Prison Libraries in Italy

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ABSTRACT

This article deals with prison library services in Italy, highlighting national and regional developments over the last twenty-five to thirty years. The article is divided into six parts: (1) a brief history of Italian prison libraries; (2) the structure and organization of the first institutional libraries (in Turin, Rome, Padua, Ravenna, Milan, Treviso, and Sardinia); (3) considerations by the prison administration and support from the Italian Justice Ministry; (4) the role of the university (the Association of Prison Libraries [ABC] and the new Italian Library Association [AIB] special interest group on people with special needs); (5) newer prison libraries and future projects; and (6) some user data and final conclusions.

A BRIEF HISTORY

In Italy one finds references to prison libraries since the beginning of the twentieth century, as when the librarian Ettore Fabietti (1933) mentions their existence in his Manuale per le biblioteche popolari (Manual for Public Libraries):

The circulation of books is by now recognized as essential even in places of pain and punishment: prisons, houses of correction, poorhouses, and health institutes, where they are administered with humanity and generosity. These institutions cannot do without their own library, well maintained and stocked with books appropriate for the varied needs of the diverse groups of people who use them... But the library that is described is not like what now exists in our prisons. Of that it would be better not to speak at all. I leave to the reader to imagine what kind of collection can be put together from gifts and the discards of personal libraries. For the less cultured, that is, for those who have the greatest
need to read, the prison library, as it still exists in many penal institutions, is a new type of moral torture. (pp. 23–24)

Fabietti’s description refers to a time when some attention was given to the state of public libraries. In Milan in 1903, a consortium of the Società Umanitaria was established, whose president was Filippo Turati (one of the founders of the Italian Socialist Party) and whose director was Fabietti. These men were open to the idea that reading was a right, indeed a necessity for the nascent democratic society. The fact that the library collections referred to in the quotation above were not established according to professional library principles but were the result of indiscriminate donations constituted a problem, a “moral torture” that actually undermined the creativity and stimulation that could be generated by the dissemination of information. The Italian prison system at the time, however, was shrouded in a blanket of silence and isolation that was not pulled away until the 1970s. In the wake of several riots in Italian prisons, which brought public attention to the problems of prisons, the government enacted a law to reform the penitentiary system, the law of July 26, 1975, no. 354, which among other things states in Article 12 that every prison in Italy must have a library. The following year, the rule for implementation was adopted, specifying the requirements for these libraries.¹

Since these requirements went into effect almost thirty-five years ago, nothing has changed in the law regarding prison libraries, and even though much has been accomplished in terms of providing services and opening new libraries in some prisons (as we will discuss further), the organizational structure is practically unchanged. Above all, the original mistake of entrusting the library management to educators—and not to librarians—still remains.² This situation presents a major problem in various respects. The lack of professional management, in particular, shows how far Italian prison libraries deviate from international standards for such institutions. Correcting this situation very likely would improve prison library collections and allow the libraries to provide the full range of services and programs we expect from such institutions.

**EARLY PRISON LIBRARIES**

When Professor Giorgio Montecchi and his team at the Department of Library Science of the University of Milan became involved with prison libraries in 1996, we sent a questionnaire to all 250 Italian prison facilities, asking whether or not they had a library, how many books were in the collection, who was in charge, etc. Only seventy-nine prisons (a third of the total) answered the questionnaire, and of those, only ten said that they had a library. We then contacted the prisons in Turin, Rome, Padova, Treviso, Ravenna, Milan, and a few prisons in Sardinia to obtain more information.

Turin was one of the first cities to start a prison library service administered by the city government. In 1988 a library was opened in La Valette
prison, with a librarian from the city library assigned to its operation. At first, the library’s collection was limited, but the existing connection with the outside world created the opportunity for accessing a much larger realm of resources. This then led to close collaboration on activities in the prison school and, in turn, to the 1998 establishment of a university branch within the prison. At the same time, many associated library programs and activities began to flourish, such as cultural events, meetings with authors, and literary competitions (Toppino, 2003).

In Rome it was not until 1999 that an agreement was signed between the city and the Administration of Penitentiaries of the Ministry of Justice to integrate the city prisons into the municipal library system (Arcuri, De Grossi, & Scutellà, 2001). Collaboration had already taken place for some time between individual city libraries and several of the prisons. The new administrative structure, however, contributed greatly to the growth of the prison libraries and an increased collaboration among the participating institutions (libraries and prisons), which still thrives today. In Rome, the prison libraries are now fully functioning members of the city library system.

