

BULGARIA/COLORADO LIBRARY PARTNERSHIP PROJECT
An Interest Group of the Colorado Association of Libraries
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Abstract: *In 1999, the Bulgarian Library Association (BLA) and the Colorado Association of Libraries (CAL) passed a resolution to form a partnership between Colorado and Bulgarian libraries. This article tells of the development of the partnership and lessons learned. Interspersed within the article are the stories of Patty Gibbons from the Eagle Library District, Colorado, and Kalina Ivanova, from the National Library Veliko Turnovo, Bulgaria, two of the partner libraries. Nancy Bolt, Colorado State Librarian*

We were in Veliko Turnovo (VT), Bulgaria, one of Colorado's partner libraries, participating in a conference on Library Services to Children and Youth. At the end of the conference, Library Director, Ivan Alexanderov, took Patty Gibbons, Library Assistant at the Eagle Library District in Eagle, Colorado, Kalina Ivanova, Assistant Director of the Veliko Turnovo Library, and me to an empty room. He waved his arm around and said: "We have received so many books from our partner library. This new Foreign Language reading Room will be the newest branch of the Eagle Library!"

This was one of the highlights of an extraordinary partner library program sponsored by the Colorado Association of Libraries and the Bulgarian Library Association.

In 1996, Colorado was privileged to host Iskra Mihailova, Continuing Education Consultant for the Bulgarian National Library, as an American Library Association Fellow. Mihailova's visit prompted Colorado State Librarian, Nancy Bolt to visit and lecture in Bulgaria. While there, Bolt met with Snezjana Ianeva, member of the BLA Board and Director of the Information Resource Center at the American Embassy, and with Dr. Alexander Dimchev, then President of the BLA and Professor in the Library Science Department at Sofia University. During this meeting, Bolt, Ianeva, and Dimchev discussed ways that libraries in Bulgaria and Colorado might work together to the benefit of both. Toward that end, both BLA and CAL adopted a Resolution of Cooperation.

Patty: My name is Patty Gibbons and I am from the Eagle Valley Library District in Eagle, CO. I am in charge of the partner library project for our district. We began our correspondence in March, 2000 with The National Library "Petko Rachev Slaveykov" in Veliko Turnovo, Bulgaria. I was introduced to Kalina Ivanova (who is now Deputy Director of her library) through e-mail with Nancy Bolt and it would be Kalina whom I would have the pleasure to speak with often in the next months and years.

Kalina: Our library joined the partner library project after the invitation of Dr. Alexander Dimchev, President of our library association. The invitation was

given to us for our active work for the association. We intended to realize an exchange of information about the development of libraries and visits of librarians from both sides. The administration of the VT Library accepted the invitation with delight. We sent the necessary information about the library including the address, photos of the library, the person for contacts. (This was me Kalina Ivanova - a classifier in "Book stocks and catalogues" department at that moment.)

Bulgaria and its libraries are recovering from 50 years of Soviet domination. They are moving from some support from the central communist government to minimal support from local governments. Most are managed by professional librarians (there are both undergraduate and graduate library programs in Bulgaria). Most have small to non-existent book budgets. New books (and good used ones) tend to come from donations from other countries and from a publishers book deposit program that benefits the largest of libraries. Bulgaria, surrounded by countries with troubled politics, see itself as a model of peace in the Balkans. It's Eastern Orthodox, Jewish, Muslim, and Roma populations live in peace.

Libraries in Bulgaria include public, college and university, school, community (called chitaleste), technical, and special. The Partner Project is designed to help those libraries that want to improve their library collections and services and begin a cultural dialogue. They need books and multi-media resources in English to help young people learn English and books on American history, culture, automation, economics, to help older students.

Patty: We here in Colorado had a much easier introduction to Bulgaria because we were able to speak in our own language, whereas Kalina, and all the pen pals we were to acquire later, had to use English, which is in no way similar to Bulgarian. We so admire their skill in the English language and their willingness to correspond in a language not their own. Within a short time Kalina and I were e-mailing regularly and exchanging gifts, books, and crafts. Kalina also sent us beautiful paintings of VT from their art students which proudly displayed in our libraries.

Kalina: My first acquaintance with Nancy Bolt and Patricia Gibbons was made by Internet. I was waiting impatiently for our first meeting when Nancy Bolt came to visit and tell us about the partnership project. I knew that the idea had a great future and would be developed very well. Mrs. Bolt visited our library in June 2000 and brought us a plaque, accepted by our Mayor Rumen Rahsev, to honor our partnership with the Eagle Valley Library District. Our new library director, Ivan Alexandrov believes the project is in the spirit of the contemporary integration of society and helps the mutual improvement of the participants. I'm glad we have wonderful contacts with Patty and our work together is excellent. I found that she is a great friend always ready to help in spite of the long distance between us.

