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Farfuri Xhaja, Director, Training, National Library of Albania

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Against the Grain

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A Conversation About Albania and its Libraries with Farfuri Xhaja

Training Coordinator, National Library of Albania

by Tom Gilson and Katina Strauch (College of Charleston)

She came to the College of Charleston Library courtesy of ALA's Bob Doyle and the Library Fellows Program. She is quite a woman with quite a background. Since coming to the College of Charleston Library, she has taught us a lot! — KS

ATG: Farfuri, welcome! Tell us something about Albania. How have things changed there since the fall of Communism.

FX: Albania is one of the Southeastern European countries. It is a small country with 3 million people. Albanians are one of the oldest people of the Balkans and Europe as well. Our language is Albanian. Tirana, where I am from, is the capital city with 300,000 people. My people suffered much during the First and Second World Wars, but it wasn't enough. Albania was a Communist country and its leaders isolated the Country from the other parts of the World for 45 years.

Everybody has heard about events in Eastern Europe after the falling down of Berlin's wall. Democratic changes happened in Albania too. There were at first students' demonstrations in December, 1990, asking for better living conditions, pluralism and human rights. Later the people of Tirana demonstrated and the Government was forced to accept the pluralism. So the first opposition party, the democratic party, was created immediately. Now there are many political parties in Albania.

Talking about the economic situation was and is still very hard. My country is passing now a hard transition period from a totalitarian regime and centralized economic system to democracy and a free market economy. This situation is being felt in all fields of life, including libraries. But is very important that changes have come without blood. Now people can express their thoughts and can celebrate religious holidays. Mosques and churches are opened now after being closed for many years. 70% of the population in Albania are Muslims, 20% Orthodox and 10% Catholics. This situation doesn't create any problem. Apart from their religious beliefs, people get married to each other and respect each others beliefs. For nearly 50 years, Albanians living abroad for many, many years, were not allowed to come and visit their families or relatives. Now, after the democratic changes it's possible for everybody to come and visit Albania.

Farfuri Xhaja was a Library Fellow at the College of Charleston Library from October, 1995, through April, 1996. She was born in Tirana, Albania and is Training Coordinator at the National Library of Albania. She visited the College of Charleston with her daughter, Denada, for six months. The experience was incredible for us in the Robert S. Small Library. We learned about another country and other people from a very different culture from ours. Farfuri left us to return home in April, but we will never forget the experience, and the friendships which we have cemented will be with us always.

ATG: What sort of education system exists in Albania?

FX: I don't know exactly the number of schools in Albania, but there are 8 year schools and high schools everywhere. In every village. 8 years of school is obligatory. Most of the young people attend high school and part of them can go to the university. The University of Tirana is the biggest in the Country. There is also an Agricultural University and the Academy of Arts in Tirana as well as four universities on other cities. All levels of education are free. But now, in the future, that will change for higher education.

There is a hard situation for young people in Albania now because not all of them who want to go to the university can go. The number of students is going down so they have to have a very high level of high school scores and have to pass a hard test. In addition it is not easy to find a job because only a small number of factories are working. It will take years to rebuild the industry. So there is a tendency for the young people to go abroad to attend university or to work there.

ATG: What role do libraries play?

FX: Naturally, as a librarian I'd like to tell you something about libraries in Albania and also about the National Library, where I have worked for 23 years. Albania is divided in 34 bashkies or municipalities and 330 communes. There is one central public library in each bashki and small public libraries in the communes. There are also libraries in every school, in institutions and universities. So there are more than 3 thousand libraries all over the country, but the staff isn't full-time. There are nearly 5 hundred full-time librarians.

The University of Tirana Library is the second biggest in the country. It has 500,000 volumes and is organized differently from the College of Charleston Library. There is the main library, and it has 8 branches in every faculty area. The staff is 45 people. There are also some other good libraries in Tirana like the University of Agriculture Library, Academy of Science Library and Academy of Arts Library.

ATG: What about access to library materials?

FX: All libraries in Albania were built and organized with closed access. The user could touch and use on his own only a small collection of reference materials and periodicals. In addition, there was a collection of forbidden works including political, economic, religious, modern arts books published on the Western countries. The information about this collection was also separated and was allowed to be consulted only if the user had special permission.

