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Die Stadtbüchereien: A Tourist's View of Germany's Libraries

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Just before I left for a month's vacation in Germany the call for submissions from the editors of this edition of the *OLA Quarterly* caught my eye. Since I had enjoyed visiting several libraries (along with touring a great many fire stations with my husband—but that's another article) during my previous visit to Germany in 1997, I decided to make it a point to visit several more libraries during this trip and share some of my impressions, starting with one of the country's most impressive and famous libraries, the Herzog August Bibliothek. This library was established in Wolfenbüttel in 1572 by Duke Heinrich

One interesting feature of this renowned library is the Bücherrad, or book wheel. The device most closely resembles modern mechanized jewelry display racks which rotate trays of items in gift shops. Constructed over 300 years ago, the Bücherrad's large display shelves support historic, handwritten catalog books and provide access to their indexing of Duke August's famous collection. In the main exhibit room housing the Duke's books, the arched ceiling stretches high above the bookshelves, and a graceful spiral staircase in the corner provides access to the three open tiers of shelves lining the walls. But what is most intriguing about this museum collection is the filing method: the books are arranged by size, as Duke August preferred. Large folios dominate the bottom tier and the collection gradually decreases in height, with books only a few inches high stored along the topmost shelves. Making the collection even more striking are the books' bindings. The Duke had all of his acquisitions purchased throughout the world in quires (unbound) and shipped to Wolfenbüttel in barrels. There they were bound in cream-colored parchment, giving the collection a very pleasing appearance.

A more typical German library would be the Stadtbücherei (city library) in Krefeld, which is completely modern and recently celebrated its first 100 years of service. It offers



This is the public library in Nordlingen.



This is the most ornate library I saw, located in Würzburg.

Julius, but it obtained a worldwide reputation under his successor, Duke August the Younger, who devoted his time and money to purchasing scholarly volumes from a wide variety of countries. A hundred years after its founding, Wolfenbüttel contained 130,000 items, had become the largest contemporary library in Europe, and was considered the eighth wonder of the world. Today the library offers its users contemporary medical and legal works, modern scientific journals, daily newspapers, and recent novels. It also contains items dating back to the fifth century, with some volumes still dangling the chains that used to securely fasten them to a wall. In addition, there are many special collections, including illuminated medieval manuscripts, historic globes and hand-painted maps, 3,000 Bibles from Gutenberg's time to the mid-eighteenth century, and "livres de peintres," works which emphasize type and illustration equally with the text, some illustrated by Matisse, Picasso, Dali and Chagall.

circulating DVDs and videos, CD-ROMs, CDs, and public Internet access. Internet access is much more expensive throughout Europe than in America, so this service currently costs patrons and travelers 3 DM, or roughly \$1.50 for each 30 minutes. The two public Internet terminals are situated in an open reading room near a display rack of current newspapers, including the International Herald Tribune for English readers, four or five small tables, and a cappuccino vending machine. Users obtain the PC key from the checkout desk, turn on the terminal at a wall lock, log on, and then pay the total owed upon returning the key. American typists discover that in Germany, the X and Y are reversed on the keyboard, the apostrophe is on the "wrong" key and only accessible in combination with the Shift key, the "@" sign must be accessed by holding down a command key and then pressing another key, and there are several additional keys for "ü," "ä," etc. where Americans' fingers are trained to find the Enter button.

Other than these difficulties, international e-mail access goes smoothly.

Next to the reading/Internet area is the main body of the library, with a staffed information desk. As is common in Germany's public libraries, there is a substantial Fremdsprache (foreign language) section. In Krefeld there are the omnipresent Stephen King and Agatha Christie titles, plus a poster advertising the availability of Harry Potter in English. Amidst the 28 shelves of English titles, users will also find some audio books and everything from Shelley's poetry to Sidney Sheldon. In the Fremdsprache section are also six shelves of French books, and six shelves containing a variety of other languages such as Russian, Turkish and Italian.

