

## Werk

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## **The LIBER Silver Jubilee in Malta**

### **Opening Remarks of the President**

ESKO HÄKLI  
*Helsinki University Library*

For the first time in its history LIBER is having its Annual Conference on Malta, in the deep South of Europe. We are grateful to Dr. Paul Xuereb, Director of the Library of the University of Malta for his invitation which was received with excitement and, as we can see today, accepted with great enthusiasm. To many of us this Conference has given the first opportunity to visit Malta and to get acquainted with this famous island, located on the crossroads of European history. I want to thank you, Dr. Xuereb, for all the efforts you and your staff have made to prepare the Conference.

Dear Rector, we are indebted to you for your support and your kindness to put the University premises at our disposal. Professor Salvino Busuttil, Director General of the Foundation for International Studies, has kindly opened to us this magnificent Aula Magna as well as other premises of his Foundation. We greatly appreciate your valuable support and congratulate your Foundation, which this week is celebrating its 10th anniversary.

Mr. Michael Falzon, Minister of Education and Human Resources has supported and encouraged the organization of this Conference. Mr. Minister, we express our deep gratitude to you for your help as well as your willingness to address us personally at the opening ceremony.

Dr. Guido de Marco, Minister of Foreign Affairs , has kindly accepted the invitation to deliver the keynote speech about Malta and the Mediterranean. We are grateful to you, Mr. Minister, that you, being the most authoritative person on this subject, wanted to do us this honour. To set up a major meeting such as our General Conference requires big efforts of a great number of people. Without mentioning any names I want to thank all of you most warmly for your contributions.

Ladies and Gentlemen! LIBER was founded in 1971 under the auspices of the Council of Europe. Today LIBER still has a special observer status at that Council. It goes without saying that during its 25 years LIBER has changed greatly and so has the whole of Europe. Due to the efforts of its members LIBER has become a well established organization. It has grown to an association with more than 300 member libraries in all parts of Europe. It has also established liaisons with many other European organizations.

At the beginning of the 70's Europe was still divided into two blocks which were hostile to one another. Having the events of Czechoslovakia in mind, which took place only three years before the foundation of LIBER, the beginning of our work took place in the circumstances of the Cold War. The harsh political atmosphere deeply penetrated the cooperation between libraries. In contrast with Unesco, the Council of Europe was in the East regarded as an organization of the capitalistic West. In an authoritative handbook of librarianship, published in Eastern Germany, LIBER, therefore, was branded as a questionable, politically biased association.

It is only fair to say that LIBER did not consider itself a political weapon of the Western block. This, of course, can be said only on the condition that cooperation between West-European libraries will not be taken as a political act per se. Librarians active in the work of LIBER were, of course, aware of the division of Europe. They also knew that the scope of LIBER was limited

to the West. But that was their part, or, better expressed, our part of the world and we did not have any illusions about our power to change the political circumstances, even if we tried to maintain contacts across the boundaries between the blocks.

On the other hand, LIBER has always committed itself to freedom, freedom of speech and freedom of the printed word. It is true that the name of our association, can be understood as a manifesto, a library association of the free Europe. But if this is politics, we all might be glad to support it.

When looking at the recent development of networks and networked information we can say that this development could not have taken place without the freedom of information. Later historians will certainly ask a number of questions about the interdependence of technological development and the collapse of centrally planned economies.

It is with a special pleasure I can say that LIBER was interested in improving its relationship with the East-European libraries already at an early stage. With the support of the Council of Europe, programmes were launched to promote a modernization of East-European librarianship long before libraries were entitled to become members of LIBER. We are delighted that so many libraries from the former socialist countries have joined our association.

As a pan-European organization LIBER is fully aware of the fact that Europe has not only been divided between East and West. There has also been a division between South and North. LIBER has traditionally paid great attention to this division. Deliberate efforts have been made to arrange Annual Meetings in the Mediterranean countries, in places such as Rome, Florence, Madrid, Padua, Lisbon and now Msida, Malta. The role of libraries and librarians from the Southern parts of Europe could, however, be much more visible in our work. We would be happy to see an increasing engagement of our South-European colleagues in the work of our Divisions.

Parallel to the political development in Europe, librarianship, as well as the whole world of learning have undergone dramatic changes. The rapid change of the conditions of library work is only partially caused by technological inventions. If we want to summarize the main reasons for the changes we could mention at least the following factors: 1. the price of the work and library materials is increasing constantly, 2. libraries together with their universities are subject to an increasing economical pressure, 3. requirements to achieve more with less, combined with a new budgetary policy generate new demands on the priorities and management styles in libraries, 4. the emerging networks are changing the whole environment where libraries work.

In many countries governments have drafted national information strategies. With the help of these strategies governments want to create a technical environment which will be necessary for the future.

It is important that an information strategy is more than merely a technical development programme. It is vital for the whole society to create a strategy of content also. In that context libraries would have their given place. According to my understanding such a strategy should also cover the traditional library collections, because they will not cease to exist and because the information included in them will be made available via networks, even if the collections themselves will not be digitized. A true information policy has to make sure that the needs of the country will be met regardless of the formats in which information is made available. A major part of all information will even in the future be available in printed form only.

There are all reasons to emphasize this aspect because a strong scepticism about the need of the printed collections seem to prevail in some quarters. There are many people who assume that the Internet in one form or another will provide all information you need. This is a widely spread populist opinion which, unfortunately, has been given a progressive flavour.

If it is becoming old fashioned to speak about printed books and journals, it might soon also become unnecessary to spend money on them. This is a dangerous heresy which will weaken the conditions of high level research in a drastic way. During a foreseeable future no centres of excellence can exist without good collections of printed books and journals combined with an access to the networked information.

A lively discussion about the future role of libraries seems to go on in many countries. To make sure that libraries are regarded as serious players in the digital environment they have to improve their competitiveness both intellectually and professionally. We have to be excellent in the use of electronic means, of course. That, however, is not enough. Computing centres have similar qualities and may be even better. To make sure that libraries will have a role in the future they have to develop their intellectual capacity. Instead of being technical service units they should become expert organizations in the subject fields they are serving. This will, of course, have far reaching consequences on the staffing of libraries.

Ladies and gentlemen! It is my hope that we at our meeting here in Malta would debate more the rationale of library work than details of technology. We will need a powerful scenario to guide our libraries into the next millenium. We can best achieve this goal together, by sharing our knowledge and expertise. The networked working environment of the future will anyway be an international environment.

But we should not forget ourselves as human beings, as men and women of culture. We have to cultivate our own personalities as well. Here in Malta we have an excellent opportunity to meet each other and to learn more about the roots of our culture when getting acquainted with the past and present Malta. Here we are met by history at every step. Please, make use of this opportunity.

I wish you a pleasant and rewarding meeting in Malta and declare the Conference opened.