But now the collection is not separated, and all the users have access to it. This is the first change the libraries did after pluralism. Librarians are conscious that the closed access system used until now is not what their communities require. They are trying to change this, but it is a problem of the space.

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ATG: *What sort of classification system do you use?*

FX: All libraries in Albania use the same classification system (UDC) and the same cataloging rules (AACR2), but card catalogs and bibliographic publications serve as the primary access to library collections. Systems of classifying and cataloging have gone through changes, but I'm not going to tell you the whole history. UDC has been in use since 1965. This system was recommended also for other libraries in Albania. Now in use are the recent editions of UDC, English version. Also cataloging rules and AACR2 are in use since 1989.

The NL tried for many years to provide cataloging in publication for Albanian books, thinking that it would be a good help for other libraries in Albania and facilitate the communication of information. This process began in 1979 and lasted until 1991, the year when the decentralization and privatization of publishing houses happened. Now publishers don't submit galleys of their books to the National Library and the process is interrupted. We are trying to persuade publishers to collaborate with us to make available cataloging in publication, but I don't believe we will arrive at this anytime soon. It needs a kind of law to obligate publishers to collaborate with the National library.

The National Library is not computerized so we use traditional ways for technical services and circulation of library materials. Card and book catalogs are the main tools of information. We have alphabetical, classified and subject catalogs for users, all those three for library users, as well as chronological and topographic catalogs for library uses. The cataloging department has to work hard to maintain all these kinds of catalogs. They have to type maybe 13 copies of each card. No library is automated, but we hope this will come. Libraries are not-for-profit institutions, so they are financed by the state. Since the state is poor, the libraries are poor too. But they are not waiting for the state to be rich. They are trying to find help from different sponsors.

The National Library is the largest and the oldest in Albania. It was founded as the National Library in 1922, and in that year it started to enjoy the legal deposit copyright. The collection was 6,000 volumes. Now the National Library has 9 hundred thousand volumes and the staff is 100 people. The National Library is the national archive of everything published in Albania. It is the National bibliographic agency, the main information supplier and the training center for Albanian librarians. As the national archive of Albanian books and periodicals, it receives free of charge 15 copies of all publications produced in Albania from 1946 till 1992. In these recent years, the National Library is faced with new conditions: decentralization, change of law system, budget's decrease, publishers' privatization, etc. According to the new law, now the NL receives not 15 but 5 copies free.

The law of legal deposit copy covers print on paper materials and not sound or other media. The acquisition of new publications is not regular because the law is not being respected by all publishers, a phenomenon that did not happen before, when there was centralization and state control. So the acquisitions department has to be in touch with publishers as often as it can.

ATG: *Do you acquire any foreign materials? Do you have any budget for this?*

FX: The acquisition of foreign materials is realized mainly by purchasing in Western and Eastern countries. Russian books predominated until 1970, because it was cheaper and the Russian language was known by Albanians. Later this changed and we are acquiring more Western books in English, French, German, Italian. Young people are learning Western languages. But in general the possibility of buying books and subscribing to periodicals has been decreased from one year to another. The NL appreciates the generous help of the World Bank and cultural centers of the foreign

embassies in Tirana (Italian, German, American, French). Their donations of very good books in recent editions is very helpful. Another way of acquiring books is activity with foreign libraries. The NL maintains exchange relations with more than 200 libraries all over the world. It has good relations with the **Library of Congress**, the **New York Public Library** and many (20) other libraries in the U.S.

ATG: *How about the NL collections. What comprises them?*

FX: The main collections of the NL are: 1) Archive of Albanian publications, about 59,000 titles, 2) The Albanological collection, including foreign publications of historical, linguistic, ethnographic, folkloric character concerning Albania and Albanians, about 35,000 volumes, 3) Manuscripts and rare books published until 1800, about 2000 titles. The oldest Albanian book was published in 1555. 4) Collection of Albanian books and periodicals, about 240,000 volumes 5) Collection of foreign books and periodicals, about 460,000 volumes and 6) Collection of microfilms, about 6300 units.

The National Library is the national bibliographic agency. It has been involved in publishing the bibliography of Albanian books and the bibliography of titles of articles of Albanian periodicals and newspapers since 1960. Retrospective bibliographies are also being compiled for the previous years. The bibliographic department is responsible for these two publications and Albanological department prepares bibliographies dealing with Albanological sciences. The serial bibliography *Albanica* is a special one. It is annotated in Albanian and English and includes books about Albania and Albanians published abroad. This department also organizes sessions for researchers of Albanological institutions to give detailed information about foreign studies in Albanian history, linguistic, literature, ethnography, folklore, etc.

