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"ABC" AND THE ITALIAN PRISON LIBRARIES

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Abstract

"ABC" – the Italian Association of Prison Libraries – was formed in the year 2000. The author describes the research and collaboration of many librarians that led to the establishment of ABC. Since the Italian legal system does not provide for the management and financial support of prison libraries, a small group of librarians and dedicated volunteers decided to form a mutual support network and to work as advocates for the improvement and expansion of library services to prisoners. Some of their most significant accomplishments are described, and the author also discusses the problems and prejudices encountered by the ABC pioneers. While ABC is an official unit within the AIB (Italian Library Association), it is also striving to achieve a higher profile at the international level and is interested in working with IFLA to promote professionalism in prison library service.

The Associazione Biblioteche Carcerarie (ABC) was born in Italy in the year 2000 as an idea in the head of the chair of library science at the State University of Milan. We, a small group of concerned library professionals, decided to create this association because the Italian prison libraries did not have a system structure; in fact, Italian law guarantees only the existence of a prison library service – not its management and financial support.

The Italian prison libraries are usually managed by an educator¹ who, together with social workers, is responsible for the prisoners' re-education and their behaviour during incarceration. Therefore, this person does not work in the library, which is usually managed by a well educated prisoner who organizes and operates it at the best of his ability.

We began to recognize this situation in 1992 when, as part of a scientific research project at the University, we sent a questionnaire to all Italian prisons in order to collect information on the state of their libraries. The data revealed a reality of total isolation and dismal conditions.

In Italy there are 205 prisons: 79 of them responded to our questionnaire; of these, fewer than 10 had a working library. We became so concerned that we contacted the Governor of the prison in Milan about a plan for creating of a library service. We, as volunteers, developed a booklist and executed a contract agreement with the public library of Milan for providing the inter-library loan service. We also contacted the other prisons who had answered our questionnaire, in order to find out how the libraries worked in their specific towns. They all told us their stories: my colleague Angela Barlotti will illustrate the situation in Ravenna.

In that time, Turin was one of the few cities that had an integrated service between the city library and the prison. Later, Rome also established a contract between the city and five local prisons. At the same time, in Padova some volunteers were trying to create a documentation centre and to promote a magazine called "Narrow Horizons", which was written by prisoners and which is still a great source of information about Italian prisons. And then there was Bologna, where a university teacher gave lectures to the prisoners about the importance of reading.

After becoming aware of all these efforts, we decided that it was the right moment to establish an association which could provide cohesion and structure to the disorganized and isolated activities in various parts of the country. The association would also serve

¹ DPR (President's Decree) 30 June 2000 n.230 (Official Gazette n. 195, 22 August 2000 – SO n. 131) Regulation of the penitentiary system and freedom restriction measures. Art. 21: Library service. 1. The direction of the institute must guarantee to all prisoners the easy access to the documents of the prison library and the possibility to read documents of any other library or public institution working in the same local area as the institute itself. 2. The choice of books and periodicals must be made by respecting the cultural pluralism of the society. 3. The library service is usually managed by an **educator** who is responsible for the conservation of documents, for the creation of catalogues, for books and periodicals' distribution, for the cultural activities diffusion. He works together with prisoners who (according to the article 12) enjoy these activities during their spare time. He can be helped by one or more scribe prisoners who will be duly paid.

as a forum for communication among library staff working with and in the prisons. An equally important role of the association would be that of advocating for full professional status of prison librarians and raising the awareness of this important work.

This is the reason for the birth of ABC: thanks to its own resources and the successful collaboration of its volunteers, it has played a vital role in connecting those Italian librarians who are interested in working with prisons.

After ABC created a very simple (and not always updated) Internet site in May 2001, many people contacted us, and we were able to organize the first Italian conference on prison libraries. For the first time we were able to meet and discuss the projects we had implemented thanks, to a large extent, to the Italian Library Association (AIB). The AIB, which is an IFLA member and has representatives here today, collaborated with us and helped us to publish the papers from the first ABC conference.

During the last two years, ABC has been involved in an increasing number of activities: we have participated in many national librarian meetings we are adding a growing number of prisons who ask to participate in our discussions; the prison library in Como has been created; other prison libraries, including those in Parma, Monza, and Cremona, are currently under construction. But our proudest achievement occurred on the charming island of Sardinia: this region developed an innovative program involving many agencies (from the Ministry of Justice to the Prison Administration Department) and has accomplished a complete integration between the Sardinian prison libraries and the local library systems. As result, the Sardinian prison libraries will be able to participate in the development of a joint catalogue, as well as the inter-library loan and a program to train prisoners who are interested in working as librarians. This endeavour will help support the daily work of prison libraries and will help the prisoners to learn a new job.

These are some of the first important steps Italy is taking to develop a system structure for prison library services and to enhance the professional role of the prison librarian. I think, however, this is just the beginning of a long process, which is made more complicated because of existing prejudices. The first prejudice is the deep-rooted mistrust of prisoners among the general population. Incarceration is still viewed by the large majority as an exclusively punitive measure, while the concept of rehabilitation has not gained much acceptance. Many people still consider non-punitive and educational programs misguided "pietism" towards those people who "must pay". Few still understand that providing prisoners with the opportunity to read and learn in reality protects society from ignorance, from the "prison" of non-awareness, and from the lack of culture that often lead to criminal behaviour. How many offenders will there be left in our prisons, if we only incarcerate those who have deliberately broken the rules of society?

The second prejudice, which must be eliminated, is that of the (supposedly) inferior status of librarians. The general public do not understand that it takes real professionals to provide the broad range of library services needed: there are books and readers, but

many people do not have an understanding of our true role in bringing the two together. We are considered "invisible." I am sure many of you know what I am talking about.

We need to demonstrate the highly skilled and professional role played by librarians in institutions such as prisons. Our profession certainly would benefit if people had a better understanding of the knowledge skills required.

I have followed with great interest the activities of IFLA, and especially the work of the Section of Libraries Serving Disadvantaged Persons. The articles by Vibeke Lehmann, as well as the book ***Down for the Count*** by Brenda Vogel, were fundamental works in my professional training: I always considered these publications an example Italy should study in order to understand who our "forerunners" are and what our goals should be.

I'm here in Berlin today, because even in Italy we are making progress and gaining confidence. I hope IFLA will help us accomplish our goal of having the professional role of the prison librarian properly recognized. But above all, I hope that the right to read will be guaranteed for all citizens - in accordance with the UNESCO document which emphasizes the library as a vital source not only for education, culture, and information, but also for peace and the spiritual welfare of all human beings.