In Padova in 1998, information to and from the prison began to flow in a different and original way through the establishment of an actual documentation center at the Due Palazzi prison, which involved a variety of journalistic work and activities. Inside the prison there is a workshop with a staff of about seventy people, including inmates and volunteers, who produce press reviews about prison that have become well known throughout Italy. It also publishes the journal *Ristretti Orizzonti* (Limited Horizons) both in print and online—a publication that has become a valuable reference source for those who are concerned with the problems of imprisonment in Italy (Favero, 2007).

In Ravenna in the mid-1990s, the regional library network was established after a reorganization that incorporated the Italian regional libraries into the National Library Service (Servizio Bibliotecario Nazionale). The new local network immediately added the prison libraries as participating institutions (Barlotti, 2002). The project “Biblioteche fuori di sé” [“Libraries Outside Themselves,” which in Italian also has the meaning “Libraries out of their Minds”] began during the same years, providing library outreach services to hospitals and rest homes—even to supermarkets, hair salons, campgrounds, and cafeterias. In Ravenna, the project included bringing books to prisons. This work continues, and the provincial government of Ravenna also provides continuous professional development programs for librarians and is responsible for the development and maintenance of the shared catalog of more than one hundred system libraries.

The Department of Library Science at the University of Milan has worked with two prisons in the city: San Vittore and Opera. The former is located in the middle of the city, is easily reached by public transportation, and is close to the main streets. This central location, as well as the fact
that San Vittore is a “transit facility” where inmates stay during trial before being moved to other locations,\(^5\) has made this prison a suitable place for volunteers to work in the library. The transitory nature of the library users makes it difficult to carry out long-term projects in the facility.

The situation is different at the Opera prison (Casa di reclusione di Opera), where the library is participating in various research activities and experiments carried out by the university. Between 1999 and 2004, courses in library science were organized for the inmates who, while working together with the full-time librarians from the outside, contributed greatly to the development of the prison library according to the model structure of other libraries in the region. Services include interlibrary loan, library materials are continuously updated, and all documents are classified and cataloged according to international standards.

In Treviso, the city government has provided, since 1998, a salary for an inmate to work in the prison library and has greatly supported access for the inmates to information. In 2003, an agreement was signed between the city and the prison for interlibrary loan service (Quagliotto, 2007).

Finally, Sardinia has since 2003 been financing the project “Prison Libraries in Sardinia,” which included initially the Buoncammino, Mamone, Iglesias, Sassari, and Quartucciu institutions, but was later extended to the rest of the prison sites in Sardinia. The project plan is to have two cooperatives manage all library services, including the borrowing of materials from outside libraries, and to have appropriately trained inmate library workers in the Sardinian prison facilities.\(^6\)

We learned later that some of the prisons that had not responded to the 1996 survey indeed had good libraries, for example, in Bologna and Modena. This, however, did not change the general picture that had emerged from the survey results, namely that the prison libraries were either very beautiful and efficient operations or barely functioning entities without any standards for evaluation of services. In contrast to the few “happy islands” and others that, while providing adequate services, did not have enough qualified staff, there existed in Italy still hundreds of prison sites with no library service or where the “library” consisted only of a useless collection of discarded books that nobody wanted anything to do with.

**The Prison Administration Point of View**

It was not until 2001 that systematic discussions about prison libraries began to take place within the Department of Prison Administration (Dipartimento dell’Amministrazione Penitenziaria—DAP).\(^7\) In 2000, the monthly journal *Le due città* had been founded as an official voice of the Ministry of Justice. This journal began to carry articles that dealt with books and initiatives related to culture. One of the first articles described the project “Wings of the Author,” which was designed to promote reading among inmates and included book reviews and reading suggestions.
Subsequent articles discussed the formation of a university-level study group in the Vallette di Torino prison and the donation by Elvira Sellerio to the prison libraries of all the titles from her publishing company (Berzano, 2001; "Il dono," 2001).

In 2003, a series of articles was published regarding prison libraries, following the participation of several DAP functionaries, both as audience and speakers, in a meeting in Sassari (Borzacchiello, 2003; Fratini, 2003).

In the words of one prison employee who spoke at the meeting:

The library is to be considered not only as an instrument for integration and support of education and learning, but also as a tool to help reduce (if not eliminate) the cultural gap among inmates and offer them options to shape their own destiny through conscious choices and positive responses to their own needs and aspirations. In this context the library must constitute a place for open discussion and encounters and be a source for the communication of values, ideals, and opportunities that can be communicated only through involvement with the outside community.

These words, spoken by a person who is not a librarian, show that our message has been clearly heard and understood by our intended audience. From that moment on, we see more frequent discussion of books and libraries in prisons and more awareness, even by prison staff, of their importance. They talk of "the liberating power of prison libraries" (Borzacchiello, 2006) and say that as "places of encounter and integration, the libraries help the inmates understand the values, the experiences, and the ideas that constitute reality outside the prison" (Fratini, 2006), and that "collections of books are being established in the whole country for donation to the prisons in the major cities" (Arzone, 2007).

