

TO BE AN AGENT FOR DEMOCRACY IN A NON-DEMOCRACY: THE LIBRARY IN LITHUANIA DURING THE SOVIET UNION

Jolita Steponaitienė

Chair Lithuanian Librarians' Association

My name is Jolita Steponaitienė, I am from Lithuania's capital Vilnius, I work in the Martynas Mažvydas National Library of Lithuania in the position of Director of the Information Resources Department.

I was born in 1963, had been learning at secondary school in 1970-1981 and studying at the Vilnius University, Faculty of History, in 1981-1986. In 1986 I started working at the Republican Library of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Lithuania. So, the most part of my life is related to the library. I used to work both in Soviet times and the independent state, to see going political, social and value changes, to feel the traumatizing experiences still chasing. I can also see nowadays occurring reflections to this time period and a censorship. I tell these facts in so detail in order to show the place of the Soviet period in my life, and what are my reflection of the changes.

I will use the following terms in my report:

- Bibliogenocide – it means reviewing of library collections, selection and destruction of publications inappropriate for government ideology.
- Soviet Union – the shortened long name of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.
- Soviet Lithuania – period of Soviet ruling 1944-1990.

I will follow periodization that is used now in Lithuanian historiography. My report is based on researches of library activities, content and formation of collections at that time, as well as my own researches.

In the Soviet Union, libraries, centres for political education, culture centres, cinema, amateur activities centres worked as ideology provision tools. Promotion of Communist Party's ideas about the well-being created by socialism and communism, evil brought by Western world and capitalism, worship of ideological idols – Lenin, Brezhnev, Kapsukas, Grishkevicius (I understand that some of these names tell nothing for you, however till 1988 they were important and worshiped people in my country). – all this was done here. Formation of library collections was organized accordingly.

Distinctive feature of totalitarianism was a censorship of peoples' reading content. Therefore, as the government of that time used libraries as important tool of propaganda, the main focus was given to the bringing of appropriate and necessary information to the public space.

In 1940, when the independent Republic of Lithuania disappeared from the map of Europe, new Soviet government (also Nazi government later on for some years) undertook to review libraries' collections and withdraw literature useless for a new ideology. During the occupations' period that lasted almost 50 years, four stages of bibliogenocide could be identified:

- July 1940 – June 1941 – the first Soviet occupation;
- June 1941 – July 1944 – the Nazi occupation;
- July 1944 – February 1956– the second Soviet occupation till condemnation of the cult of Stalin;
- February 1956 – March 1990– the second Soviet occupation.

German Nazi regime coming in force in 1933 was „marked“ by book burnings. The Soviet totalitarianism organized destruction of opponent literature with no advertising, even avoiding visible traces.

At the beginning of every stage, work went in the same directions:

- Former periodicals were closed; those who were allowed to further publishing had to change their political orientation;
- Printing of books in printing houses was restrained; publishing and printing houses were nationalized and transferred to state entities;
- Import of foreign printings was cancelled.

Printings issued before were reviewed, assessed individually and, if found being harmful for regime, destroyed. Various institutions were involved in this process. The main Soviet censorship institution was GLAVLIT (the supreme board of literature and publishing at the Soviet Lithuania's People's Commissars (NARKOM), later on – at the Ministers Council). Activity of GLAVLIT wasn't public. Libraries and bookstores had to present lists of newly acquired publications. All process of books production was under control of GLAVLIT – from receiving the order on printing till the printing and dissemination of the whole edition. GLAVLIT had the right of control over distribution of foreign publications, international mailing operations, permission to customs to bring books in the USSR, supervising library professionals and acquisition processes.

Starting from the first days of occupation, all books in the libraries were reviewed, and those which contained information against the Soviet regime or Marx-Lenin teaching were removed from collections. The repertoire of books that had suffered from the bibliogenocide was very wide,

because one could easily discover an antagonism to Marxism or Sovietism in the most of books issued or imported in the Republic of Lithuania before the occupation. Such books until further decision had been kept in departments of books forbidden and could not be borrowed.