The NL also plays a role in preservation and conservation of library materials. To preserve rare books and manuscripts, the users don't use original materials, but the microfilm. We have a lab for microfilming. We also microfilm newspapers and periodicals. There isn't any vendor in Albania for this kind of materials. Also we have a restoration and binding department which does paper deacidification, restoration and leather binding. This department is the only one in Albania and provides restoration services for special collections of other libraries.

ATG: *What's public services like in Albania and the National Library?*

FX: Readers service is the right of everybody above 16 years old and these people can be members of the NL. But the NL doesn't provide children's service. There are three reading rooms for books and two reading rooms for periodicals. These last are free access. The average number of library members is 7000 in a year, and materials circulated is 200,000 volumes a year. The membership fee is \$ 0.50.

The user service department provides reference services, exhibitions and other information activities. This department makes the collections available in the reading rooms of the library and by way of domestic and interlibrary loan.

I have to admit that we in the NL as well as in the other libraries in Albania don't work as much as you do to help users. Working as a reference librarian (and seeing other people, like technical services librarians, who work in the reference desk here at the College of Charleston, has been a very good experience for me. You don't wait for the user to ask you, but you ask him if he needs help. So you save both the users' time and the library materials. He will find exactly what he needs and will go away satisfied.

It happens sometimes in our libraries that when the user comes for the first time to the library, he goes to the card catalog, finds the card of the book he needs, pulls it out, gives it to the librarian at the circulation desk and says, "I want this book please." If he would have the help of the reference librarian, this wouldn't happen and the catalog wouldn't be as damaged.

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ATG: For how long can patrons check out books?

FX: The due time for books is two weeks. If the reader loses the book, he has to pay 10 times more than the real price, according to library law. This is because we need the book, not the money. So the reader has to take care of the book and if he wants to keep it, he has to think about it.

I see here that it is not easy for you to find the price of the books in the circulation desk for overdue or lost books. We find it easy in the acquisition department according to identification number. Everything acquired in the library no matter which way, has its real price. In addition we have the price in the last area of the bibliographic description. This practice is also in all libraries in Albania.

ATG: Tell us about library education in Albania.

FX: If you want to know about library education in Albania, we have none, only library training. Our librarians are specialists in different fields with a university education. We are graduated from the university. As we get a job in a library, we have to attend a training course at the National Library.

ATG: So is the National Library responsible for training in Albania?

FX: There isn't any school of library and information science in Albania. For many years, experienced librarians have transferred their knowledge to the young people that worked with them. Only two librarians were graduated on 1960 in library science in the Soviet Union. It was on their initiative that a class attended by 30 people was opened in 1963. It was a middle school level program and was closed in 1967. After that, the NL was charged as being the training center for Albanian librarians. This practice is used also in some other countries in Europe.

ATG: And this is where you work, the National Library? What exactly does the Training Department do? And as Training Coordinator what is your role?

FX: The training and research department of the NL runs librarians' training. I have worked in this department since 1973. The department organizes a two-year correspondence training course. To be admitted in this course, you have to work in a library. During 1994-1996, the course was attended by 40 people. This seems like a big number for a small country like Albania, but there have been changes in the library staff these last years.

The program of the library training course comprises 7 subjects and includes theory and practice. The people who pass all exams receive a certificate. Two librarians of the training department and some experienced librarians of the NL are the teachers of the training course. They are also authors of textbooks and lectures, but no one has graduated in library science or specialized in this field. So I'm grateful to all of them who gave me the possibility to be here and to learn from your experience. I wish the same luck for my colleagues. Being here I see and feel that we need to improve the program of library training. We also have to include some other subjects, such as library management or information technology.

The training department also provides continuing training for NL staff and for other libraries in Albania. We organize workshops and conferences for different topics (technical services and readers services). At the end of the year we ask the departments of the NL what they need for next year's training. Every three months, we have a workshop. The speaker may be one of the librarians from the department or from another department. It depends on the topics. The training department also chooses articles from foreign periodicals about news in library science and suggests that other departments discuss the article. For public libraries, after we visit those,

we decide what they need and organize workshops once or twice a year. The last program we had was about open stacks and reference materials. (As I said all libraries in Albania are with closed stacks and we are trying to change it.)

