

Tietse Pieter Sevensma (1879-1966)

IFLA Secretary General 1929-1958*



Tietse Pieter Sevensma was born 22 July 1879 in Sneek (province of Friesland, the Netherlands). His father was the local manager of a shipping company based in Rotterdam. Young Tietse grew up in his birthplace, where he passed secondary education (Latin school), and was initially destined to become a Baptist minister; to that end he studied Theology at the University of Amsterdam. Towards the end of his studies, a conflict with the governours of the institution where he received his education, brought him to changing his plans for the future: away from becoming a minister, his ambition was lying in the library profession!

Sevensma's PhD thesis [1908] was titled 'God's Ark, the Old-Israelian Heathendom'. After this publication his interest in theology seemed to disappear from his life completely, he had changed his studies into the direction of political science and found a position as conservator at the Amsterdam University Library, where he catalogued manuscripts. In 1912 he was among the initiators and founders of the Dutch Association of Librarians and he became the first President of this [Nederlandse Vereniging van Bibliothecarissen-NVB](#) (1912-1923). During his term as President the membership in NVB increased from 22 to 163; an important aspect of his activities was the advancement of international contacts.

In 1914 Tietse Sevensma was invited to establish the library for the newly created (1912) Higher Education Institution for Trade in Rotterdam, and he became the deputy librarian, which was soon to be followed by a nomination as Chief Librarian. The library in Rotterdam was inaugurated in October 1916, but in November that same year Sevensma was appointed as the Director of the Public Library in Amsterdam. He developed this organisation from scratch: a central library was inaugurated in 1919 and organised a system of branch libraries in the subsequent years. Sevensma's vision led to the establishment of a reference desk, a technical support department, a special collection for trade and commerce, a library for the blind, as well as a music library.

From 1924 Sevensma's job was further extended when he also assumed the direction of the Amsterdam University Library and until 1928, he worked hard on a complete internal reorganisation, including the reconstruction of an existing building.

A now well-established reputation as library builder and organiser led the League of Nations in Geneva to appoint Sevensma as its Chief Librarian in 1928. Under his leadership a modern library was designed, strongly assisted by a donation of two million dollars by John D. Rockefeller, which had to become a centre of knowledge of international relations. The construction of the library started in 1930.

A new era in his career started when Sevensma was nominated Secretary General of IFLA in 1929, a post he would hold for nearly 30 years. These were the first three decades of the organisation, a range of years characterized by the deployment of the Federation, its construction and development in patience, spanning the Second World War and its pre - and post war periods. Sevensma worked from Geneva until 1938, in which year he returned to the Netherlands, where he started as Chief Librarian of Leiden University. This appointment brought him a time of new reconstructions and reorganizations, including the creation of a number of reading rooms, staffed by expert personnel. He sailed the Leiden University Library through the war (1940-1945) safely.



Sevensma's term at the Leiden University Library ended in 1947; he was entitled to keep an office in the library, from where he served IFLA as its Secretary General until 1958. Shortly thereafter he withdrew from public life. He was among fellow professionals only once more, in January 1960, on the occasion of bestowing him with an honorary fellowship by the NVB. He passed away on 30 June 1966.

*This is a condensed translation of the biographical sketch on Sevensma by J.R. de Groot in [Jaarboek van de Maatschappij der Nederlandse Letterkunde](#) 1970, p. 195-202.

Further reading:

[The Pioneers: Tietse Pieter Sevensma \(1879-1958\)](#)

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Vol. 14, No. 1, Spring 2004