The oddity to be mentioned was that at the beginning of the occupation, in order not to leave schools without the handbooks, it was recommended just to cut-out the „harmful“ pages. So pupils had used such „amended“ handbooks.

Though reports presented to the local authorities contained certain figures, after beginning the Nazi occupation in Lithuania the part of documents in local authorities' offices were destroyed, and the exact figures are probably lost forever. In 1940, the list of books of Lithuanian authors and in Lithuanian language to be withdrawn from collections contained over 2000 titles; however, the same lists of books of books in Russian, German, Polish, Yiddish languages were not made yet.

New Nazi occupation authorities had faced other problem in that time – orders to withdraw books non-pleasing the Nazi regime were issued, but libraries still did not manage to cope with the books non-pleasing the Soviet regime, and again, they had already started to acquire publications of Soviet propaganda. The acquisitions were very big, for the books had been sent from the whole Soviet Union. One more fact to note – in 1940-1941 Soviets closed monastery libraries, nationalized manors, publishing and printing houses; many books lost their owners. In most cases books were passed on to the libraries. So, huge amounts of books, bad conditions of storage undoubtedly harmed library collections, some unique important for Lithuanian history and culture publications were lost. However, as a consequence of „bad organization of work“, many pre-war publications survived to our days.

After the war, during the years of the second Soviet occupation, review of the collections also had place; procedures had been eventually settled, „right“ and „wrong“ authors identified. The lists were supplemented after the 20th Communist Party Congress held in 1956 when the cult of Stalin was condemned. Publications about Stalin and his environment were added to the lists of „inappropriate“ books.

In the Soviet time libraries, regardless of their status, were turned into the propaganda channels. They arranged exhibitions on occasions of Soviet holidays and the Party actors anniversaries, lectures and meetings with the writers aimed at celebration of socialism victories and criticism of bourgeois Lithuanian government, etc. In order to strengthen the current policy, discussions about the materials of the Communist party congresses were organized in libraries. As the socialist competition – achieving the highest results, overfilling obligations – was mandatory, statistical data about such events was incorrect, greatly increased.

As an example I can present the state-range company of promotion of the books of Leonid Brezhnev, the Secretary General of the Communist Party of the USSR. These were the memoirs about the war, the post war campaigns including up taking of Kazakhstan virgin soils „Malaja zemlya“, „Vozhrozhdenye“ and „Celina“. As the libraries had been controlled and had to present „right“ figures, the librarians had reported about the big turnover of these books thought almost nobody read them.

After restoring independence of Lithuanian in 1990, a big number of articles revealing Soviet genocide of Lithuanian culture including book publishing appeared in the press. Witnesses of the processes mentioned, people of that time, still work in the libraries.

A number of memoirs of people who suffered one or another way, experienced a moral grievance has been issued. They reveal the environment of writers and artists' work, relations of authors and publishers, atmosphere of „inner censorship“, usage of „Ezop language“, pressing from the others to correct the work to match the „Soviet reality“. However, these memoirs should not be unambiguously assessed. Though Lithuania for 27 years lives as an independent state, the articles accusing that time writers, colleagues, publishers for collaboration with the Soviet government still appear. On the other hand, they reveal the order imposed by the Soviet system that destroyed national culture and mentality.

About book publishing. Only state-owned publishing houses existed in the Soviet system, and through their monopoly rights ideological lines of the Communist party were conducted. Special attention was given to the work plans of publishing houses. The draft-plans had to be discussed and corrected by the Committee for Publishing, approved by the Central Committee in Lithuania, translated into Russian language, and sent to Moscow – to the State Committee for Publishing of the Soviet Union. Afterwards they had to be reviewed by the department of propaganda and agitation of the Central Committee of the Soviet Union. Only then, returned back „cropped“, considering all admonitions and warnings, the plan could be adopted. In accordance with the regulation of central government in Moscow Lithuania could publish only 2000 titles of books per year. The most important was to publish the certain number of atheist literature, to keep balance between classical, contemporary works and translated literature. Nevertheless, even manuscript included into publishing plans was never guaranteed to become a book. The publishing houses itself used invisible but reliable multistage censorship, ensuring issuing only books that met ideological requirements. GLAVLIT kept under control all stages of production from receiving the order on printing till the printing and dissemination of the whole edition. Printing houses could receive only manuscripts marked with special GLAVLIT stamp.

