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table of contents

foreword Maurizio Fallace

texts

- 19 IFLA & Italy, a long-lasting friendship**
- 29 Associazione Italiana Biblioteche**
- 33 Libraries in Italy: a Brief Overview**
- 53 The Italian Library System**
- 63 Cataloguing Tools**
- 75 History and Profile of the Italian Librarians**
- 83 Education and Training**
- 91 Reading**
- 101 Reading and Books for Children**
- 111 Digital Libraries**
- 123 Italian Participation in European Projects**
- 131 Rare Books and Historical Libraries**
- 143 Milan, a Library and its Treasures: the Ambrosiana**

IFLA & Italy: a long-lasting friendship

Before IFLA

IFLA's birth is closely related to Italy and to Luigi De Gregori, the most active librarian in Italy during the first half of the 20th century, notwithstanding the fact that until 1930 Italy itself had not founded its own library association. It is well known that the International Library and Bibliographical Committee (the first nucleus of IFLA), instituted in Edinburgh in 1927, was formally installed in Rome in 1928 and came back to Italy in the next year. Its first plenary meeting was held in Rome on June 14th 1929, on the eve of the solemn opening of the First World Congress of Libraries and Bibliography. A few days later, in Venice, in the great hall of the Biblioteca Marciana, the Federation chose the name that it still carries and all the associations taking part approved the Statute issued in the meantime at the second plenary meeting held in Florence. International relationships amongst librarians who had already met on various important occasions – in London in 1877 for the foundation of the Library Association of the United Kingdom, in Chicago in 1893 for the Columbian Exposition, again in London in 1897 and in Paris in 1900 (coinciding with the Universal Exposition) – were interrupted during the First World War and following years. Nevertheless, immediately after the war international cooperation could count on the activity of the League of Nations, which had just been founded and had created an International Committee for Intellectual

Cooperation, based in Geneva, and an executive organ, the Institut international de coopération intellectuelle, in Paris, which hosted a Committee of expert librarians.

Also, the idea of founding an international federation of library associations came from old Europe: at the Congrès international des bibliothécaires et des amis du livre held in Prague on 29 June 1926 it was proposed to build an «international library union», the activities to be coordinated by the International Institute of Intellectual Cooperation. The proposal was made by a librarian from Paris, Gabriel Henriot, president of the Association des bibliothécaires français (founded in 1906) and who promoted the idea of “libraries for all”. It is not surprising, therefore, that from then on he has been considered «the spiritual father of IFLA» (Joachim Wieder). The resolution proposed by Henriot was carried by the assembly, but those present at the Congress in Prague were not as enthusiastic as those that attended the following congresses. It seems that only one Italian delegate participated, Oreste De Biase (director of the Public Library of Foggia) and probably many delegates had their minds on another important meeting, this time in the United States. In the Autumn of 1926 librarians from all over the world would meet again in Atlantic City in New Jersey to celebrate the fifty years of the American Library Association. To promote participation at this conference, the Carnegie Endowment financed a good many trips by American librarians: in his European tour William Warner Bishop, librarian at Michigan University and later President of ALA, met in Rome the philosopher Giovanni Gentile, Minister of Public Education.

At the end of October, at Atlantic City, fifty-eight delegates from twenty-six different countries met the American librarians belonging to ALA; at the end of the Conference around thirty foreign guests were invited to take part in the ALA Post-Conference Trip in order to visit the libraries of major American cities: Washington, New York, Philadelphia, Chicago and Detroit. The new Italian Minister of Public Education, Pietro Fedele, appointed Luigi De Gregori, director of the Biblioteca Casanatense, to represent Italy: De Gregori was the most esteemed librarian in Italy and also well known outside the country, corresponding regularly with Bishop, but only spoke French at the time. He was accompanied, therefore, by Vincenzo Fago, director of the International Exchanges Office of the Ministry of Education, who was perfectly fluent in English and French. Fago was a peculiar “globe-trotting” librarian who was put in charge of founding the University Library at Cairo and worked many years for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in various countries.

