the rest of us into the brave new world of digital search and electronic preservation. Still, users are far behind the keepers in today’s world of warp-speed changes. Users have only begun to realize the immense potential of searchability for new topics and for new ways to understand the world. And most accumulated knowledge today remains beyond the grasp of search engines, even with the immense resources being devoted by many of your organizations to digitization.

Few of us have had the audacity to imagine the world that you are creating, in which every written word, and perhaps even every image, can be searchable and identifiable using criteria that may yet to be dreamed of. We have become accustomed to searching online catalogs, but the possibility of searching immense databases consisting of traditional printed works is a stretch of imagination that few of us have made. Yet such searchable databases already exist, such as Lexis-Nexus, the JSTOR project and the Making of America project at the University of Michigan. In these cases, word savers are driving processes in advance of widespread scholarly demand for it: JSTOR and the Making of America seem to me to be propelled by librarians’ needs to conserve shelf space and prevent the deterioration of fragile materials. However, these projects are also prototypes for a future of vastly expanded opportunities for word users to search and instantly retrieve information from vast repositories of traditional printed material.

Such capacity will bring to life new modes of inquiry into the human experience. These new approaches may well take us beyond the traditional disciplines within which most of us operate. Some researchers in the social sciences are already using these new tools to extend their reach deep into the past, and present-day events are becoming more transparent and accessible to scholars in the humanities.
Last year at this conference, as a consumer attending a gathering of producers, I found my own imagination stimulated by presenters’ ideas, by the range of issues and the depth of challenges that were discussed. I expect the same from this year’s gathering of fine minds and accomplished professionals, and am honored to be a listener and occasional participant in your deliberations.

I ask two things of you. First, I ask that you keep in mind that anonymous librarian who presciently preserved the obscure tomes of the Glasnik Zemaljskog muzeja, for that unknowable inquirer of a century later. In other words, to gaze open-mindedly into the future without precisely knowing the needs of future users of the words you preserve. Second, that we together dedicate our deliberations to celebrating the contributions of Kemal Bakaršić, now unable to join us because of the terrible disease that struck him just two days after the conclusion of this conference last year. Kemal is a friend to most of all he is a friend of humanity, an ally in the quest for understanding and a lover of words and images. We will miss him immensely this year, but several of us have agreed to keep him informed of the progress of our conference. It is his wish and will that we continue the tradition that he began last year. Together over these next few days we will find ways to advance our art, and I hope we can do so with the idealism ad enthusiasm that Kemal has brought to our gathering.