Over the last three years, twelve public, school, and medical libraries in Colorado and Bulgaria have formed partnerships. From the beginning, we had listed only four requirements to become a Partner Library:

- a desire to learn about a different culture
- a willingness to frequently communicate with your Partner
- someone who speaks English (mainly a requirement for the Bulgarian partners!)
- an e-mail address (post office is too slow)

Partner libraries engage in many activities including: regular communication by e-mail and postal mail; exhibits and programs in the libraries of both countries; exchange of cultural information; sending books and information from American libraries to their Bulgarian partners; pen pals (and e-mail pals) between youth; visits of American librarians and municipal officials to Bulgaria; conferences on topics of interest to Bulgarian librarians and municipal officials; establishment of English reading rooms in Bulgarian libraries; cross-country friendships; and internships in each other's country (planned).

Patty: Kalina, Patty and Mariana Kirkova (the daughter a VT librarian and also pen pal to Patty) began the pen pal program in June, 2000. We have about 50 children involved. We have programs where we have activities introducing our children to Bulgaria and its customs. We have had adult programs where Patty and her husband, Dennis, shared photos and experiences from their trip to Bulgaria in June, 2001. We prepared Bulgarian food, displayed crafts, and once had two singers/musicians/dancers entertain us with Bulgarian songs and dances.

Kalina: The basic programs of our mutual work are information exchange about librarian activities, programs for children, and the celebrations, festivals and traditions of our cities. One of these is the pen pal program. The participants in this program enrich their knowledge of the world and improve their skills in English. When we receive books and other materials from the Eagle Library we inform the newspapers and the other media in order to popularize the new books and resources. I inform the press intermittently about our mutual project.

To date, books and other resource materials have been sent to ten of the twelve partner libraries. Over the last four years, we have taken librarians to Bulgaria and do conferences on library service to tourists; access to public information through libraries; lobbying town councils for increased funds; creating an Economic Information Center; creating a union catalog among academic libraries; and serving children and young adults.

In 2001, Colorado city officials visited their counterparts in Bulgaria. In addition to topics of interest to city officials, we also discussed at length the role of libraries in the economic development of a community and in creating Economic Information Centers through libraries. Local libraries are now funded from city funds and the support of mayors and vice-mayors is critical to that happening.

Patty: While in Bulgaria Patty, Dennis, and Nancy visited VT and were honored at a reception where they were presented with Bulgarian books, lovely pottery and a beautiful painting of VT. We took a tour of the 100 year-old library and met Kalina (in person at last), Mr. Alexandrov, and other library staff. We were so excited to meet Patty's pen pal Mariana and her family on this visit.

Kalina: The communication with Patty was by e-mail until June, 2001 when she and her husband, with some library specialists, visited our city. During their visit we held the conference "Library Services for Children and Youth." Our American colleagues shared their experience in preparing and successful working summer and evening programs and what would make the libraries more interesting for the youth.

The Partnership between Eagle and VT is an example of what the best partnership can look like: a steady stream of good used and new books to the VT library, pen pals, programs, and finally, a commitment from VT to form the English language reading room and from Eagle to pay for a computer to be delivered to the VT library from a local computer store. Investigation into options showed that wiring funds directly to the computer store was the fastest and safest way to deliver a computer to the library.

Patty: Since the time of our meeting in Bulgaria, we have sent books and Kalina has informed us of the opening of their Foreign Language Reading Rooms where they will house their books in foreign languages and will have computer access to their patrons.

Kalina: We shared with our colleagues our idea for opening of a Foreign Language Reading room with a conference hall and the problems that come with this opening. Patty and her colleagues accepted the idea and have sent books in English on history, geography, literature, wonderful art albums, almanacs and books for children. I want to express our gratitude for the fine gesture of our partners from Eagle. It was a kind of Christmas present for the Foreign Language Reading Room, a computer configuration. I hope that we will be able to open the Foreign Language Reading Room in October, 2002.

The project is not without its challenges. As might be expected, some partnerships have communicated more than others.

We have begun to learn what makes a project a success.

- Someone other than the library director taking responsibility for the project in the library. Library directors are too busy. Library staff like Patty and Kalina are able to take a more intense interest in the project. I cannot help but think that Kalina promotion to Assistant Director had something to do with the initiative she has shown with the project.
- Americans have to be persistent and committed. There is a real cultural difference between Bulgarians and Americans. For many Bulgarians, communicating with an American is an exciting, intimidating, IMPORTANT

activity. And they have had to do it in English. We have found a reliable translator in Bulgaria who will translate e-mail messages on a daily basis.

- The partnership is not without expense. We import Bulgarian jewelry and crafts and sell them at ALA and other library conferences with part of the profits are used to send books donated by Colorado libraries to their partners. Donations are expected and some library vendors have been generous with their support.

Patty: The most wonderful part of this whole project is the warmth and friendships we have forged with a people and a country rich in history, strength, and beauty. The Bulgarian people love their country and heritage and have fought bravely over many centuries to maintain their separate identity and freedom. We are so happy to look to the ongoing friendship with our Partner Library, Kalina, Mr. Alexandrov, our pen pals and all the librarians there.

Kalina: The program for cooperation and cultural interchange with the Eagle Library helps to increase the information for librarian activities brings new experiences and new friends. For Bulgaria, this program helps to increase the tourist flow and spread historical, cultural and ethnographic information about our city. Let's make a wish to prolong our cooperation and friendship to enlarge the spheres in our mutual work and to become closer and closer.

For more information about the Partner Library Program, go to www.cla-web.org.