This interest from the central prison administration is certainly positive and may lead to gradual improvement in the condition of prison libraries, although the prison libraries are still more likely to ask their local city government for help with library management than to request assistance from the central prison administration. Uniform prison library operation standards are still lacking, and these can only be realized if/when all the stakeholders come together and agree to certain premises.

The Role of the University: ABC, AIB, and GUSPEC
Since 1992, the Department of Library Science at the University of Milan has been involved with prison libraries, first as part of a research project with the purpose of collecting data on the state of these libraries, evaluating them (the libraries) and, eventually, proposing new methods for the organization of this information. After the 1996 survey, it became clear that many prison library functions had yet to be established. Not only was there no existing working relationship with international library organizations such as the International Federation of Library Associations and
Institutions (IFLA), but even within the country, the few existing prison libraries had little awareness of each other and no possibility to share information about successes or common problems. All the libraries were traveling the same roads, facing the same problems, making the same mistakes, and wasting precious time with the same results: they didn’t have the advantage of being able to learn from their counterparts in other prisons. The realization of this unfortunate situation gave birth to the idea of forming an association with the purpose of sharing information about existing prison library realities throughout Italy in order to reach consensus on how to build a uniform prison library system. The new Association of Prison Libraries (Associazione Biblioteche Carcerarie—ABC) was formed in 2000 as part of the university, and ABC went on to sponsor three national conferences on prison libraries to start a dialog among institutions: “Free to Read” (Costanzo & Montecchi, 2002), “Unchained Libraries” (Contini, 2003), and “Peripheries of the City” (Celegon & Ghersetti, 2005). The proceedings of these conferences were published by the Italian Library Association (Associazione Italiana Biblioteche—AIB) Contini, 2003. The AIB has always been interested in and supportive of the activities by the ABC. It recently offered to give the ABC an organizational home as part of a group similar to the IFLA section Library Services to People with Special Needs that conducts studies of specific library services and problems. The new AIB group (GUSPEC) would study library services to users with special needs, in particular, hospital patients, people with physical or mental disabilities, individuals with reading difficulties, multicultural population groups, and—of special interest—prisoners.

In brief, in Italy today, the professional aspects of prison library services are still monitored by the university and the AIB, actual services are provided by local government authorities or volunteer groups, while the prison administration is responsible for the institutional operation. The big challenge is to integrate these three realities so that these entities, which are still without a unified structure, can grow and prosper. This lack of unified structure has resulted in inadequate training of prison librarians, who must often rely on their own common sense rather than on established prison policies and procedures. Such policies and training are especially important for librarians who come from outside libraries and are unfamiliar with security regulations at their workplace.

**New Prison Libraries: Como, Monza, Pisa, and Volterra**

The birth of the ABC and the increased attention given to prison libraries by various agencies have led to the establishment of many more libraries over the last ten years. These new libraries enjoy more autonomy than the older facilities mentioned earlier, and the individual prison administrations are more involved with their operation. Still, no uniform management structure has been adopted for these new libraries, and their
operation is mostly entrusted to volunteers—usually librarians from libraries beyond the prison walls working without pay—who nonetheless consider themselves fully entrenched in the institution structure, and who work closely with the inmate assistants.

Such is the case at the prison in Como, where a volunteer, Ida Morosini, since 2002 has built three separate library areas, which have become important institution centers for cultural activities and other events (2003). In connection with the 2009 IFLA conference in Milan, a group of librarians from around the world visited the prison libraries, where they were welcomed by the chief of the DAP for the region of Lombardy, as well as the prison director and most of the staff (Lehmann, 2009). This visit was significant, as it raised the profile of an Italian prison library to the attention of an important international organization.

Another new prison library has been opened in Monza, near Milano, as the result of collaboration between the province of Milano and the local library system, Brianzabiblioteche. The librarian is Amelia Brambilla, and the real innovation at this facility is that inmates visit the library in person (Brambilla, 2007). This development is quite significant, since traditionally this has not been the case; for many years, only a few inmate clerks provided library “services.” In fact, the prison system policies do not include the position of “librarian,” and library work is seen mainly as clerical in nature, dating back to the times when many people could not read or write and a designated inmate wrote letters for other inmates. This designated inmate also went from cell to cell with books for those who could read and had requested materials in writing.

