

Multicultural Librarianship in the Czech Republic (NGO's point of view)

The focus of this paper is on the multicultural librarianship in the Czech Republic and on the methods how Czech librarians enhance their awareness of cultural understanding and multicultural issues. The term "multicultural librarianship" is fairly novel in the Czech milieu and public libraries are only beginning to grasp its meaning. The Czech Republic is not a country with a high rate of migration – official statistics show that foreigners and members of ethnic minorities make up only 2.5 percent of the country's population. However, the opening up of borders after 1989 and the Czech Republic's accession to the European Union in 2004 made it possible for many people from cultures that were unknown until then to enter the country.

The first part of the paper provides the basic information about the *Diversity to Libraries* project, that is run by the non government organization Multicultural Centre Prague and was supported by the Office of the Czech Government. The project is aimed to help libraries to build up multicultural book collections and their enhance role as regards the acceptance of minorities through educating and informing librarians about intercultural topics. The following parts of the paper closely focus on introducing individual activities concerning the building of competencies of library staff on multicultural issues, such as: Interactive workshops of librarians in the different regions, a conference "Us and the others" and provision of information support for libraries. The final part concentrates on the running project entitled *Libraries as Gateways to the Integration of Immigrants in the EU* that won the support of the EU's INTI program (projects on integration of third country nationals). This project aims at best possible local integration of immigrants in different EU countries through educational opportunities and information provided by public libraries.

Diversity in Libraries

Before 1989, people rarely encountered foreigners in the Czech Republic and ethnic minorities such as the Roma were not really considered at all. The situation has changed and people from Vietnam, Ukraine or the Arab world are now a part of the Czech Republic's multicultural reality. Minorities, foreigners and immigrants have become new users of libraries and libraries therefore must adapt their services to their specific needs.

There is no doubt that public libraries play an important role in disseminating information about multicultural issues and minorities and also in providing an opportunity to enter into intercultural dialogue. In order to fulfill this role, there is a strong need for a culturally aware, committed and open-minded librarian capable of dealing with library users from different ethnic backgrounds and understanding the new function of a public library in today's multicultural society.

It was *Diversity in Libraries*, an ongoing project launched by the Multicultural Center Prague in 2002, which for the first time pointed out the importance of public libraries in today's multicultural society. *Diversity in Libraries* is aimed at making available to users of Czech public libraries books that provide information about the past and present as well as the customs and traditions of different cultures, ethnic and national minorities or books that deal with the hot issue of multiculturalism.

In 2002-2004, we distributed, free of charge, a number of books for children, students, experts as well as the general reading public to 500 libraries all over the Czech Republic. In cooperation with the libraries, MKC Prague organizes complementary cultural events about minorities living in the Czech Republic in order to promote the distributed books and above all to make both children and adults to actively look for more information, for example by turning to relevant literature. The project also includes an artistic and literary competition for children designed to make them ponder what is there in their and other cultures to appreciate, what is interesting and also inspiring and therefore enriching.

Another objective of the project is to educate librarians and information officers working in libraries through regional training sessions and international conferences which are described in more detail in the second part of this paper.

The overall objective of all project activities is to create in public libraries a unique space for meeting of diverse cultures.

The project *Diversity to Libraries* was part of the *Campaign against Racism* financed by the Office of the Government of the Czech Republic (2002-2004). It has been supported by the Ministry of Culture of the Czech Republic, the Royal Netherlands Embassy in Prague, the Czech-German Fund for the Future as well as the European Union.¹

Building competencies of library staff on multicultural issues

Thus far, there are not many activities underway aimed at building competencies of library staff on multicultural issues in the Czech Republic. However, the Association of Library and Information Professionals in the Czech Republic provides a great deal of support to our efforts and consults with MKC Prague the content and structure of training sessions.

In cooperation with educational centers of regional libraries, experts on multicultural issues, librarians and regional coordinators for national and ethnic minorities we were able to organize various activities including:

- **Interactive workshops of librarians in various regions;**
- **International conferences;**
- **Provision of information support to libraries.**

As a part of *Diversity in Libraries*, MKC Prague organized a number of workshops for librarians.

The aim of the series of **regional one-day workshops** entitled *Intercultural Dialogue in Libraries* was to introduce participants to the approaches to multicultural education and training as well as to the acquisition of literature about minorities and other cultures.

The training courses also included a practical guide and a list of activities entitled *How to Help your Library Become More Multicultural*. Traditionally, there was also time for presenting multicultural programs of local proactive libraries that often serve as a great source of inspiration for other participating librarians. The workshops also attempted to identify areas suitable for cooperation on local level. Regional coordinators for minorities from the local governing authority also introduced the local minority organizations and their activities.

In 2004, 10 intercultural workshops were held in almost all regions of the Czech Republic and over 270 librarians were professionally trained.

The annual international **conferences** (*Intercultural Dialogue in Libraries* in 2003, *Us and the Others* in 2004 and *Libraries for All* in 2005) served as another helpful source of information. They focused on the above issues and served as a platform for exchange of intercultural dialogue experience from other European libraries and library associations with regard to ways in which minorities and their cultures can be presented and with regard to inclusion of members of minorities or different ethnic groups in library activities. For example, this year's conference focused on multicultural marketing in libraries and on ways of addressing library users from ethnic minorities.