Lists of information forbidden to publish adopted by the Ministers' Council of the Soviet Union circulated around among the special services. The last list of such kind received in Lithuania in 1987 contained 14 chapters and 10 annexes.

Publications that possibly contain information harmful to the regime were marked as „secret“ or „for internal office use only“. List of information forbidden to publish often was very wide, and it was hard to understand why information already known to professionals of one or another field was forbidden to reveal.

Yes, it resembles fragment of the Orvel's novel „1984“.

About libraries

Librarians, as the mediators between a book and a reader, in Soviet period had been entrusted with the function to foist reader one kind of literature and to isolate him from another kind. Isolation was ensured by very selective access to Western („foreign“) literature, cultural and scientific publications. That situation caused significant distortion of knowledge and image about the Western life, especially its innovative trends. When reading minutes of meetings of library party organizations, one can get impression that everybody worked almost in conditions of enemy siege; professionals had to demonstrate permanent „political vigilance“, especially working with foreigners – visitors as well as librarians from foreign countries – because some of them „have good intentions to get acquainted with our treasures“, but others „look for gaps to withdraw information they need“.

Deliberate „provocations“ used to be organized by the authorities as control of the „political vigilance“ – e.g. packages with „literature of religious and anti-Soviet content“ delivered to the Acquisition Department of the State Republic Library, letters sent to library director and the head of the Scientific Research Department that „openly slander our Soviet life, urge to gather information needed for foreign enemies“. Prevailed distrust of readers, often also of employees, willingness to deny access to forbidden information. Of course, it was peculiar to big republican, scientific or central town libraries that possessed bigger information resources. Regional public libraries simply had no such publications. During this period there was strict regulation of making copies with photocopier machines. Librarian had the right to control content of the text to be copied. Especially before official Soviet holidays, and religious (e.g. Christmas) holidays as these holidays officially were not celebrated in the Soviet Union.

Soviet library system included such departments as Special storage funds, where „oppositional“ publications were collected, and accessible only with special permits. The idea of establishment of these funds was based on providing a possibility to study a „hostile literature“ in order „to know

enemy“, but only for special category of readers. Readers as well as librarians were strictly prohibited „to copy anti-Soviet, anti-communist and emigration’s texts and images“. Such departments were only in the biggest libraries of the country - Republic library, Vilnius university library, Kaunas central library, library of the Academy of sciences.

Special storage documents could be used only for scientific and office work, under request of the heads of the science institution or another officers. The person who wanted to work with the documents had to specify required material and to read it in the special reading room. The anti-Soviet ideas he could find there were prohibited to publicize by the rules.

Activity of republic special storage funds depended on the „mission“ they were entitled to, and on the attitude of librarians who worked there. In this regard, the library of the Institute of History of Lithuanian Communist Party was distinctive, since it got the most part of Lithuanian printings sent for foreign libraries or even individuals. As information about received works of Lithuanian writers in emigration was not announced, there was little number of readers of such literature. Workers of such departments usually acted in accordance with strict instructions: „stood by and did not allow even slightly longer to invert the prohibited literature. Used his finger to show and told to read only what you asked for“. By the way, the workers themselves had been tested and provoked for violations. Bibliographic information about the literature kept in the Special storage funds was not presented in the general library catalogue. The funds had their own catalogues, but they did not contain information about Lithuanian emigration literature. Later on, information about special storage funds was placed in the general library catalogues except of publications of Lithuanian emigration marked with special hexagon stamp. Again, one must remember that formation of such funds took place spontaneously – everything had been collected – publications survived after destroying of libraries, received (confiscated) from abroad, or found in personal libraries and antique bookstores; there was no even slight systematic supply. For these reasons, readers rarely visited special storage funds and usage of information preserved there was limited.