At the Atlantic City conference Hugo Krüss, director general of the Preussische Staatsbibliothek in Berlin, once again proposed setting up an international library association, to be formally constituted in Great Britain, in a meeting of official delegates of interested associations the following year in Edinburgh. The occasion would have been offered by the planned Conference for the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the British Library Association.

The ideas developed in Prague and Atlantic City gave their first results in Edinburgh. Official delegates from fifteen countries voted on September 30th 1927 the so-called Edinburgh Resolution which

gave birth formally to an «International Library and Bibliographical Committee» fixing some of its rules and thus making it an embryo of the Federation. Twelve European countries were present – Austria, Belgium, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, The Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland – as well as the United States of America, Canada and China. The Executive Committee appointed at Edinburgh included representatives of the largest and strongest associations: the American Library Association, the Library Association, the Association des bibliothécaires français and the Verein Deutscher Bibliothekare, the Czech delegate (possibly in honour of the Prague proposal), the Italian delegate Vincenzo Fago. As a president *super partes*, the Swede Isak Collijn, director of the Kungliga Biblioteket of Stockholm and consultant of the Vatican Library.

The First World Congress of Libraries and Bibliography

Notwithstanding the fact that the Italian Library Association had not yet been founded, in the following months Italy proposed – informally at first – the city of Rome as a candidate to host the first of the world congresses that the new Committee, following the decisions made at Edinburgh, intended to organize every five years. Rome also offered to host the first meeting of the International Library and Bibliographical Committee and of its Executive Committee, which took place on March 31st 1928. The members of the Committee (eleven of the fifteen founder countries were present) were welcomed in the new seat of the Ministry of Public

Education, in Rome, Viale Trastevere. Firstly they verified that all the joining associations had ratified the Edinburgh Resolution and that consequently the Committee could be considered formally instituted. Fago was elected Vice-President together with Bishop, who would follow Collijn as President. Secondly the delegates accepted the Italian proposal to organize the first World Congress in Rome; the Italian Directorate for Libraries assured its support and Fago was appointed general secretary of the Congress. Count Antonio Cippico, member of the Senate and for many years professor in London, chaired a local committee which organized the conference with the help of the local authorities, government officials and librarians.

Only a few months after Edinburgh, the future of the International Library and Bibliographical Committee, which had seemed so uncertain at first, appeared quite bright: the executive committee could look upon its first major engagement – the world First World Congress of Libraries and Bibliography fixed for the second half of June 1929 – with great expectations. The Italian Government's support was certain and substantial (a special law had been enacted, law no. 3094 of December 27th 1928) and Mussolini's regime was at the time in high esteem in Europe and overseas.

After the announcement of the Congress, associations from all over the world started to join: Estonia, Finland, Japan, Latvia, Mexico, Poland, Hungary. Other countries contacted the executive Committee and in many of those where there was still no professional association, the mere existence of the Committee was an extraordinary stimulus. As a matter of fact, Italy itself was one of these: Italian delegates took part in international initiatives



Official invitation to the 1929 World Congress

with the financial support of the Ministry of Education and formally as representatives of the Library Group belonging to the Fascist Association of Civil Servants, a sort of trade union, which had Vincenzo Fago as national secretary (Luigi De Gregori, however, was not even a member). The First World Congress of Libraries and Bibliography lasted 16 days (June 15th-30th), took place in two cities (Rome and Venice), offered visits and expositions (official and unofficial) in seven other cities (Bologna, Florence, Milan, Modena, Montecassino, Naples and Trieste) and attracted the presence of around 1,300 participants from nearly forty different countries. The Congress saw the participation of the associations which had already joined the International Library and Bibliographical Committee but also official delegations from Spain, Russia, Egypt, Syria and the Society of Nations, as well as representatives of many other countries (Algeria, Bulgaria, Philippines, Yugoslavia, Morocco, Palestine, Puerto Rico, Rumania, Tunisia and



Turkey). Last but not least, a mention is due for the representatives of the Vatican, monsignori Giovanni Mercati and Eugène Tisserant, and the fact that the Congress attendants had the honour and the pleasure of being received in the frescoed hall of the Vatican Library by Pope Pius XI who greeted them with the warmth of «a previous and now old colleague», as he himself put it (indeed Pius XI before becoming Pope had been a librarian, at the Biblioteca Ambrosiana in Milan and later at the Vatican Library).

