

# *On the Origin of the International Organisation of Librarians (IFLA)*

*The Congress of Librarians in Prague 1926*

by RUDOLF MÁLEK

The recent visit of the President of IFLA, Mr. Herman Liebaers, the Director of the Royal Library in Brussels, initiated discussions concerning the present, the past and the future of IFLA – the International Federation of Librarians' Associations. The beginning of IFLA's activities was also remembered, the first concrete proposals to establish an institution which would take care of the development of international relations among libraries and create the necessary conditions for the mutual international co-operation of librarians. And it is with Prague and the association of Czech librarians of that time that these oldest memories of the IFLA are connected.

From June 28 to July 3, 1926 the International Congress of Librarians and Friends of the Book was held in Prague. It had been convened by the Association of Czechoslovak Librarians in co-operation with the organisation of book-sellers and publishers, the association of bibliophiles and other Czechoslovak institutions. Comprehensive records of the proceedings of the Congress have been published by the State Printing House in two volumes, consisting of almost 900 pages, in French, while the original language of the contributions made in the discussion has been retained, see *Congrès international des bibliothécaires et des amis du livre, tenu à Prague du 28 juin au 3 juillet 1926. Tome I. Procès-verbaux. 1929, 95 pages and illustrated supplement. Tome II. Communications et mémoires. 1928, 791 pages.*

Almost 700 persons – 522 librarians from Czechoslovakia and 164 from abroad – took part in the Congress. The international participation was constituted by the representatives of 28 countries, 48 towns and 88 organisations.

The honorary committee consisted exclusively of foreign librarians, e. g. Sweden was represented by the Director of the Royal Library, Stockholm, Mr. J. Collijn, the Netherlands by the Director of the University Library, Amsterdam, Mr. E. P. Sevensma, the USA by the Secretary of the American Library Association, Mr. C. H. Milam, Denmark by the Librarian at the

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Royal Library, Copenhagen, Mr. V. Madsen, Switzerland by Mr. N. Rubakin, England by the Librarian of the British Museum, Mr. L. C. Wharton, etc.

Among the foreign corporations the most numerous representations were those of Poland, France, Germany and Yugoslavia, further those of the Soviet Union, the Central Book Palata, Moscow and the Library of the Institute of Art, Kiev, of Belgium, The Platin-Moretus Museum, Antwerp, and the International Institute of Bibliography, Brussels, of Austria, Hungary, Rumania, Italy, Portugal, Turkey, Brazil, Egypt, Palestine and other countries.

The working committee headed by Professor V. Tille, Charles University, and with Dr. Jan Thon, the Director of the City Library of Prague, and Mr. J. L. Živný, the Secretary of the Czechoslovak Institute of Bibliography acting as vice-chairmen, received tens of greeting telegrams – from the V. I. Lenin State Library in Moscow, the University in Tokyo, from Teheran, Bologna, Barcelona and other librarians' or scientific institutions.

The Congress was of truly international character and met with response in the whole world. Its social importance and splendour was enhanced both by the reception of the delegates by the President of the Republic T. G. Masaryk and by the party given in their honour by the Primator – Mayor of the City of Prague, Karel Baxa as well as by the friendly closing meeting of the librarians from the Slav countries. In its proceedings the Congress touched upon practically all of the then topical problems of Czechoslovak and foreign librarianship, bibliography, the publishing and sale of books.

The participants of the Congress – both domestic and foreign – prepared 103 papers and presented them in six sections: the first of them dealt with international co-operation, the second with bibliography and catalogisation, the third with the history of books and libraries, the fourth with the problems of research libraries, the fifth with those of public libraries, the sixth with the publishing of books and bibliophile publications. Seven separate exhibitions were organised at the occasion of the Congress: exhibitions of ancient illuminated manuscripts, of old prints, old bindings, modern books and bibliophile publications, an exposition of ex-libris, another of Czechoslovak librarianship and one about Czech printing offices.

With regard to the further international collaboration of librarians it was the contribution of the President of the Association of French librarians, M. G. Henriot, the Director of the Forney Library and Professor at the School of librarianship in Paris, which was most important. He proposed to establish a permanent international organisation which would unite various national associations of librarians. After animated discussion his suggestion was adopted, elaborated in detail and included in the final resolution of the section for international relations as well as in the final resolution of the Congress as a whole. In the nine points of this resolution almost all of the

basic ideas can be found which characterize, one year later, the officially established international organisation of librarians, IFLA, and which influenced its entire future activity. Besides other questions it was also recommended here that the organisation be headed by an Executive Board the members of which would be elected by the delegates of the national associations of librarians and which would direct the manifold activities of the international organisation, facilitating the co-operation among libraries and librarians of different countries.

Moreover the Prague Congress passed resolutions on the international exchange of publications, on the international inter-library lending service, on the education of librarians, the international statistics of prints and on the need for a world bibliography. As is evident, additional documents were adopted which had a fundamental impact both on the future work of IFLA and on the international collaboration of librarians and the exchange of knowledge, information and experience in all spheres of science, technology and art.

It was in these connections that the Congress appealed to the librarians of all countries to give their support to the efforts for international co-operation of libraries which could also contribute to the enhancing of the social prestige of the librarians' profession and ensure for librarianship and its newly constituted organisation the place they are entitled to in the great intellectual development of the world.