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## **The Information Department of Nicholas Copernicus University Library as the Flood Relief Headquarters and its role in rescuing flooded book collections of Lower Silesia in July 1997.**

### *Abstract*

*We describe the experience of the staff of Information Department, Nicholas Copernicus University Library in Toruń, Poland, during the flood of Summer 1997. The Department organized and coordinated help for the libraries of Lower Silesia (southern Poland) whose collections were seriously damaged by the flood. In this presentation, we focus on the process of change in the functioning of the library Information Department, its role, organization of work, with the emphasis on the transition from spontaneous willingness to help to a coordinated aid action, planned and conducted on a longer time scale. We discuss the means that were used to gather and exchange information about damaged or endangered collections, to mobilize librarians in other academic centres to join the aid action, and to raise funds, acquire materials and facilities for the restoration of damaged prints. The use of media and Internet is treated in detail. Finally, we sum up the experience and draw conclusions about efficient cooperative projects and protective measures for the future implementation.*

In July and August of 1997, the Information Department of Nicholas Copernicus University Library served as a 'flood relief headquarters' co-ordinating the rescue efforts undertaken in Toruń to save the flooded book collections of Lower Silesia, some 300–400 km south of Toruń.

The flood of the summer of 1997, the largest one in the Southern Poland in decades, caught individual people, as much as institutions, unprepared and defenceless, libraries being no exception. The primary goal of Silesian librarians was to evacuate the most precious parts of collections, i.e. old prints and rare books. The items that suffered the worst damage were mainly the XIX and XX c. books and prints.

We learned gradually about the scale of the disaster from TV, radio and press, however it was the Internet that brought instantaneous access to more detailed, often personal and therefore dramatic information.

On July 15 and 16, I was working at the Information Desk of Toruń Library. While routinely browsing through some Internet WWW pages I ran across several "flood hot line" ones. The information there was stunningly different from the TV and radio broadcasts of those days. It became clear that in this particular situation the Internet provided a very powerful, fast and accurate means of communication: wherever other media failed, the network delivered text, sound and images,

practically in no time, giving a broad audience an interactive access to flood information. "Hot line" pages often operated as discussion groups and proved particularly useful during the flood.

It was the Krapkowice page where we first saw — on July 15 — a note on the inundation of the University Library in Wrocław, posted by a "Gazeta Wyborcza" journalist, Joanna Banach (GW is one of the most popular Polish daily papers). I managed to inquire, through the Krapkowice page, about the situation of other Silesian libraries. I must admit that it was my first positive experience with interactive electronic news bulletins: it proved to be extremely useful in crisis situations like the flood, offering not only excellent means of communication but also an easy way of joining the support and rescue efforts. Let me point out three features of the network that are essential here: the speed of information transmission, low cost, and broad and easy access worldwide.

The 15 of July was the beginning of the rescue action undertaken by the Toruń Library. It lasted until mid-August. In the first few days our actions were mostly spontaneous and emotionally-motivated; however, very soon we managed to turn it into a well-organised and co-ordinated effort.

### **The first spontaneous aid**

In these exceptional circumstances our immediate reaction was to provide direct aid to the inundated libraries. We managed to mobilise many people in Toruń willing to help, and contacted the head of the University Library in Wrocław, offering to evacuate 1000 out of 7000 wet books to Toruń for drying and conservation. They were more than happy to accept our offer. Having agreed upon the strategic plan of our actions in Toruń, we could divide responsibilities.

As we co-operated with the Provincial Public Library and with the Department of Conservation and Restoration of Historical Paper and Leather of our University, the Information Department assumed the role of the co-ordinator, while the directors of the Libraries and the head of the Department took responsibility for preparing personnel and equipment for the reception of wet books from Silesia.

One of my duties was to prepare a detailed plan of the evacuation of books from Wrocław. Using the Internet again I found a map of Wrocław showing flooded areas of the town. It allowed me to trace the roads and streets by which the Library buildings could be accessed. I could also estimate the size and number of wooden boxes for the transportation of books. We planned the evacuation for the 18th of July. The Toruń district police offered us a truck with a team of experienced drivers; thanks to this help we managed to transport to Toruń 2000 instead of the originally planned 1000 books in a single day. These were mostly XIX c. German books, journals and maps which underwent initial drying the very same evening they arrived in Toruń: volunteers and library staff supervised by the conservators dried them using a traditional method of separating wet pages with absorbing paper. It certainly was a time-consuming method, but in the conditions it was the cheapest and the most effective one as well. Unfortunately however, the books were already contaminated with bacteria and fungi.

