but a question
directed toward understanding –
the declaration of war against the
state of affairs
and resignation.

KRIBIBI:
Public Libraries and the
"Working Pool of Critical Librarians"
in Austria

by Renate Obadalek

The origins of public libraries in Austria, in the past called Volks­
buchereien, go back to the 19th century with the setting up of small
libraries in three different sectors of society: the parishes of the
Catholic Church; Social Democratic educational organizations for workers;
and bourgeois library organizations like the guild of the “Central Library”
in Vienna. The state itself felt no obligation to run public libraries in favor
of better education for the masses.

After World War I and the collapse of Hapsburg Monarchy, the situation
basically didn’t change. The First Republic was characterized by the
conflict between Conservative Government and Social Democratic commu­
nal administration authorities. Even the so called “red” administration of the
capital that introduced new standards in public welfare, school education
and architecture for the working class, didn’t realize the importance of a
public library system. They sponsored the working class libraries, but as
private institutions. Running public libraries didn’t become part of the
communal or governmental tasks.

It is a shame to admit, but Austrofascism, the dictatorial regime between
1934 and 1938, and National Socialism were the first political movements
to recognize the importance of libraries for their educational policies, and
they established library systems in the most important towns of the country.

For these historical reasons, the library scene after World War II has been
dominated by three stakeholders: the municipalities, the Catholic Church,
and the Austrian Federation of Trade Unions. Public library legislation that
defines quality and training standards, as exist in other European countries,
doesn't exist in Austria. Therefore the infra-structure for a system of libraries is very minimal and it is practically not possible to build up an extensive network. Another disadvantage seems to be, that apart from the large municipal systems, almost 85% of the librarians work on a voluntary basis. They are only briefly trained and work for a few hours in the small bookrooms of parishes, villages and factories. The opportunity to attend a polytechnical university for library and information studies did not exist before 1997.

The strict separation of scientific and public libraries prevents the exchange of information and inter-library lending between them. We think that is not a friendly policy for library users and customers. There exists a third system run by civil servants employed by the state or municipalities – the school library system, which is administered by another ministry. Therefore cooperation between public libraries and school libraries only works if they are situated in the same building. Centralization and standardization seems to be necessary but it would require a change in the Austrian constitution, and we know by experience that this is not possible.

In 1982, some librarians, dissatisfied with the prevailing opinion about library work and the existing structures, joined with publishers and booksellers in order to found a progressive lobby to promote books and all information in the form of books. The RENNER-Institut (a cultural and educational institution of the Social Democratic Party) offered help with organization and financing. But after a short time, publishers and booksellers lost their interest in such a guild. Only librarians and some representatives of library supporting bodies remained.

In 1983, the Working Pool of Progressive Librarians (Arbeitskreis kritischer Bibliothekarinnen und Bibliothekare im Renner-Institut or KRIIBIBI) was founded. After investigating the purposes and structures of organizations, KRIIBIBI decided to use the model of “Future Workshop” created by Prof. Robert Jungk for the promotion of social and creative imagination. Since 1983, KRIIBIBI has arranged two workshops each year in order to dispute and elaborate subjects which are under discussion not only in Austria, but all over Europe. Librarians from all Austrian provinces and also from other German-speaking countries have taken part in our workshops. They are interested in a progressive change within library work, and value the opportunity provided by the workshops for exchange of opinions and experiences.

In the following years KRIIBIBI has discussed a lot of subjects and the results have led to innovative steps in the development of the public library system in Austria. A new library development scheme was the result of a workshop on cooperation between adult education organizations. Several group-dynamics seminars have led to a new definition of our profession, which is still changing for the sake of expanding into the electronic information sector. The “Network Library Solidarity” has remained an illusion for great library systems, but smaller ones in the federal counties have built up small networks. The lack of a Library Act has often been discussed, and as a result of one such discussion the matter found its way into a parliamentary committee meeting.

Secondary analphabetism, reading behavior and attitudes towards books and other audiovisual media have been part of educational discussions not only among Austrians. Because of an influx of immigrant workers and their families, in some parts of our country a multicultural society is developing and therefore we are discussing ways to integrate them fully into the everyday life of libraries.

Additionally, for several hundred years within Austria there have also been living ethnic minorities, whose mother-tongue is not German. For example: Slovenians, Croats, Czechs and Romani. Their access to reading facilities in their respective languages is not guaranteed. During one of our workshops in Carinthia, a federal province with a language minority, KRIIBIBI members became convinced of the precarious situation of the Slovenian Study Library. We organized a solidarity action and worked to help them.

Together with the libraries of the Austrian Federation of Trade Unions we set up a workshop to discuss and organize a fight against austerity programs...
in enterprise and factory libraries. Our seminars examined the improvement of public relations, evaluation, marketing, library management, and the future position of public libraries in the age of the Internet. Many of these discussions have motivated us to look for better training opportunities. Only well trained librarians can meet the challenges facing us. It has taken a long time, but in the end our fight for professional training was successful. Since 1997 it's become possible to go to the Polytechnical University for Information Studies. We believe that this new educational program will improve the library situation in Austria.

Discussions concerned with the sense of cultural work, like organizing literary and musical events and exhibitions have brought about the development of a progressive cultural definition for KRIIBI. For example, to work as a volunteer librarian means to be female. This understanding of the gender component of this work initiated a project about female history in the evolution of public libraries. “Is there or is there not an intact worldview in children’s books?” was the title of a KRIIBI seminar in which we tried to investigate, together with psychologists, historians and publishers, the treatment of topics like racism, sexism and political history in children’s literature.

Additional to the activities in our seminars, KRIIBI tries to do lobbying and information work in political organizations and cultural institutions. Our participation in the jury that awards a prize to the most important political book of the year, the so-called “Bruno Kreisky Award,” is indicative of KRIIBI’s influence on a progressive book award in Austria. Our next workshop in autumn 1998 will deal with new media in public libraries. Finally we are happy to report that we will organize, in cooperation with our friends of AKRIBIE, a European meeting of progressive librarians in Vienna in 2000.

Let me now finish with a traditional, but still valid principle of the working class people in Austria: Let’s go forward, but don’t forget solidarity!

RADICAL LIBRARIANSHIP: Something of an Overview from the UK

by Martyn Lowe

To start off, there is a question that I would like to put to the audience: is librarianship an art or a science?

I would state that:
(a) ALL information work is an ART.
(b) Information work covers more than just traditional librarianship.

Yet, if I am going to elaborate on these ideas, then perhaps I should tell you something about myself and “where I am coming from.” This is not so much for the sake of an autobiographical ego-trip, but because it will help to place something of what I have to tell within a particular context.

Where I Am Coming From

I have worked in libraries since 1972. Before that I spent 3 and one-half years in a theatrical costumiers. However, most of my working life has been spent within public libraries. During the period 1987-1988, I lived in Denmark and was a student at Brenderup Folkehojskole on Fyn.

This was followed by a few years temping (i.e. temporary short-term contract working). These jobs included working with The Economist, a school of nursing library, a couple of university libraries, and doing records management archiving at a Lloyds underwriters. I am currently working in a public library in London.

In addition, I have 30 years active involvement within the peace movement. Rather than give a long CV list of which organizations I have been involved with over the years – I’ll just mention the ones that I am involved with at present.