The scientific results of the sixteen sessions of the Congress were of the highest level and the foreign participants marvelled at the many events, exhibitions, receptions and tours that took place in those two memorable summer weeks, sunny and hot but cooled down by sudden bouts of rain.

The meetings which took place at the time in order to organize fully the activities of the International Library and Bibliographical Committee were many. The first plenary meeting was held in Rome on June 14th, on the eve of the opening of the Congress, at the Ambasciatori Hotel, with the presence of eighteen countries and the League of Nations.

At the end of his speech illustrating the activities that had taken place after Edinburgh, President Collijn proposed, in consideration of the success of the Committee, to change its name into «International (or World's) Union of Library Associations». After a lively discussion and the introduction of one variant the Committee approved what is still (substantially) the name of the international organization of librarians, in the four official languages of the time: Fédération Internationale des Associations des Bibliothécaires, International Federation of Library Associations, Internationales Verband der Bibliotheksvereine, and Federazione Internazionale delle Associazioni dei Bibliotecari. In short, IFLA was baptized in Rome, on June 14th 1929. On the same occasion T. P. Sevensma, director of the Library of the League of Nations, was appointed IFLA's perpetual secretary and his office in Geneva, IFLA's first seat.

As well as a name the Federation required a statute because the Edinburgh Resolution had only fixed the rules for the composition of the first Committee and the purposes of the latter's activity (till the end of the year in which the first Congress would have taken place). The story then moves to the Savoia Hotel in Florence, where on June 25th the secretary of ALA and provisional secretary of the Committee, Carl H. Milam, brought to the attention of the second plenary meeting of the Committee a draft of the statute. The text was discussed, amended and approved so it was possible to print and distribute it at the final session of the Congress.

On the morning of June 29th, at the beginning of the last work session, in the hall of the Biblioteca Marciana in Venice, Collijn announced the name that had been chosen for the Federation and Fago

read in English the new statute which bore the date «Florence, 25 June 1929» which the various associations belonging to the Federation would have to ratify. The first two articles read:

- 1 The name of this organisation shall be the International Federation of Library Associations.
- 2 The object of the Federation shall be to promote international library cooperation.

The Congress ended with the voting of two resolutions and with the solemn final session



The closing session at the Marciana Library in Venice

held on the following day in the Sala dei Pregadi which saw various authorities and delegations giving tribute to the organizers.

A few months later, the anomalous Italian situation also found its solution, mainly due to the efforts of Luigi De Gregori. The absence of a library association in Italy meant that Italian librarians could not be properly appraised for the role they were playing in the international context. The First World Congress of Libraries and Bibliography that Italy had just hosted could nevertheless become a link between the aspirations of the best and more innovative Italian librarians (who wished to overcome years of provincialism) and the regime's desire to appear on the international scene.

Italy and IFLA

Indeed in 1930 a Committee promoting the Association of Italian Librarians (*Associazione dei bibliotecari italiani*) was formed. It included librarians working in libraries belonging both to the State and to local bodies and was presided by Pier Silverio Leicht, a law historian and deputy who at the Congress had represented the Government as undersecretary of the Minister Belluzzo.

At the Congress he also had been in charge of the Committee responsible for the selection of the papers. In September 1929 Leicht had left the Government but continued to coordinate the monumental edition of the proceedings of the Congress, in six volumes, with the collaboration of Count Cippico, of the director general Salvagnini and of a few librarians. The Committee promoting the Association

PRIMO CONGRESSO MONDIALE
DELLE BIBLIOTECHE E DI BIBLIOGRAFIA
ROMA - VENEZIA 15-30 GIUGNO MCMXXIX - A. VII
ATTI PUBBLICATI A CURA DEL MINISTERO
DELLA EDUCAZIONE NAZIONALE (DIREZIONE
GENERALE DELLE ACCADEMIE E BIBLIOTECHE)

VOLUME PRIMO

LA LIBRERIA DELLO STATO
ROMA - MCMXXXII - ANNO X E F.

