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NEWS

Rebuilding a Landmark in Bosnia

The National and University Library in Sarajevo struggles to protect what is left and replace what was lost

By Theresa Agovino September 12, 1997

SARAJEVO

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Two shrapnel-scarred books sit on the desk of Enes Kujundzic, director of the National and University Library of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

"These books remind me of the difficult job that lies ahead," he says.

"They are witnesses to history."

The history he speaks of is August 1992, when fierce shelling by Bosnian Serb forces caused a fire that almost obliterated the library's collection of three million items, including one million books. The blaze also caused severe damage to the landmark building.

The volumes on the director's desk -- one a study of Oriental history, the other on financial planning -- survived the fire. But in all, only about 10 per cent of the library's books were spared, and only because they were stored in a warehouse at the time of the fire.

Concentrated efforts to rebuild the library and its collection did not really begin until after the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement on Bosnia-Herzegovina was signed. The process has been going slowly.

Repairing the building is out of the question for now, as the Bosnian government doesn't have the \$25-million or more that it would take to

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do the job. But the library is getting a new roof, which will at least prevent further damage, thanks to a \$1-million gift from the Austrian government.



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The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization has donated \$200,000 to help renovate a former army barracks to house the remnant of the collection temporarily. Unfortunately, Mr. Kujundzic says, it would cost close to \$750,000 to adapt the structure.

The director has had better luck in rebuilding the collection. The library now has 150,000 books and access to 500 periodicals and journals via CD-ROM. Working out of temporary quarters, it is again serving clients. "We can now claim we are a university library of modest size," says Mr. Kujundzic.

The institution was always much more than a university library. It was a treasure chest of Bosnian history and culture. The director says it is impossible to estimate the value of the three million pieces of Bosnia's past -- including periodicals, maps, and pamphlets -- that were lost.

The Topkapi Palace in Istanbul, the University of Bologna, and the Widener Library at Harvard University all have extensive collections of Bosnian books, documents, and manuscripts. But Mr. Kujundzic does not have the funds to visit those institutions and find ways in which his library might benefit from their holdings.

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"We are still doing pedestrian work," he says, "getting lists of what we need, cataloguing."

At one time, he says, he believed that the library might be able to use new technology to replicate much of its collection. But obtaining enough computers to make that idea feasible has proved difficult.

Over the next few months, the library will complete its catalogue of current holdings. Mr. Kujundzic's main task now is to keep the donations of books and periodicals coming, a job that he says is not getting any easier. University presses and libraries in the United States already have donated thousands of books. The Sabre Foundation, a U.S. philanthropy that has coordinated such donations, in July shipped 10,000 new books to

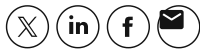
Bosnia, half of them for the library. The shipment was made up of two copies each of 2,500 titles published by Harvard University Press and 2,500 published by the MIT Press. The foundation is working with 20 university presses to prepare a donation of some 20,000 more new books.

University Microfilms, in Ann Arbor, Mich., has donated the CD-ROMs that provide the library with access to periodicals. But Mr. Kujundzic's says that gift will expire in a few months.

"I'm so afraid to ask them to renew," he says. "There are a million guys like me around the world who need help."

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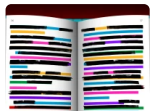
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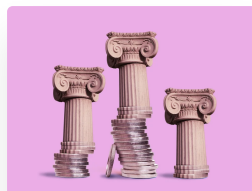
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