

IFLA – The Geneva Years

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When the International Library Committee decided, at its second session in Rome, on June 14, 1929, to elect Dr Tietse Pieter Sevensma, Chief Librarian of the League of Nations Library at Geneva, to become its first permanent Secretary General, a new era in international library cooperation opened. For, although ever since 1877 numerous, but comparatively unrelated international bibliographical and library congresses had been held, there had been little assurance that the decisions taken would be rendered effective. IFLA's link with a world organization possessing facilities for conducting correspondence in the Federation's five official languages now made such permanent contacts possible. The choice of Dr Sevensma proved also to be felicitous for the recently endowed Rockefeller Library of the League of Nations, as it found itself on the point of creating its own tradition, being destined to develop from a mere office library into one of the world's foremost libraries, serving both as a centre of international research and an instrument of international understanding. A Library Planning Committee had been set up, but there seemed to be little chance that the Administration would accept the plans put forward by the Librarian, to turn the Committee into a permanent body upon the completion of the library building.

An effective link with other great libraries needed to be forged, and IFLA – whose second President, William Warner Bishop, still chaired the League of Nations Library Planning Committee – proved a perfect partner.

For this reason also Dr Sevensma strongly recommended, upon his departure from Geneva to become Director of the Leiden University Library in 1938, that the Assistant Secretary should continue to work with him, and that IFLA's administrative centre should be maintained at the League of Nations. In 1939 Dr Sevensma attained the age of 60, and his many friends, aware of his reluctance to accept the customary memorial volume, took him by surprise by creating the Sevensma Prize.

Facilities made available by the League of Nations Secretariat, enabled IFLA to maintain a low budget, whose main items were printing and postal expenses, a part-time typist-secretary, and the travel costs of the Assistant-Secretary, the Law Librarian (subsequently Chief Librarian of the League Library), Arthur C. Breycha-Vauthier, to attend IFLA's annual meetings. Through these reduced costs no library association needed to be prevented from joining IFLA owing to lack of funds.

From the beginning the Federation proved to be really international, and as early as 1931 its first *Répertoire* listed 24 associations in 21 countries in America, Asia and Europe. By far the largest member was the American Library Association, a founding member whose moral and financial support was essential from the start,

but most of the associations of librarians in Europe and Asia also joined at an early date. So did the new countries of that era, where old libraries existed, such as Czechoslovakia, Poland and the Baltic States. They became most active IFLA supporters. The 1938 *Répertoire* reflects IFLA's steady growth: 39 associations from 30 countries. Professional work was now carried out with the help of one section and twelve subcommittees.

It was William Warner Bishop who proclaimed in a presidential address that IFLA's chief duty was in days of crisis "to hold our organization intact, ready for prompt service and development when a happier day shall dawn", and in a memorable meeting, on the eve of the Second World war, it was agreed that in spite of all controversies IFLA should remain "a heaven of peace in a stormy world". Such pronouncements helped to form IFLA's policy in hard times when contacts between members were practically inexistent and even communication between Geneva and the Secretary General in the occupied Netherlands became increasingly problematic. In order, however, to show that librarians were active whenever this was needed and that IFLA still existed, a close collaboration was started with the "Consultative Committee for reading facilities for prisoners of war and internees", a group of important international organizations set up in Geneva in 1940 with the help of the International Committee of the Red Cross, and that distributed some 12 million books through its members together with over 3 million volumes specially edited. IFLA remained active in this group during the war and in the final phase even ensured its secretariat.

When the war ended no question arose as to the need of continuing IFLA, and the first post-war meeting held in Oslo in 1947, in a country which had so grievously suffered, showed under its new President, Wilhelm Munthe, that peaceful understanding had been resumed. So were IFLA's annual conferences, and the 1955 edition of the *Répertoire*, the last to be published in Geneva, listed 57 national associations as well as three international members, and these figures also were soon exceeded. In spite of the increase in activity, as reflected in the size of the *Actes* of the International Library Committee (renamed after the 19th session (1953) the IFLA Council), caused by the rise in membership, the Secretariat managed to carry on, though with some difficulty, under Breycha-Vauthier who had taken over since 1946 as Chief Librarian, the Geneva United Nations Library.

Dr Sevensma resigned at the Madrid Council meeting, on October 10, 1958. The Federation rendered a tribute to his unique merits by electing him Honorary President. Combining sound library traditions with a progressive but realistic vision, his reliable, steady character was tempered by an exquisite personal charm and an unflinching sense of justice. A vast store of knowledge in many fields (he had been editor of two successful encyclopedias), great linguistic gifts, a capacity for hard work, and a deep sense of duty, all these qualities had left a personal mark on IFLA's first thirty years.

A complete reorganization of the Secretariat was now due, and IFLA's ties with Geneva had gradually to be relinquished. Dr Joachim Wieder from Munich was

elected Secretary, a charge he held until 1962 when IFLA's first full-time Secretary, Mr Anthony Thompson, was appointed, and the Secretariat moved to Sevenoaks (UK). Breycha-Vauthier continued in office as Honorary Treasurer until 1963, when he handed over his charge to the former IFLA President Pierre Bourgeois in Berne. Until 1963 the *Actes* continued to be prepared in Geneva with the help of Joachim Wieder and Maria Razumovsky from Vienna. The transmission of the IFLA Secretariat was smoothly effected by these devoted successors, with a minimum of disturbance caused to the membership at large.

The fact that during several decades the Geneva Library had been the centre of IFLA's activities proved a valuable asset in the post-war period. It helped to make new generations of users appreciate the importance of the Library's international role. If during its first thirty-four years IFLA had benefitted from the facilities graciously offered by this international link, it reciprocated with continuous moral and practical support, leaving as a most positive balance, born from this happy collaboration, everlasting precious memories and a deep professional and personal satisfaction.