

The National and University Library of Bosnia and Herzegovina from shelling on 25/26th august 1992 till reconstruction

CONFERENCE – PROTECTION AND RESCUE OF CULTURAL HERITAGE IN
CRISIS SITUATIONS AND DISASTER RISK MANAGEMENT IN LIBRARIES,
ARCHIVES AND MUSEUMS

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It is my honour and pleasure to bring greetings to the organizers and participants of this meeting from Sarajevo and the National and University Library of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

On one hand, I am sorrowful to discuss the same subject as one discussed at the Conference “What do we lose when we lose the library” in Leuven, but in another hand, it is important to remember and not to forget how humankind treat culture and history of others.

Our subject comprises military-political, cultural, historical, social, legal, economic, and psychosocial determinants. Although there is an apparent discrepancy and dissonance between ‘war’ and ‘culture’, these terms are often combined in the same discourse. Every war inevitably brings suffering, destruction and eventually havoc. In contrast, culture, in each of its aspects (architectural, literary, musical, artistic and other) brings spiritual enjoyment and enrichment. Every form of cultural heritage (tangible or intangible), in any civilization, requires a certain period of time to develop. Cultural heritage, which according to the Hague Convention of 1954 should be protected, often has been the direct target of aggression. The Convention, among other things, prohibits the use of monuments and cultural heritage for military purposes. However, despite all the conventions that protect cultural heritage, we are witnessing a flagrant violation of the provisions of these documents.

In Sarajevo, in the period 1992–1995, in full view of the world’s public, heavy weapons were targeted against civil and cultural facilities such as museums, libraries, institutes, mosques, churches, cemeteries, old bridges, hospitals, schools, Olympic sports facilities and so on. In fact, the target was the whole city and its starving and suffering residents. An illustrative example is the shelling of the National and University Library of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 25th/26th August 1992, which was almost completely destroyed, including the “Vijećnica” building and about 90% (from approximately 3 million volumes) of library collections. Many employees of the Library were inside the building of Vijećnica during the shelling, one of whom was killed.

Owing to the superhuman efforts of employees and some citizens, a part of the holdings was saved. Despite the catastrophic destruction, the most important part of the special collections of the National and University Library B&H is still witnessing the multi-ethnic and multicultural character of Bosnia and Herzegovina through the centuries, the tradition of our nations, and the coexistence of diverse cultures and religions on these territories.

Only about ten percent of the collection that remained from the war destruction was preserved by the efforts of conscientious and dedicated volunteers, especially library and cultural workers, as well as a number of citizens and friends from the world of librarians, forming the core of what the Library is today.

Part of a valuable items from the archival collections have been saved: the archive of documents, written in Bosančica, of the Republic of Poljice, the archives of Silvije Strahimir Kranjčević, Mehmed-bey Ljubušak and Jovan Kršić. Manuscripts, poems, photographs of writers Aleksa Šantić and Svetozar Ćorović are also saved. Manuscript collections is saved as well as manuscripts in oriental languages and the Qur’an of Husein Bošnjak. Some of the saved items from the collection of rare books are: incunabula, works of Bosnian Franciscans (from the 17th century onwards (Matija Divković and others), the Gospel from Mrkša’s church (16th century), Srbulje, publications printed in Sopron’s printing house, Vilajet printing house (the first textbooks, official publications, periodicals etc.), the first Bosnian-

Herzegovinian journals and newspapers (Bosanski prijatelj, Bosanski Vjestnik, Sarajevski cvjetnik, Bosna, Neretva and others). The cartographic collection was partially saved.

In all, 19.700 manuscripts and rarities, irrefutable testimonies of the state and the cultural, especially multicultural, identity of Bosnia and Herzegovina through the centuries, have been saved. These collections alone, according to international standards, give us the status of the national library as it is recognized throughout the world.

For days after the horrific fire, there were “Black Butterflies” fluttering over Sarajevo, and fragments of burned books turned into ashes. The beautiful building “Vijećnica” turned into an empty shell within which walls collapsed and one could hardly make out the decorative stained glass, painted with geometric and floral designs. The passage of time and exposure to rains, snows, extreme heat, or cold caused further deterioration.

After the destruction of Vijećnica on the night when library material was destroyed in an inferno, NULB&H "like a refugee in its own town", was housed in the Temple (old synagogue) - now the Bosnian Cultural Center, where a part of library holdings had been earlier housed. NULB&H has changed its “temporary accommodation”. The third temporary accommodation since 1997 is in the former Marshall Tito barracks at the campus of the University of Sarajevo (architects were Karel Pařík (Karlo Paržik) and Ludwig Huber). Although the Library is in an inappropriate space, it functions following the high professional standards in accordance with its dual purpose. In these premises we are just tenants, still waiting to return to our home.

It was only after the war that the first actions were taken to protect it from further damage to the building, which in 2006 was declared a national monument of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Reconstruction of the building was carried out in stages and finally completed in May 2014, with the financial support of donors from around the world but mainly financed from the EU Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance funds. The National and University Library still has not moved into the “Vijećnica” building because of ownership questions (even though at the Land Registry the owner of the building being the State, and the National and University Library of Bosnia and Herzegovina being the user, have been registered for more than 50 years).

However, the National and University Library of Bosnia and Herzegovina, immediately after the devastating fire in 1992, started reconstitution and reconstruction of the destroyed library holdings. Aid was provided by libraries and librarians from Europe and around the world. The activities and functions of the Library have been rehabilitated, a significant part of the library collection has been replaced, procedures and equipment have been streamlined, and staff trained to modern professional standards. Despite apocalyptic damage, the Library today retains the most precious specimens of the Bosnia and Herzegovina treasury: manuscripts, incunabula, rarities, graphic and cartographic collections, whose preservation is the pride and huge responsibility of the National and University Library of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

NULB&H is a custodian of Bosnia–Herzegovina (BH) cultural and historical heritage and [such a great loss is] a thorn in anyone's side connected with preserving the continuity of BH sovereignty. Documents from a thousand years of state history in the stormy Balkans are its treasure

In respect of time and other speakers, I would like to conclude this gloomy story with the information that makes us proud to work in the Library and to protect the collections of cultural heritage.

On July 2nd 2020, the Special Collections of the National and University Library of Bosnia and Herzegovina are declared a National Monument of Bosnia and Herzegovina

Commission to Preserve National Monuments at its 35th session, held in Sarajevo, has adopted a decision to designate the Special Collections of the National and University Library of Bosnia and Herzegovina as a National Monument of B&H. The decision to declare Special collections as movable cultural property was made by a commission composed of: the chairman of the Commission Radoje Vidović and members Goran Milojević and prof. Dr. Amir Pašić. In addition to members of the Commission to Preserve National Monuments, representatives of the international community also attended the session.

The National and University Library of Bosnia and Herzegovina heritage treasures testify to the past of our country and the people who live in it. These treasures are our legacy from the past, what we live today, and what we must pass on and leave to future generations. The NULB&H treasures are irreplaceable resources and witnesses of past times and inspiration for future life, work, and progress.

Thank you!

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