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Titel: Libraries in Switzerland

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Ort: Graz

Jahr: 1997

PURL: https://resolver.sub.uni-goettingen.de/purl?514854804_0007 | log64

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Libraries in Switzerland¹

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General Comments

From a country, which to the present day has found its identity in being independent, different and special and accordingly has maintained a critical distance, one could expect that it also has something original to offer with regard to libraries. This is exactly so, even if Switzerland is in no way as exotic where libraries are concerned as it has been on the political front, particularly during these years.

For the on-looker abroad, and even sometimes at home, it must, at times appear as if the much cited phrase, which ostensibly stems from the humanistic circles of the 16th century "Hominum confusione et Dei providentia Helvetia regitur" (Switzerland is governed by human confusion and the providence of God) still held true today.

I would like to take this opportunity of familiarising you with the library structures of this country, but first a brief word about the politics:

¹ Paper presented at LIBER Annual General Conference 1997, Bern.

Political Structures

The Swiss Federation today consists of 26 cantons of greatly varying sizes and population numbers. The latter ranges from the Canton of Appenzell Innerrhoden with a population of 14.800 to the Canton of Zürich with a population of 1.175.500.

The cantons are made up of municipalities. The Canton of Basel-Stadt has merely of three municipalities whereas the Canton of Berne has 401. The populations of the municipalities vary from perhaps a couple of dozen people in a small mountain community to the town of Zurich with 360.000. 60% of the round 3.000 municipalities have less than 1000 inhabitants.

Foreign policy, the army, customs, post and telecommunications are matters dealt with by the Federal Government. All other matters come under the auspices of the cantons (and in some cases the municipalities). This also applies to art and culture. The cantons are also responsible for education, from primary schools through to universities. (Two exceptions to this are the Institutes of Technology in Zurich and Lausanne.) And also in the library system there are no state uniform regulations.

As the result of this state of affairs the library system in Switzerland is decentralised and without any real standardisation. The supporting bodies are manifold. Only three of the larger libraries are financed by the Federal Government: The Swiss National Library Schweizerische Landesbibliothek and the libraries of the Federal Institutes of Technology in Lausanne and Zurich.

Typology**Overview**

In Switzerland four types of library are distinguishable:

1. General Research Libraries
2. Special Research Libraries
3. Study and Educational Libraries
4. General Public Libraries

General Research Libraries

Characteristic of the general research libraries in Switzerland (in comparison to the anglo-saxon countries) is the combination of the functions of a university library on the one hand, and on the other, those of a public library. According to Swiss tradition the collections of the ten Swiss universities are freely accessible (with restrictions in three cases). Most of these libraries fulfill the function simultaneously of a cantonal and, in part, of a municipal library. The Stadt- und Universitätsbibliothek Bern, for example, is the main library of the University of Berne, the Cantonal library of Berne and the Municipal Library of Berne all in one.

With the exception of the two Institutes of Technology libraries and the University Library of St. Gall we are dealing with academic general libraries covering all fields of knowledge.

Characteristic is also the co-existence of central university libraries and faculty libraries, numbering between less than 50 and more than 150 depending on the university. (An exception is the University of Lausanne, where at Dorigny a large central library has been built on the campus. The only faculty libraries still in existence here are those for Law and Medicine.) Basically, it was intended that the central library was to procure the rudimentary and interdisciplinary literature, whilst the faculty libraries were to procure specialised literature for research purposes. In practice, however, this division is often ignored by the faculty libraries.

Special Research Libraries

To the most important publically accessible libraries in this category belong the Swiss Social Archives in Zurich, the Swiss Archives of Economics in Basle and the Swiss Eastern European Library in Berne.

The chemical industry in Basle possesses considerable company libraries. However, over the past few years the company libraries have been the subject of cost reviews and as a result there have been noticeable cutbacks. Due to these developments, use of the inter-library loan system in the General Research Library sector, and in particular in relation to the Institutes of Technology and medical faculty libraries, has increased considerably.

With regard to the international organisations, one should not omit to mention the large collections of the UNO, the International Labour Office and the World Health Organisation in Geneva.