At the same time, 3 colleagues from the Department of Conservation and Restoration of Historical Paper and Leather brought over 2 tons of water-damaged old prints from the Opole Province Public Library. These books were immediately frozen and put in the cold storage plant of Miesi'czkowo near Toruń as a protective measure against microbiological damage. Frozen, the prints would safely be stored for almost a year awaiting conservation.

### **Organised long-term actions**

While the arduous work of drying and disinfecting books from Wrocław took place day after day in the underground storage rooms of our library, two floors up, the Information Department co-ordinated the efforts for the successful continuation and completion of the rescue action.

According to our analyses the important tasks were:

- characterisation of our needs (people, equipment, funds)

- organisation and co-ordination tasks
- finding sponsors (businesses, foundations, associations, individuals)
- information tasks (Internet, radio, TV)
- mobilisation of library professionals in Poland (Internet discussion groups, personal contacts).

## **Characterisation of our needs**

Prior to systematic rescue actions we attempted to characterise our direct needs — the equipment, materials, and the amount of funds necessary for the effective completion of the rescue effort. Taking into account that the University Library, as a unit financed from the state budget, would not be able to withstand unplanned expenses, we directed our efforts at gaining as much voluntary help and sponsorship as possible. We also prepared a working plan to minimize the costs.

As mentioned above, we chose the traditional method for treating the damaged books, yet, given our situation, it was also the most effective one. The detailed plan was worked out together with the Directors of the Library and the Department of Conservation.

## **Co-ordination and organisation tasks**

We decided that the University Library and Toruń was the area where direct rescue actions needed to be co-ordinated, while it was also necessary to organise and co-ordinate the co-operation of the entire professional librarian community in Poland. Moreover, international contacts would help in solving equipment and financial problems.

Thus, the Information Department assumed the role of a flood relief headquarters, where the relevant information about the progress of the work and co-operation among the units involved was gathered and analysed.

In practice, 2 persons worked here permanently, mobilising other Department employees as needed. The Department received and processed all relevant mail (by Internet, fax or phone, or by ordinary mail). The local co-ordination of work was relatively simple as it consisted of providing information to 3 distinct units: the University authorities, the Department of Conservation, and the Province Public Library. Hands-on work with wet books was managed by the directors of both libraries and by the head of the Department of Conservation. Thanks to the motivation and high professional level of these people as well as good equipment and excellent work conditions in the University Library, we managed to complete the 1st stage of the drying process of 2000 books by August. All the books survived, including precious, rare old Silesian maps and journals.

On the regional scale, our tasks were somewhat broader: the aim was to mobilise the regional community to support our efforts and to find sponsors. We needed to co-operate with local media, regional government and business. To achieve these goals we prepared a large scale publicity campaign: interviews, publications in local press, and an exhibition and guided visits to the storage rooms where the book-drying was taking place. Though that work absorbed plenty of our time and energy, the results were by all means positive.

On a national level, our efforts focused on providing reliable information. The Toruń Library turned out to be the main source of information concerning the flooded collections. Thanks to the Department of Conservation — the only research unit in Poland developing methods of the restoration and conservation of damaged prints — instantaneous professional consultation was offered over the Internet, fax or phone.

## **Finding sponsors**

By July 19th we had already begun the search for sponsors in order to acquire not only funding but also materials and equipment of immediate use. These included drying and disinfecting materials like absorbing paper, cotton, alcohol, germicidal UV lamps, and protective clothing for people working with damaged books.

We called regional businesses, foundations and charity institutions; we sent faxes, informed the media about our needs, and issued over a dozen statements per day via the Internet. As a result, we received help from about 20 sponsors, and not only local ones, who provided materials, equipment and money worth about 14,000 z<sup>3</sup> (2500 pounds) in the total — it was sufficient for the first stage of the action. The authorities of the University, both libraries, and the Department of Conservation applied together to the Polish Ministry of Culture and Art as well as to the Foundation of Polish Science and to the Polish Foundation for Science Advancement for funds to purchase a lyophilizing cabinet (for freeze-drying of books) and the equipment for digitalisation of endangered prints. The lyophilizing cabinet was eventually purchased by the University with its own funds, while the financial support of the Ministry was directed to the creation of the Digitalisation Laboratory in the Provincial Public Library of Toruń.

Let me mention here that we also received donations from Polish communities abroad, in Holland, for example, which were used to buy a refrigerator for storing frozen items. Last but not least, conservation materials were donated by Poles from Germany.