The proceedings of the 1929 World Congress

of Italian Librarians (in 1932 the name changed to Italian Association for Libraries, Associazione Italiana per le Biblioteche, acronym AIB) could count on the same political and professional personalities which had contributed to the success of the World Congress and, therefore, could easily bank on the experience and claim the excellence of Italian librarianship in order to obtain from the Minister of Education Balbino Giuliano the authorization to found the association. During the fascist regime this type of association could exist only when the Government had authorized it and approved its Statute.

Thus, finally, on the morning of June 11th 1930,

in the study of a notary in Rome, the president Leicht, the vice-presidents Salvagnini and Bonazzi, the treasurer De Gregori, the councillors Calcagno and Boselli as well as the secretary Mancini signed the act that founded AIB. Immediately followed a toast in the Caffè Aragno, a common meeting-place for Roman intellectuals, journalists and politicians. The first president of AIB, Pier Silverio Leicht, represented Italian librarians in a number of international meetings and was also appointed honorary Vice-President of IFLA. In this role he led a substantial Italian delegation to the second World Library Congress, which took place in Madrid in 1935, and attended some IFLA sessions and other international conferences. On other occasions Italy was represented at IFLA sessions by Luigi de Gregori or by Count Antonio Boselli, director of the University Library in Bologna. After the second world war Italian librarians rebuilt their association on a democratic basis and only in 1951, during the years of the reconstruction, began to participate again in activities promoted by IFLA, hosting a new Conference, once again in Rome. The 18th World Documentation Congress, organized by the Fédération Internationale de Documentation, was scheduled to be held in Rome in September 1951. Following S.R. Ranganathan's proposal it was decided to hold the two meetings in the same city and one immediately after the other (the IFLA session took place on September 12th-14th, and the FID session followed) in order to facilitate participants' travels but also to underline both the relationship between librarianship and documentation and the collaboration between IFLA and FID. Due to the difficulties of the post-war period, the IFLA conference, held at the seat of the

National Research Council, was highly qualified but small and was attended by only 54 delegates, belonging to 25 national associations and four international organizations.

Italian participation to IFLA between the Fifties and the Seventies was very active, mainly due to the work of Francesco Barberi who served as Secretary of AIB until 1957, and of Laura De Felice Olivieri,

Renato Pagetti, Maria L'Abbate Widmann, Maria Valenti, Vilma Alberani and others.

Laura De Felice Olivieri Sangiacomo, director of the National Library of Rome from 1955 to 1968, was the first woman in 1958 to be elected in the executive Committee of IFLA.

She was confirmed vice-president for two mandates, until 1964.



Group photo of the 17th IFLA Session, Roma 1951

In 1964 the General Conference of IFLA returned for the third time to Italy and once again in Rome. The 30th session was held in Palazzo Barberini, September 13th-18th, with over 350 delegates from 30 different countries: it went down in history as the best attended session ever recorded (participants would not be counted in thousands for many years to come).

In 2009, eighty years after the first World Congress and forty-five from the last General Conference held in Italy, librarians from all the world return to Italy and Italian librarians remember with gratitude all those colleagues who by founding the first library associations – in America, in Great Britain, in other European and non-European countries – and creating the basis for international exchange and cooperation set an example and stimulated the founding of AIB as well as setting the rules of free debate in free associations, rules which also the Fascist regime had to comply with.

IFLA's first fifty years: achievement and challenge in international librarianship, ed. by Willem R.H. Koops and Joachim Wieder. München: Verlag Dokumentation, 1977.

Giorgio De Gregori - Simonetta Buttò.
Per una storia dei bibliotecari italiani del XX secolo: dizionario bio-bibliografico 1900-1990. Roma: Associazione italiana biblioteche, 1999.

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Nascita e affermazione della professione bibliotecaria in Italia (1861-1969). In: *La professione bibliotecaria in Italia e altri studi*. Roma: Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Roma, 2002, p. 5-34.



Group photo of the 30th IFLA Session, Roma 1964