The training department is a consultant center for all kinds of libraries. We regularly visit 34 central public libraries and help other libraries when they need help. Manuals and guidebooks for the NL and for other libraries are prepared by this department in collaboration with experienced librarians. We don't need to do classification schemes or cataloging rules, because there are international organizations doing these (as FID for UDC), but we have to translate those into Albanian and give Albanian examples. In recent years, we have worked on a list of subject headings in Albanian. We didn't use subject headings before 1994 because we didn't have a list in Albanian. We used Sears List as a model, not the LCSH because it is so big and it will take so many years to translate and adjust it into Albanian. We notice that our list sometimes is restricted for special subjects, so we have to add new subject headings. Our list has the same form of the LCSH and this is very important because it allows us to add LC headings when they are not provided on our list and to graduate to the full use of LCSH in the future.

The training department publishes two bulletins. *Librarians' Bulletin* is the only one published in Albania in the field of librarianship. The other one is *Annotated Informative Bulletin* for books and articles of foreign periodicals, new acquisitions in the NL in the fields of library science, bibliography and information. We have a collection of professional books and periodicals in foreign languages available for all librarians.

ATG: We are lucky that you came to the U.S. to learn and to teach us about Albania. What about the automation of libraries in Albania? Is the situation optimistic? And has your visit to America helped you?

FX: Yes. The National Library as well as other libraries in Albania are not automated. The National Library applied for a grant from the SOROS Foundation and is waiting for an answer. Because of this situation I was interested in learning about library automation. At first, I practiced how to search for information in different databases. Being a librarian, however, I needed to know about the creation of a database, the automated acquisition process, and how computers are used in the circulation desk and in interlibrary loan. So I visited each department to see how the automation process works in them. Considering the creation of a database is the first step of library automation, I decided to concentrate on the MARC record. I spent a lot of time learning all about MARC record construction for books and serials.

In addition, I visited and talked to librarians in Charleston and Columbia, both big and small libraries, about their experience with the process of computerization, retrospective conversion and changes in the library organization. They were all generous with their time and tried to tell me everything about their experiences and what they thought I should know.

During the time I was in Charleston, I attended two conferences. The first was: Issues in Book and Serial Acquisition, 15th Annual Charleston Conference (November 2-4, 1995). This conference was attended by scholarly publishers, vendors of materials to libraries, and librarians. Discussions were concentrated on the future of acquisition and collection development in the digital era. The second one was: South Carolina Association of School Librarians Back to the Future (January 10-12, 1996). The participants were librarians, library media specialists, teachers, specialists of information technology, and authors of children's books. The conference also had several kinds of exhibitions. Each of these conferences were a good experience for me because of the organization of the conferences and the content. It was also a good chance for me to meet librarians from all over the US and to talk to them about my country and libraries in Albania.

Being in the College of Charleston I enjoyed the distance educa-

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tion in Library and Information Science. This practice is new for me. It is more like regular education in the classroom than correspondence education. Students can communicate with the professors every week through the TV or every day through email. I attended the classes transmitted in Charleston during my fellowship (5 courses, 2-3 days a week) and visited the school in Columbia.

ATG: *What about life in the United States and in Charleston? Your eighteen-year-old daughter, Denada, came with you? What are your general impressions?*

FX: I lived in Charleston in a nice house on the Campus of the College of Charleston, close to the library. I can't forget the hospitality and the attention of the people of the library the first day I came; they made the house nicer with flowers, fruits, sweets and other things. It was a sign of welcome. I also appreciated the attention of the dean of the College of Charleston Libraries, Mr. **David Cohen**. I would also like to mention the generosity of the director of the private high school **Ashley Hall** which admitted my daughter as a student for the months she stayed with me in Charleston. I had another orientation program the first couple of days here by my mentors and **Martha Felts**, a very nice woman who works in the Catalog Department. We took a tour of the city and they showed me restaurants, stores, cultural centers, etc. Charleston is an old, quiet and very beautiful city. It is a living museum with old buildings, antique shops, green parks and flowers even in the winter. We enjoyed the time here. My daughter and I had a rich cultural life. We visited museums, attended many cultural, artistic, and sport activities. Being in Charleston from October till March we had the chance to see the Thanksgiving Day parade, many activities on Christmas eve, went to parties, concerts, and celebrations commemorating special days or people from American history. In this way, we learned much about American history, culture and customs.