## **Acquiring and distributing information**

The news prepared by our Information Department spread very fast. We continued to collect information about the situation of libraries in the flooded areas and transmitted it further over the Internet.

After a few articles and interviews had been published in the central media, Toruń became the place where not only librarians but also archivists would seek help or information. Together with the Conservation Department we distributed instructions about how to protect deluged prints against further damage and information about the location and availability of drying chambers, etc. The employees of the Conservation Department personally supervised the drying of precious prints and documents in Opole and Wrocław or monitored the condition of collections in flooded buildings in Nysa.

Our everyday work consisted in browsing through the Internet services, analysing press, radio and TV broadcasts with the focus not only on the flood itself and its direct consequences, but mainly on the problem of protecting and rescuing cultural heritage. Domestic and international Internet "flood news services" proliferated very fast in those days and it would be hard to mention all of them here:

- "Virtual Poland" <http://wp.cnt.pl/>
- "Internet for the Flood Victims" <http://krapkowice.sonik.com.pl/krapkowice/powodz/pomoc.html>
- "Wrocław -- Voluntary Services" <http://www.gnet.pl/powodz/>
- "The Invasion of Help — RMF FM" <http://www.rmf.pl/akcje/powodz/>
- "TV for the Flood Victims" <http://www.tvp.com.pl/konto/home.htm>
- "TV Bryza for the Flood Victims" <http://www.mawisoft.polbox.com/bryza.htm>
- "Radio Plus Action" <http://www.gliwice.pl/puls/powodz.html>
- "Polonia for the Flood Victims" <http://www.worldgate.com/polcannet/powodz/>
- "Wielkopolska for the Flood Victims" <http://www.radios.com.pl/powodz/wielkopo.htm>
- "Caritas Poland" <http://www.bielsko.pl/~eb/>

The best flood page, though, was "Internet for the Flood Victims", edited single-handedly in Krapkowice by a young amateur Internet enthusiast — Maciej Sonik. Krapkowice is a village in the flooded area, one of the first local communities with its own Internet server. This page became known in the whole country for its particularly accurate, well organised and essential information on the flood. It was visited over 300,000 times. Many people took an active part in the exchange of information through this page. The service still exists, providing information and assistance to all those who still struggle with unresolved flood-related matters.

We received dramatic news about flooded legal archives, often quite old and irreplaceable collections like those in Nysa dating back to the XVII and XVIII c., and endangered collections of the Ossolineum Library in Wrocław which holds some of the most precious items in Poland (manuscripts, scores etc.).

We had to analyse all news critically, classify and verify it, since it was not uncommon that emotions upstaged the facts in the broadcasts. Being aware of this, we paid special attention to the verification of the news. Official sources, like press, radio or TV, gave us assurance about the professional and objective character of the information, however, as in case of other sources, mainly the Internet, no such truthfulness could be assumed per se.

It is understood that in extreme situations like the flood people are often driven by emotions, which is naturally reflected in the information spread by public networks. Thus, we took it as a rule that any data obtained via the Internet had to be double-checked, through an additional contact, in person or by telephone, or verified through other sources. As a last resort, we would decide to release uncertain but potentially important information with an appropriate comment as to its reliability.

In order to achieve a more efficient information flow, the librarians engaged in the rescue action decided to create and maintain WWW pages concerning exclusively the libraries affected by the flood. After a discussion the pages were placed on the WWW server of the Ossolineum Library in Wrocław, <http://www.oss.wroc.pl/theflood/>. They contained up-to-date information on the state of individual libraries, aid information, relevant addresses, photographs, description of rescue actions, etc. The pages were edited by the librarians of Wrocław, Toruń, and Warsaw.

After July 25, the National Library issued the electronic journal "Sygnały", where a list of libraries that suffered from the flood was maintained and some statistical data published. In addition, it contained information about government and grassroots initiatives aimed at helping not only the libraries but also individual librarians who lost their homes or property in the flood.

Two electronic discussion lists for librarians are maintained in Poland: AIBIBL and INFOBIBL. Thanks to these lists we managed to mobilise librarians in Poland for the rescue action: the appeals issued by the Toruń University Library, by the National Library and by the Association of Polish Librarians received a broad response. We maintained permanent contact by phone or e-mail with librarians in UK, Germany and USA, who helped us with valuable advice.

We discussed individual problems seeking optimal solutions, we shared professional advice on the conservation of books, and information about available equipment and materials. Later on, the list helped us to replace systematically lost items in Silesia by finding duplicates in other Polish libraries.