The most important ecclesiastical collection is the Stiftsbibliothek St. Gallen, with its theological, philological and historical stacks. It is one of the most outstanding medieval libraries in the world. (The monastery was founded in 612 A.D. and secularised in 1805.)

**Study and Educational Libraries (Studien - und
Bildungsbibliotheken)**

The most significant representatives of study and educational libraries are the cantonal libraries. But some of the medium-sized towns (e.g. Biel, La Chaux-de-Fonds, Winterthur) have a study and educational library.

Each canton in Switzerland has a cantonal library. In some cases it is named after the canton (e.g. as in Valais or in Aargau),

in others these functions have been taken over by a university library (e.g. in Vaud, Freiburg and Berne).

The cantonal library collects, apart from academic and popular science literature from all fields, the entire literature relating to the canton, as well as works by authors from the canton (archiving function). In most cases the library also produces the cantonal bibliography. The study and educational libraries often have in their possession valuable old stocks, for example, from secularised monasteries. The stocks vary from 22.000 volumes (Appenzell) to 800.000 (Solothurn).

The main user group is usually secondary school children. In cantons without a university, the study and educational libraries provide the most important help for students in their home areas. As the study and educational libraries are linked to the national inter-library loan system it is possible to obtain literature which would otherwise be unavailable. In some instances, however, individual subjects areas are so well represented that the stocks almost resemble a university library. Naturally, this applies primarily to the local knowledge of a canton, but in some cases also applies to other subjects such as law (e.g. Winterthur) or theology/philosophy (e.g. Lucerne). Other study and educational libraries (e.g. Biel) have decided to supplement their stocks with a selection of books which would normally be found in a public library, such as children's and adolescents' literature, as well as works with an entertainment value and a wide range of sound recordings and videos covering all subjects. In this sense, they come closest to the definition of a public library which are to be found in Anglo-saxon and Scandinavian countries.

General Public Libraries (Allgemeine öffentliche Bibliotheken)

The library system, which in the USA comes under the heading of "Public Libraries" is divided in Switzerland into study

and educational libraries on the one hand and general public libraries on the other.

The stocks of this kind of library are based on entertainment and on education and further education. The fiction in the smaller libraries tends to be predominantly in the local language, whilst larger libraries very often also stock foreign language standard works and new publications. The non-fiction books are of a popular science nature. Stocks are continuously updated and those which do not prove to be popular are withdrawn.

Unfortunately, nearly all the general public libraries in the German speaking part of Switzerland are subject to lending fees. In Berne, the annual subscription fee for 1997 is CHF 50.-- Students may borrow books free of charge.

Travelling libraries (e.g. library buses) are still an exception in Switzerland. They are only to be found in the French speaking part of Switzerland. The Appenzeller Railway, however, has a library carriage which stops at a different station each day.

The Swiss National Library (Schweizerische Landesbibliothek)

The Swiss National Library (founded in 1895) cannot be easily slotted into one of the above mentioned four categories of library systems. The former director of this institution, Prof. Franz Georg Maier, described it as a research library for Helvetica², as a purpose lies in the collection of works by Swiss authors, works about Switzerland or those which were printed in Switzerland.

The National Library edits the national bibliography ("Das Schweizer Buch"), as well as other special bibliographies and maintains the "Catalogue of Foreign Journals in Swiss Libraries" (Verzeichnis ausländischer Zeitschriften in Schweizer

² Maier, Franz Georg: Libraries in Switzerland. In: Encyclopedia of library and information science. 36, suppl. 1. 1983, S. 508-515. 513.

Bibliotheken - VZ). However, the "Union Catalogue of Foreign Publications in Swiss Libraries" (Gesamtkatalog ausländischer Schriften in Schweizer Bibliotheken) on catalogue cards, which was previously of great importance has lost much of its significance in this age of on-line retrieval. For stocks, particularly those which are not listed in the EDF catalogues, the National Library still serves as a turnable for national inter-library loans.