The nonfiction collection is large, taking up most of the library's bottom floor as well as a partial basement. It includes many bound volumes of periodicals, as well as over 100 feet of bound volumes of the National Union Catalog, which gives the library the look of an American academic institution. This look is enhanced by the fact that most library holdings are hardcovers and the remainder have been prebound. Fitness and health, art, and do-it-yourself projects are popular topics, but the most intriguing collection is a spinner rack labeled "Esoterik Taschenbücher" (esoteric paperbacks) offering a browsing collection on topics such as UFOs, Scientology, understanding body language and Nostradamus. The library also contains a typically large collection of graphic novels for adults featuring a wide array of titles not available in the U.S., along with the more familiar *StarTrek*, *Star Wars* and superhero graphic novels.

There is a large children's room on the upper balcony level. As is standard both in Germany's bookstores and in libraries, there are very few paperbacks in the juvenile collection. Even series books comparable to Nancy Drew are published in inexpensive hardcovers for children that retail for about \$6.00. Once again, there is a graphic novel collection, this time featuring *Asterix*, *Tintin*, and a large quantity of Disney titles I have never seen offered for sale in America, all in hardcover. A large number of board games are available for check out, and it is not unusual for libraries to offer game-playing evenings for their patrons. Dorling Kindersley (DK) books are prominent in the nonfiction displays and familiar authors such as Lois Lowry, Enid Blyton and Astrid Lindgren line the shelves. As in the adult portion of the library, the shelving is openwork and quite tall. There are no backs to the freestanding shelving, which helps the crowded rooms seem more open.

Outside the doorway of the children's area, in the passageway leading to the music/video/DVD room, is a very small teen area divided into five sections: "Probleme," "Fantasy," which includes graphic novels, "Liebe (life), Sex and Co.," "Pop," and "CD-ROMs and videos." Two of the new books on display require no translation and would look perfectly at home in an American YA section—*Go, Cyberspace!* and *Body-Art*.

In the DVD/video/music room is another staffed service

desk and a large collection of audio-visual materials. Much of the display is face-out and many of the holdings are Hollywood productions. One of the interesting things about the library is the casual public display of erotic content, typical of Europe and so restricted in the States. For example, near the downstairs check-out desk is a display rack featuring new DVDs. Alongside *Dante's Peak*, *The Santa Clause*, *South Park* and *Pocahontas 2* is a DVD case with a category label of "Erotik-Film" featuring a photo of a bare-breasted woman. This much more casual and public acceptance of nudity is also obvious in the magazine displays in kiosks and store racks, where *Penthouse* and other hardcore magazines are featured in face-out displays beside the home improvement, women's and juvenile publications. American patrons who express concern about art photos of semi-clad supermodels on the covers of library magazines such as *GQ* and *Esquire* would be shocked.

To an American librarian the pace of the German libraries seems slow, the facilities uncrowded and the shelves preternaturally tidy. The overall feel is in contrast to the American library, which seems to constantly strive to be at the center of the community's activities and to attract ever more users. Only one of the libraries visited was busy, with perhaps two-dozen patrons and a tour group of fifth-graders; the rest were quiet, with only handfuls of users and few children or families in evidence. And, of the dozen families we have stayed with during our visits to Germany, most are readers who regularly purchase books, but only three households are library users. Patron statistics provided by the library in Wendlingen am Neckar reflect this low-use pattern as well, with 2,500 registered borrowers from a service population of 16,000 (only 16 percent).

Libraries are supported by city taxes, but patrons of quite a few libraries pay additional fees, such as a 1 DM charge for each video rental, and many libraries charge an initial user fee of 15 to 20 DM (\$7 to \$10) with an annual charge of 10 DM when patrons' cards are renewed. Staffing can be quite minimal; the smaller libraries generally only have a circulation desk and clerical staff, with reference desks reserved for the larger city libraries.

