

# **I still have a suitcase in Berlin : World Library and Information Congress, the 69th Annual Conference of the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA)**

From different parts of the world, librarians' suitcases were sent to Berlin during the summer heat because the World Library and Information Congress, the 69th Annual Conference of the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) was held from 1st to 9th August in Berlin. (photo 1) More than 4,500 participants from 133 countries attended the Conference this year. I was honored to be one of the delegates sponsored by the "Bibliothek und Information International" to participate in this world congress. Changes brought about by the re-unification as well as the move of the capital created new challenges to the libraries in Berlin as well as Germany. But what unchanged was the role of libraries as a gate of media, information and culture. "Bibliothek als Portal" was the conference theme this year and Brandenburg Gate was naturally the conference logo.



1. International Conference Center (ICC), Berlin. Copyright BDB-IFLA 2003/Dirk Deckbar.

During the nine conference days, there were different kinds of activities organized in a variety of themes. Activities included council business meetings, plenary sessions, conference sessions, exhibitions, poster sessions, workshops etc. Topics included the impact of the reunification on libraries in Germany, Iraq libraries after the war, the

freedom of access to information after 911 etc. In addition, many libraries in Berlin were opened for the visits of the participants during the conference period. Newcomers like me needed to set goals and made a timetable in order to make the participation fruitful, productive and enjoyable. Out of the conference room, I paid a visit to the library of the “Abgeordnetenhaus Berlin”, a city legislative library comparable to my own in terms of scale, nature and functions.



2. Palais am Funkturm, situated next to the ICC. Copyright BDB-IFLA 2003/Dirk Deckbar.

Equally unforgettable were the evening parties. After the opening ceremony, a band of Jazz led the crowd to enter the Palais am Funkturm. While some danced in the hall inside or gathered in the beer garden outside, others simply enjoyed themselves by the fountains watching the Funkturm in the sunset. (photo 2) Amazing was, in the Cultural Evening, the ship-shaped "Berlin State Library - Prussian Cultural Heritage" was turned into a party place where champagne and organ music were served. (photo 3 and 4)



3. Books, buffet and champagne. CopyrightBDB-IFLA 2003/Dirk Deckbar.

Social gatherings provided excellent occasions for the participants to meet each other informally, sharing experiences, building up relationship or simply making friends. Most of the delegates came from Europe and as a Chinese, I was warmly welcomed. I also had the chance to meet librarians coming from other parts of Asia, Africa, Central and South America as well as other Chinese cities like Shanghai, Wuhan and Guangzhou.



Once on the border, the “Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin” (foreground) is now part of the new city center Potsdamer Platz (background). Copyright BDB-IFLA 2003/Dirk Deckbar.

A city tour was arranged for all delegates. I found the revisit worthy because there were so many new surprises. The top surprise must be the Potsdamer Platz where the landscape had been changing dramatically for two centuries. It had been the city center of Berlin since the Kaiser's age but was under heavy bombardment by the end of WWII. During the Cold War, it was a "no man's land" where the wall ran across. Now after a decade of reconstruction, new buildings redefined the skyline of the district. (photo 4) Weinhaus Huth, the only building in the area left in its totality after the war, was embedded like a monument into a group of glass-steel architecture. Besides, visiting the Jewish Museum was such an experience that one should not miss. Inside Daniel Libeskind's deconstructed star of David, I found a marriage certificate written in old-style Chinese. It was issued by the Shanghai government to a couple of Jewish exiles in the 1930's. The I.M. Pei's glassy snail, the new wing of the Deutsches Historisches Museum, was just opened in May. More to come were the new embassy buildings ...

One could just enjoy Berlin in many ways : at the streetside café of the

Ku'damm watching people passing by, at the restaurants of the Savigny Platz having dinner in the sunshine, biking along the "17. Juni Strasse" to the Brandenburger Tor, or on the lawn of the Tiergarten taking a naked sunbath like a Berliner. Behind the "Sehenswuerdigkeiten" was, however, a city of financial difficulties. Public pools were closed. Unemployment rate was high. People left the city. A Berliner brought me to see the characteristic residential buildings in Wedding, the city north, where houses along a street were uninhabited. People joked about rebuilding the disappearing Berlin Wall to boost tourism as a way to improve the economy. Berlin was once a symbol of division and now the capital of a reunified country. Berliner strived to meet the challenges resulting from changes. It sounded familiar to the people of Hong Kong. Perhaps that added one more dimension to our viewing of this city. Perhaps that was what Marlene Dietrich meant in her song "ich hab' noch einen Koffer in Berlin". \* I would go back to Berlin because I still had a suitcase there.

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\* mentioned in Ms Sybille Deselaers' article in the last HKLA Newsletter