

An American Museum Librarian's Tour of German Special Libraries

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From September 28 until October 10, 2003, I was fortunate to participate in a whirlwind tour of over a dozen German special libraries. Nine other American colleagues and I were treated to fascinating and educational behind-the-scenes tours. My very sincere gratitude goes to the Initiative Fortbildung für wissenschaftliche Spezialbibliotheken und verwandte Einrichtungen e.V., particularly to Frau Evelin Morgenstern for organizing the tour, and to Checkpoint Charlie Foundation for sponsoring it.

I should preface this report by saying that I viewed this tour as a "working vacation," and the completeness of my notes on the various host libraries varies according to the weather and my mood. Every single library we visited welcomed us with incredible graciousness and hospitality, and each one merits its own days-long visit. All this poor author can offer, however, are outline sketches and brief impressions of each institution. Library "snapshots," if you will. Another thing to consider as you read my account is that I am in the very beginning stages of my library career; therefore, my impressions and reactions will differ from those of a veteran librarian.

Heidelberg: Universitätsbibliothek Heidelberg (www.ub.uni-heidelberg.de)

Dr. Nicole Kloth was our guide here, and she gave a very informative tour of this impressive educational institution. The library was very modern, with a large computer lab, and heavy involvement in digitalization projects. The thing that struck me most at the time was the fact that their stacks were shelved chronologically. This means that outside of the "reading room" areas, there is no real browsing option for patrons. Books were simply shelved in the order they were received, with biology books resting right next to literature texts. To me, this means that the days of the "serendipitous discovery" are a thing of the past. No longer will the patron be able to accidentally discover the perfect book merely by looking around the shelves. The luck of the search is confined to the online catalog. This has interesting implications for the future of information retrieval.

Karlsruhe: Staatliche Kunsthalle Karlsruhe and Badisches Landesmuseum Karlsruhe (www.kunsthalle-karlsruhe.de ; www.landesmuseum.de)

The director of these two libraries, Sabine Müller-Wirth, impressed me with how much she is able to accomplish with limited resources. I think most of us in the museum library world can sympathize with the difficult decisions that must be made in the face of limited resources. Her creativity in maximizing staff and space were an inspiration to me.

Karlsruhe: Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie (www.zkm.de) Media Library and Library of the State Academy for Design

As someone deeply entrenched in the issues of archiving and digitalization of visual media, I was utterly fascinated by the work being done by Petra Zimmermann's team at ZKM. Their facilities were state-of-the-art, including interactive media displays and video art viewing booths. Yet they, like many of us, encountered the difficulties inherent in the rapid pace of technological advancement. For example, I was particularly delighted to get a closer look at a soon to be media storage "dinosaur," a huge CD jukebox. What was in 1997 a huge investment in cutting edge technology was already becoming a liability. The mechanical arms that pulled the videos from their slots and loaded them for viewing jammed constantly. Also, the format in which they had saved their videos on CD is incompatible with today's software, so a complete digital conversion of all of their videos is currently underway. In our photo archives, we face this same challenge. CDs burned just two years ago are no longer readable on our new computers. I wonder if there is a "perfect solution" to the question of how to archive digital media.

Weimar: Herzogin Anna Amalia Bibliothek (www.swkk.de)

This library was emblematic of what we would find throughout our two-week library tour: there was much evidence of reconstruction and growth. This structurally lovely library was receiving much-deserved attention to guarantee its preservation. Future generations should all be privileged to feel the thrill that I did when I gazed upon the very same library that Goethe utilized and helped organize.

Gotha: Forschungsbibliothek Gotha (www.flb-gotha.de)

What particularly interested me about this library was its somewhat complicated relationship with the former Soviet Union. I imagine this situation is replicated at other libraries throughout former East Germany. During World War II, many volumes were removed and taken to Russia, and they were only returned 10 years after the war. If I am not mistaken, I believe the library is still in negotiations with Russia to return some of the more valuable volumes.

Wittenberg: Library of the Evangelisches Priesterseminar (www.predigerseminar.de/biblio.htm; www.martinluther.de)

Librarian Stephan Lange gave us a wonderful overview of some of the treasures of the collection. It was quite exciting; we sat around a table practically covered in rare books. For example, we were able to see Luther's September Bible, which we were told was a very valuable Testament featuring a Cranach drawing.

Halle/Saale: Frankeschen Stiftungen (www.francke-halle.de)

This institution fit the noticeable pattern of being located in a town undergoing much building construction. We were welcomed into the non-public area of the library and shown rare archival material, such as historic orphanage ledgers. This was one of several libraries where I noted the practice of using old medieval manuscript pages to cover much more modern books.

Leipzig: Die Deutsche Bibliothek/Deutsche Bücherei (www.ddb.de)

Birgit Schneider, the General Director here, told us that this library was founded relatively recently in 1912, and mirrors Germany's history of late unification. Unlike the centralized U.S. Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., the German "national library" is spread across three libraries; the Leipzig location holds the most volumes. Another interesting fact is that the formation of this the depository was not a governmental initiative, but was a result of the efforts of publishers and book traders.

Leipzig: Bach-Archiv/Bachmuseum (www.bach-leipzig.de)

Like many archival collections, the Bach-Archiv was a fascinating juxtaposition of history of modernity. Moments after staring in awe at an original manuscript that I would never dare touch, I was able to actually hold a printed-out version of another manuscript in my amateur hands, thanks to the wonderful digitization project of Dr. Peter Wollny and his team.

Berlin: Library/Mediathek of Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz (www.ghwk.de)

The visit to this library had a personal significance to one of my American colleagues who, thanks to the help of Head Librarian Gaby Müller-Oelrichs, was able to locate letters of relatives in a Jewish immigrant book. Another thing I noted was that this library was organized according to its very own classification system. This appears to occur often in small libraries with very specialized collections, in both Germany and the U.S.

Berlin: Library of Frederick the Great, Sanssouci

Librarian Hannelore Röhm guided us through one of the most beautiful libraries in our tour, with fabulous rococo interiors. Again I felt extremely privileged to be allowed a rare glimpse of a non-public area of the library, even if we did have to shuffle around with "Pantoffel" (oversized slippers) on our feet!

Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin-Preussischer Kulturbesitz (www.sbb.spk-berlin.de).

This was one library in two locations, one in western Berlin (Potsdamer Strasse 33), and one in eastern Berlin (Unter den Linden 8). The librarians we met spoke of the challenges of handling a

collection in two physical locations. Another difficulty was the fact that the two staffs worked for the exact same institution, but received unequal compensation based on whether they worked on the west or the east side of the city. One sad fact that we learned is that at some point during World War II, the National Union Catalogue of Germany was lost. Before going on this tour, I never really reflected on the concrete impact the conflict had on German libraries.

Kunstabibliothek der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin- Preussischer Kulturbesitz. (www.smb.spk-berlin.de)

At this library, the Director, Prof. Dr. Bernd Evers, went out of his way to show us the most exciting pieces in his collection, including hand-colored pages from the very first fashion journals, as well as medieval manuscripts. He even opened the vault to show us an extremely rare block book from 1460.

To summarize, my overall impression of my visit to German libraries is that they face very similar challenges as libraries in the United States. We all must deal with rapid advances in technology and try to increase the accessibility to our collections even in the face of limited resources. I firmly believe that librarians as a group are uniquely suited to face these challenges with great creativity and optimism. At every single library we visited, we were treated with such generosity and graciousness that I very quickly grew to identify myself as a librarian first, and an American second. Thank you again to everyone who helped to provide our group with such an overwhelmingly positive experience.