Though authorities and librarians announced about successfully implemented tasks of ideological education of the nation (e. g. campaign „Book in every family“), real number of visitors did not satisfy the authorities, therefore several administrative and structural reforms took place in the libraries, aimed at increasing number of workers visiting libraries and shaping their worldview. I must remind that workers were the main and ruling class in the Soviet Union. Another important group were peasants. Thus, their education was the government was mainly concerned with. However, in reality libraries worked in the context of „deficit“ of books in great request, though book editions were quite large, but repertoire was not engaging. One could find a great number of non-relevant and obsolete political and other literature but really nothing to read. There were foreign

authors' books and translations of classic literature, even included in school programmes, but all this presented as a class struggle, focused on exploiters and exploited.

Like all Soviet culture, libraries had to contribute to formation of the „new Soviet man“. However, a library was still considered like a place where a reader must be mandatory oriented to the certain direction. The main guidance of reading was provided through the bibliographic indexes that highlighted information of the most value to regime. Readers were offered the „lists of literature recommended“, where among the obligatory topics were, for example, „We build Communism“ or „To live, work and study as stated by Lenin“. Librarians were responsible for increasing of number of readers and loans, for promoting reading of ideological literature. Indeed, such „functions“ of librarians just worsened relations with readers who had turned their backs to librarians and began to assume them being ideology propagators. At the same time, librarians unwilling to carry out ideological functions undertook falsification of indicators and reporting works never done.

Everything I have told above was an official side reflecting ideology of that time. However, there was another side of the librarianship at this time period. Lithuanian historiography of Soviet time research used a concept of „silent resistance“. Intellectuals, librarians among them, who did not admit Soviet ideology acted their own way to preserve Lithuanian books and manuscripts. Manuscripts and old book were catalogued by many intellectuals of pre-occupation Lithuania, lawyers, art critics working in the libraries, especially scientific libraries. I want to present a case of the wife of the last Minister of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania Juozas Urbšys, bibliographer Maria, who worked at the National Library. In 1940, right after the Soviet occupation had started, her father Pranas Mašiotas, very popular children's writer in Lithuania, presented to the library his family archive containing many documents and photos of diplomatic life of independent Lithuania. Only brave and vigilant librarians saved the archive from destruction. I myself have conducted a research what manuscript documents the national Library acquired in the sixties and seventies. To my pleasant surprise, the most of them were old religious texts, sermons, remains of churches archives. To tell the truth they often were given titles in such a way that one could not even understand their content. For the management, it was enough.

I also have done a research how libraries' collections were treated in the after-war period. Because director of the state library that worked in Kaunas Juozas Rimantas had been obliged by authorities „to collect books from the libraries that lost their owners“. The libraries lost the owners as they emigrated to the West escaping from the thread of Soviet occupation or were exiled to Siberia after the war. In such a way, authorities tried to control circulation of unwanted books. Honest librarians had used this as a tool to preserve the books, because there were such a numbers of collected books that selection went very slow. In accordance with the orders, first of all the ideological literature had

to be controlled. One more detail – cautious librarians even till the last decade of the 20th century did not include in catalogue entries proveniences, to say, information about former ownership of the books. This was done to prevent GLAVLIT from temptation to „withdraw from collections“ or include into lists of forbidden books printings owned by „the wrong owners“.

In accordance with the Soviet model, the Book Chamber was established in Lithuania. They recorded the facts of the press, collected the archive of published documents. Because they did not collect, store and catalogue the manuscripts, many unique historical documents of eminent persons and ecclesial institutions reached our days and became available to the public.

How did I feel it all like? Fortunately, in the library I met a lot of interesting, educated people who loved and respected the book and had a lot of historical knowledge they gladly shared.

This helped for me, still a young specialist at that time, to understand the context and to assess what is the real democracy.