We used all accessible means of communication in collecting and distributing information: telephone, fax, electronic and traditional mail, other Internet tools like telnet, ftp and WWW browsers. The sources of information were: WWW pages, press, radio, TV and discussion lists, as well as personal contacts.

## **Contacts with the media**

We attributed a lot of importance to our contacts with the media during the rescue action, as it gave us an opportunity to act beyond the confines of our institution. Our daily needs required about 20 volunteers to work with wet books. In total, more than 130 volunteers worked in the storage rooms of our library during those days. Following appeals broadcasted by local radio stations and by the press there came college and grammar school students, retired people, soldiers, museum employees, artists, scientists, and relatives of librarians, who carried out „the grunge” work of separating wet pages with absorbing paper, and disinfecting them with chemicals. The media created a very positive image of our efforts and determination.

Journalists wrote about us almost every day: our appeals and broadcasts were always published free of charge. They presented the rescue action as an effort to protect and save a small part of the common European heritage. All of us — the organisers of the action -- experienced very friendly but sober and professional contacts with media people.

## **Mobilisation of the librarian community**

In the very beginning of the flood, when the first news about the disaster reached us, we realised that in order to bring any help to the flooded libraries we needed to mobilise other library centres in Poland. This is why my appeals to other libraries in Poland and abroad date as early as July 19. My attempt was to make it clear for everyone that Silesian libraries desperately needed our help.

As mentioned above, Poland has 2 large electronic discussion lists for librarians. Our appeal through one of them — the INFOBIBL (created in Toruń, 118 subscribers as of today) — received a broad response. The libraries that joined the rescue action were those of Gdańsk Polytechnic, Warsaw University and Jagiellonian University in Cracow. The collective effort saved all 7000 books inundated in Wrocław University Library.

A few days later the Library of Poznań University joined in saving the most precious XVII–XVIII c. collection of prints damaged in the Theological Seminary of Nysa. When a terrified priest called us from Nysa reporting the old prints inundated in the Seminary building, our data bank already contained an offer for help sent, via the discussion list, from Poznań. All I had to do was to get them in touch: once the contact between Nysa and Poznań was established, it took no more than 2 days to transport to Poznań and freeze 4000 precious old prints. These prints are still undergoing today antibacterial treatments and conservation in several laboratories in Poland which are technically prepared for such an operation.

Also, the National Library took active part in this rescue effort organising the Centre of Information on the Losses of Libraries and establishing working groups for the analysis of information and the preparation of specific instructions for rescue operations.

Unfortunately, I have no time now to mention here in detail the mobilisation of other units in Poland other than the academic ones — the environment most familiar to us. It should be stressed however, that many Polish libraries, archives, cultural centres and government institutions took an active part in rescuing precious collections.

## **Final remarks**

Thanks to extensive organisational and informational efforts, the results of our actions were positive and they are still visible today as concrete and enduring achievement. We got to know our community better and we learned whom we could count on in critical situations.

There is an ongoing discussion in Poland today about the creation of regional centres for rescuing items of our cultural heritage during natural disasters. The Central Council for the Rescue of Library Collections After the Flood, including top specialists from Toruń and Warsaw, was established at the end of December 1997.

Locally, the regional Toruń Post-Flood Association for the Rescue of Book Collections and Archives was created in Spring 1998. Its aim is to build the Laboratory of the Conservation of Books in Toruń — a kind of emergency service for all of Poland in times of disaster. For this purpose, professional equipment is being gathered and sponsors and funds are being found. We co-operate with the Ministry of Culture and Art and with the Polish Committee for Scientific Research. We are also applying for financial support from Polish and international foundations. A certain part of the necessary equipment has been already purchased — equipment and materials that proved to be critically important but were often inaccessible during the flood last year. Furthermore, we plan to purchase equipment for digitalisation of texts and prints.

Next year in 1999, an international conference on the conservation of damaged prints will take place in Toruń. Here we will share our experience with our colleagues from other countries and discuss optimal methods for protection against losses.

The National Library and the Association of Polish Librarians made the effort to prepare library personnel through a series of seminars, workshops and publications for protective or rescue actions.

Floods and other natural disasters cannot be controlled or eliminated. Yet we can learn how to minimize their consequences, in particular the loss of items of irreplaceable cultural heritage. We hope that our colleagues — librarians, in Poland and abroad, can profit from our experience last year.

*Bożena Bednarek-Michalska*