Living in the Campus, I didn't have many neighbors. However, our carriage house was next to the Provost of the College and we spent many holidays together and visited many interesting places. It is very special and we enjoyed our neighborhood. We had also the friendship of the people of the library. We spent many weekends at the homes of library staff. At first I felt shy, but they are so friendly and so nice and soon you feel like you are with old friends. Our discussions were about life, politics, religion, the educational system, food and sports. Charleston is not a big city. I liked it because I did not have a car and I could walk everywhere. Here you don't feel alone or like a foreigner. I don't know if this happens in other cities. Walking around, you have people you don't know greeting you with a 'Hi', 'Good morning'. This is really a friendly custom.

The only problem I had sometimes was transportation, because buses are few and scheduled an hour or more apart outside of the city center. Americans have their cars and a driving license is their most important identification document. I don't have a driver's license, so I found that I had trouble cashing checks. My check was unacceptable in many cases by the stores even though I had my passport, social security card and College I.D.

ATG: *We know that you have read and written a lot of reports and even had to translate American library documents into Albanian to make them useful. How have you spent your time in the U.S., professionally speaking?*

FX: Working for six months in an American library, was a very useful experience for me in order to be able to contribute to the development of our library education program in Albania. It helped me to increase my knowledge of library science in general and particularly in those fields that impact my job at my home institu-

tion. In Albania, we need more than other countries to improve access to information and to promote intellectual freedom to our people. The relations I formed with my mentors, with librarians at the College, at the State Library and with some professors at CLIS, has given me an opportunity to learn from their experiences. What is more important, I will be able to communicate with them in the future!

During my time in America on this Fellowship, I translated some parts of the MARC manual into Albanian. This system is unknown by librarians in Albania because we don't have computers. I'll finish my translation of the MARC manual in my country. I couldn't do it before I came here, because I didn't understand the MARC record without practice.

I plan to share my introduction to American library education, organization and practice of work with my colleagues. I'll use my notes to publish some articles in the Albanian *Library Bulletin* about academic libraries in the US based on my experiences at the College of Charleston Libraries, the library education system in South Carolina, the organization and activity of the South Carolina State Library. I'll share what I learned here with my colleagues.

I'm going back to my country with good impressions of the American people. Americans are generous, open to people (sometimes more than is needed), friendly, and willing to help. They are hard workers. Work is important, but holidays and weekends are also important. They are optimistic. In answer to the question: 'How are you?' in my country (I guess in all of Eastern Europe), the frequent reply is, 'So so' which shows pessimism and sadness. Americans say: 'I'm just fine', which means for me happiness and optimism. I'll take this answer with me because we need some optimism.

ATG: *What about the future. What does it hold for Albania and its libraries, do you think?*

FX: The NL is located in the Palace of Culture and occupies one-third of the building. The store rooms are already full and the space is becoming a serious problem. The only way of creating space for new acquisitions is the weeding of books that are not circulating. But the problem can't be resolved this way for a long time. So an immediate need is a new building for the NL. A project was designed before the political changes happened in Albania. So the new government has no concrete plan to build a new NL. Let us hope this will change in the future.

We also need an good and active Albanian Library Association. All associations in Albania were created after 1991 which means after pluralism. ALA (Albanian Library Association) was founded in 1993. It is a professional, non-government organization and is the only library association in Albania recognized legally by the government. ALA has 350 members belonging to different libraries. It is member of IFLA.

But the main question for the NL and other libraries in Albania is computerization. It's the government's duty to admit the project and to give the money, and it is our duty as librarians to be prepared to work in a different way. So, at the first step we need only paper and pen. We know that is necessary to use library standards and we are trying to use them, even if sometimes it is not easy. Not all the people accept change. Now we have to translate into Albanian MARC manuals. The second step is to know the experience of other libraries. NL of Albania is, I think, the only one NL in Europe which is not computerized. We say in Albania that "every bad thing has its good part." So the experience of other libraries will be useful for us because we have a chance not to make the mistakes they did at the beginning. We have to be optimistic. It is true that Albania is a poor country; we have no computerized systems in our libraries, but our librarians work hard to do everything in a traditional way. We have some good things, like our rich national culture and have much to tell and share with other people. 🌿