Other national collection centres are the Cinématique Suisse in Lausanne (founded in 1943), which preserves all Swiss films and a selection of foreign ones, and the National Phonothek (Landesphonothek) in Lugano (founded in 1983), which collects sound recordings which are of importance for Switzerland.

In fact, the Federal Institute of Technology (Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule) in Zurich, the largest library in Switzerland, also has the function of a national library for science and technical literature, which it collects in its entirety.

Online Union Catalogue Systems (EDV-Verbundsysteme)

On a university level three large union catalogues are in existence at the present time in Switzerland. They include nine of the ten Swiss university libraries, and work with different systems:

The university libraries of Geneva, Lausanne, Neuenburg and Freiburg, as well as the cantonal libraries of the Valais (Sion) and the Ticino (Lugano, Locarno, Bellinzona) are joined in the Réseau Romand et Tessinois (RERO). Until 1996, the software SIBIL, developed in Lausanne, was operational. In 1997, however, after an extensive period of preparation, a switch to the VTLS system was made.

The Swiss German Union Catalogue includes the Universities of Basle and Berne, with a total of over 100 participating individual libraries. The software in operation is also SIBIL. Stocks number approximately 1,5 million titles.

The Swiss Federal Institutes of Technology in Zurich and Lausanne, together with the Central Library Zurich and the Social Archives Zurich, are joined in the Zurich Information Union Catalogue ETHICSplus.

Two smaller union catalogues, which operate with the DOBIS/LIBIS software are located at the University of St. Gall and the faculties of the University of Zurich.

In the Swiss German speaking part of Switzerland preparations are currently in progress for the replacement of these systems by a restructured union catalogue using a uniform system.

A union catalogue for General public libraries, as is used in Denmark for example, does not exist in Switzerland.

Personnel and Training

Swiss libraries have a comparatively small number of staff, which is partly due to the 42 hour working week. In compliance with the heterogenic governing bodies, the employment conditions (and salaries) over the entire range of private and public legal contracts.

Uncontested to date, is the three level division of library personnel into upper service (academic staff), middle service (diploma staff) and other staff. In comparison to Germany it is interesting to note that the academic and diploma librarians generally work together.

Whilst in General public libraries women are, at the present time, in the majority and in most instances hold leading positions, in the university libraries and the study and educational libraries they are trailing behind. It is obvious that women are under-represented here in leading positions.

With regard to training, Switzerland is on the brink of change. Over the next few years a uniformly regulated, state recognised qualification is to be introduced, which will include not only

librarianship but also archive and documentation systems. Planned is a three level previous training model with a professional apprenticeship for an information and documentation assistant (prerequisite qualification: secondary school), a technical college course (prerequisite: 'Matura') and a post-diploma course on a university level. The legal stipulations for levels one and two are currently being reported on.

Critical Assessment

On the whole, Switzerland has proved politically that decisions should be made where the action is. In other words, autonomous responsibility on a local and regional level works. However, there is another side to federalism regarding the inequality of finances or the fact that projects, which would be of national interest, frequently fail due to the dissemination of decision making competences and the lengthy channels of officialdom. An example for this is the organisation of special subject collections as demonstrated in the German model for example, which was never able to be realised for research libraries in Switzerland.

In my opinion, Switzerland lies somewhere in the middle of the library system in Europe.

The following factors count as positive:

A large number of old library stocks, as well as modern works are available. This is in part due to the fact that Switzerland, over the past two hundred years has not been involved in or affected by war, but it is also due to the fact that the buying power of this country has been comparatively good over the past fifty years.

Switzerland has a dense network of medium sized libraries (study and educational libraries) which archive the complete cultural heritage of their region, in addition to making the most important academic works from all fields of knowledge available to the public.

The number of university libraries (10) is also relatively large. It is also worth mentioning that they are all (with three exceptions, open to the public, without restrictions.

The following are points of criticism:

There are no federal uniform library regulations, as a result of which the number of libraries varies according to each region.

Up to now, training has been strongly practice-oriented with too little emphasis on theory.

Swiss libraries often charge fees for their basic services such as lending.

With regard to the library union catalogues these are too diverse in all library categories.

The digitalisation of Helvetica has hardly begun.