Like most of the public libraries in Germany, the facility in the city of Krefeld is open only five days a week, being closed Sunday and Monday. No businesses are open on Sunday in Germany, so German library staff are taken aback that America's libraries offer this service. Hours are much more limited than in the states, as well, with an average of 21 open hours a week. Of the libraries I recently visited, Kirchheim was open the longest, offering 32 hours a week:

10 a.m. to 6 p.m., Tuesday and Wednesday
10 a.m. to 7 p.m., Thursday
2 p.m. to 6 p.m., Friday
10 a.m. to 1 p.m., Saturday

The smallest libraries, called Zweigstellen, are often only open seven to eleven hours a week. One example is Zweigstelle Zizishausen, which offers hours only from

3 p.m. to 5:30 p.m. on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and from 10 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. on Fridays. But the library in Wendlingen am Neckar was probably most typical with 24 open hours:

10 a.m. to noon and 2 p.m. to 6 p.m., Tuesday
2 p.m. to 6 p.m., Wednesday
3 p.m. to 7 p.m., Thursday
10 a.m. to noon and 2 p.m. to 6 p.m., Friday
8 a.m. to noon, Saturday

Handicapped access is limited. For example, in Köngen the library for a population of 10,000 is housed in a renovated historic grainery that used to store the grain tithes which paid the farmers' taxes. To enter the building, patrons must climb two staircases, with no elevator option. In Baden-Baden the library is an intricate warren on three floors of what appears to be a renovated residence. Patrons meander through a series of tiny rooms crowded with shelving and featuring a hodgepodge of collections. It's a browser's delight, but hardly handicapped-accessible.


Three Irish Journeys


(Continued from page 5)

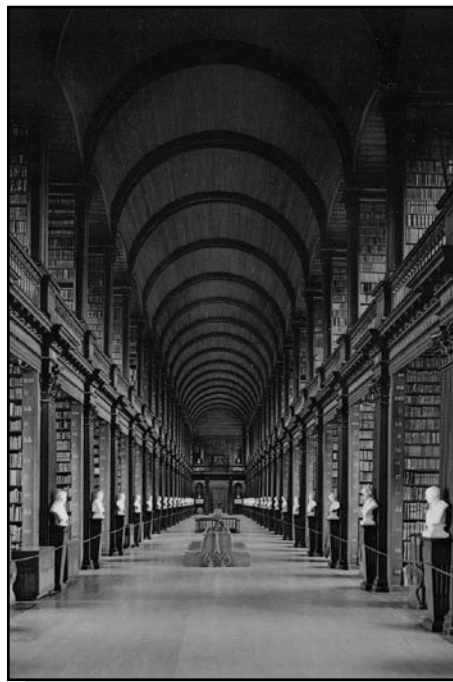
ing. Here was a huge—yes, long—room with an incredibly high arched ceiling, lined with arches which led to alcoves of 15- to 20-foot high stacks of old leather-bound books. Ladders in each alcove give access to the top shelves, if you are not a tourist confined to the center hall by thick red cordons.

High above these alcoves are galleries leading to more 20-foot alcoves of book stacks. The room smelled of old wood and leather. I could feel the presence, in the far upper reaches, of ghostly students who had not yet learned everything they wanted to know when their bodies had failed them.

The Long Room, built in 1712, is a cathedral, built to worship knowledge as contained in books. All libraries share that ancient reverence for knowledge. Our own little shrines in Oregon may lack some of the age and grandeur of that cathedral. But they serve the same purpose, perhaps, as the icons and shrines that dot the Irish landscape and result in such institutions as Our Lady Crowned Credit Union. They are daily reminders of the importance of preserved knowledge.

There is a third part to every journey, after the planning and the experience. After your return home comes the research, and sharing, of new interests opened by the experience. In the research for this article, I was reminded that even 300-year-old institutions change with the times. I did not get to see Marsh's Library in Dublin. You and I both, however, can access the catalog of Marsh's library at <http://www.kst.dit.ie/marsh/>. 

Of course, in some ways Germany's libraries and reading habits are much like America's. Harry Potter is everywhere in Germany—in the bookstores, in the libraries and featured in dinner table conversations in many households. Germans evidence surprise that Harry is known in America, however, despite the fact that English editions of Rowling's titles are easy to come by. In a typical bookstore browsers can choose from German hardcover editions, British hardcover editions with either the juvenile covers or the more discreet black-and-white adult covers, and British paperback editions. Bookstores are quite prevalent in Germany and seem to be on every other street corner. Many are small and have limited offerings but occasionally travelers will find a Borders-type store, complete with calendars, a coffee bar and even a fountain burbling in the sitting area. So if you're traveling in Germany, rest assured that bibliophiles are definitely willkommen. 



The Long Room, Trinity College Library Dublin.