Speakers included Lourine de Voogd from the IFLA, Birgit Lotz from the Frankfurt am Main Public Library, Ann Kathrine Poulsen from the Danish National Library Authority or Ton van Vlimmeren from the Utrecht Library in the Netherlands. Participants received a résumé of all lectures, translations of selected presentations as well as other materials suitable for their line of work.

¹ For more information about *Diversity to Libraries* and the Multicultural Center Prague, please visit www.mkc.cz/en where you can find full texts of selected presentations and other interesting information about our international conferences. www.rozmanitost.cz, the website about multiculturalism, librarianship and books, is available only in Czech.

Conferences were organized in cooperation with the Association of Library and Information Professionals of the Czech Republic and the Municipal Library of Prague.

Apart from workshops and conferences, the Multicultural Centre Prague provides other important information and support to libraries such as a mailing list (*Multicultural Books Acquisition Service*) and a website about multicultural librarianship.

The mailing list has been launched in September 2003 to distribute tips for possible acquisitions, multicultural training, funding, lectures and events organized by libraries and NGOs. The mailing list became a platform for libraries to share experience and information. Its users receive updates on a monthly basis.

The website about multiculturalism, librarianship and books has been launched in June 2004 at www.rozmanitost.cz ("rozmanitost" means diversity in Czech). The site serves as a source of information for the general public, librarians and other people interested in multicultural librarianship from home and abroad. It contains basic information about the project.

Recently, MKC Prague released a new **handbook entitled *Libraries for All***. It summarizes more than three years of experience on the part of the Multicultural Center Prague with the project. An important part of the handbook is a chapter about selected multicultural activities in Czech libraries. An English version of the handbook is available at www.mkc.cz/en since September 2005.

In fall 2004, we have carried out a **survey** among 500 libraries in order to find out how Czech libraries work with minorities and foreigners and what services are available to these new users. If libraries are to provide multicultural services, they must be aware of the needs of these users – what they miss in libraries, what materials are useful for them and what prevents them from visiting libraries regularly. For this reason, we have started conducting a survey among members of minorities that should be completed by the end of 2005.

Another important source of information in multicultural issues is the **Library of Multicultural Center Prague**. The library stock focus on contemporary publications and periodicals in several well-defined thematic groups, such as:

- National and ethnic minorities in Czech republic and abroad
- Intercultural education and learning
- Cultures and their interactions
- Migration and refugees
- Nation, nationalism and racism
- Cultural and social anthropology
- Multicultural librarianship

Library stocks also include collection of multicultural films and press monitoring database. Publications are mainly in Czech, English, German, Spain and Roma. The study tours for students, teachers or librarians take place in the library.

Challenges into the future

According to evaluations and a survey (held in 500 Czech public libraries), our regional workshops were regarded as very attractive and as a useful tool. It seems that many more Czech librarians are now eager to learn about how to communicate with ethnic minorities, how to prepare workshops or public events for and about people from different ethnic backgrounds and where to buy relevant books. As a result of multicultural training, many libraries become self-motivated and start to take action in running their own multicultural activities or projects.

In the future, we would like to continue in training librarians taking into consideration their current needs and circumstances. Our plan is to work on developing multicultural training for Czech librarians as a part of *Diversity in Libraries*.

Furthermore, thanks to the experience from *Diversity in Libraries*, one of our new projects won the support of the EU's INTI program (projects on integration of third country nationals). This project, entitled *Libraries as Gateways to the Integration of Immigrants in the EU*, aims at best possible local integration of immigrants in different EU countries through educational opportunities and information provided by public libraries. To achieve this, exchange and transnational transfer of good practice and know-how concerning public libraries as key tools in successful integration of immigrants into their new host cultures will be carried out between several EU states with varying degrees of experience in this field. The strategy for libraries as models for integration will be developed and its pilot implementation assisted in those EU countries with small or no experience in this field.

It is our belief that public libraries play an important role in developing the country's civil society and it is therefore necessary to strengthen their role as an information, educational, and cultural center for all people. The overall objective of all project activities is to create in public libraries a unique space for meeting of diverse cultures. In over three years, the Multicultural centre Prague has gained a lot of experience and collected a vast amount of materials which can be used to implement additional initiatives, enhance project activities, start new cooperation and prepare for sharing experiences in multicultural librarianship.

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About Multicultural Center Prague (MKC Prague):

The Multicultural Center Prague is a non-governmental non-profit organization whose mission is to prove that multicultural coexistence is possible and enriching at all levels.

Ever since its activities began in 1999, it has attained its goals by means of public debates, a variety of educational, cultural and public informational activities, research, publications and the establishment of links between individuals and organizations with similar aims within the Czech Republic and abroad. Specifically, the Center:

- *Informs specialists as well as the wider public about interethnic coexistence in the Czech Republic and other parts of the world;*
- *Creates a forum where communication, learning and research can take place regarding the great variety of European and non-European cultures and identities;*
- *Poses questions and looks for answers concerning the plights of different sociocultural groups in the Czech Republic;*
- *Works on developing the intercultural skills of individuals and institutions in the Czech Republic;*
- *Strives to influence individuals as well as institutions to lay the conditions for a working plural society in the Czech Republic;*
- *Initiates public discussion on migrational trends; the formation of cultural and ethnic identities; cultural plurality, education and state policy; attitudes towards difference; nationhood and nationalism.*

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