In May 2009, a new pilot project was initiated jointly by the library system at the University of Pisa and the prison of Volterra. This project included the formation of a library study group on services to various types of institutions and user groups, including prisons, hospitals, and people with disabilities. New interdisciplinary activities involving prisons were defined and implemented, thanks to the work of the librarian, Lucia Chericoni, who believed that the university has a duty to serve its students, wherever they are, even in prison. The library service was initially offered only to inmates enrolled at the university but has expanded to include services from other local agencies, including public libraries, which have organized several cultural events under this project. The Pisa public library also organized a series of meetings in 2009 and 2010 to promote reading among people with mental disabilities, as well as incarcerated people.

Some Data and Conclusions
When looking at the descriptions above, one can only conclude that the state of Italian prison libraries is definitely in need of further development. One observes a great inequity of service and the lack of a uniform organization throughout the country. At the same time, there are individual
prisons where libraries are highly developed and thriving, quite indepen-
dently of each other. Information about these success stories is, unfortu-
nately, not widely shared and therefore of little help to those locations that
could learn from their example.

Without continuous central monitoring, it is extremely difficult to col-
lect statistical data that give a clear picture of this fragmented and in-
consistent prison library operation. Demographic data are available on
the total prison population, but no consolidated operational data (DAP,
2009). One can, however, form a useful profile of a prison library user.
Italian prisons today have a total population of 63,630, of which 60,851
are men and 2,779 women. Middle school diplomas are held by 21,477;
approximately 3,000 have a high school diploma; and approximately 646
have a college degree. For 25,144 inmates, mainly foreign, no educational
information is available. The foreign inmate count is 23,609, almost 39
percent of the total population. The majority of inmates are between the
ages of twenty-five and thirty-nine.

Unfortunately, no single agency collects data on the prison libraries,
their collections, circulation functions, and users. No central policies or
standards exist for collection development and circulation of materials.
The lack of central direction constitutes a major obstacle to future de-
velopment. A few of the libraries, however, have developed internal data
collection tools that show the number of acquisitions and discards and
the use of the collection (circulation). These data, of course, facilitate col-
lection development in response to actual user needs. Without such data,
one can hardly talk about a genuine library that is supposed to grow and
evolve like a living organism according to user demands.

An example of a good prison library is the Monza facility, where the
librarian keeps current statistics.9 To build this library, the province of
Milano, between 2005 and 2008, allocated an annual amount of approxi-
mately 33,000 euros to the prison library, which serves a population of
450. The entire start-up collection (11,000 items) was cataloged, and
training in basic library management was provided to interested inmates.
Purchase and donation policies and procedures were developed, as well
as user rules and regulations. Special attention was paid to the needs of
foreign inmates, and books in Arabic, Albanian, and Romanian were pur-
chased. The library also organizes educational and cultural activities, in-
cluding civic education classes, film showings, and film discussions.

Another successful and well-managed library is that at the Bassone prison
in Como. Library staff has built a library website (http://bibliobassone
.altervista.org/wp/) with a wealth of information about the collection,
services, and special events. It also includes testimonials and comments by
inmate users. The library has become the center for recreation, education,
and rehabilitation. The library catalog is integrated with that of the local
public library system. When one clicks on the “catalog” button, a message
appears: “ATTENTION! In order to ensure the survival of the library and maintain good service with an educational, ethical, and social purpose, it is highly recommended that a legal definition of prison library and prison librarian be developed, in order to counteract the outdated and altruistic perception that is still associated with both, and to change the practice of delegating library operations to volunteer staff, *sic et simpliciter.*”

There is consensus among those in Italy who work with or in prison libraries that the future will include many challenges, but first and foremost stands the task of bringing together all parties who can contribute to the “unification” of these libraries into a single system. These parties include the DAP, the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, representatives from local government (municipalities, provinces, and regions), the AIB, and the experts from the ABC. The goal of their work should be to make sure that already existent best practices are adopted nationwide, so that Italian prison libraries can reach the same quality as their counterparts elsewhere.

**Notes**

1. “Library service. The management of the institution must make sure that the inmates and internees have easy access to the publications of the institution library, as well as, through appropriate agreements, to take advantage of reading materials found in libraries and public reading centers in the place where the institution is located. In the selection of books and periodicals, attention must be paid to a balanced representation of the cultural diversity that exists in the general society. The library service is assigned, as a rule, to an educator. This person is in charge of the materials collection, is responsible for record keeping, for the circulation of books and periodicals, as well as for the development of initiatives to disseminate culture, and allows for inmates and internees . . . to carry out these activities during free time” (DPR April 29, 1976, no. 431, art. 21).

2. The law of July 26, 1975, no. 354, established the role of educators for adults, or of workers involved in the reeducation of inmates after they participate in mental health treatment and other activities during their stay in prison, with the purpose of providing data to supervising judges for planning eventual alternative incarceration or release.

3. The institution Libraries of Rome was established in 1996 and united under a single administration the thirty-three libraries of the city in accordance with law no. 142 of 1990, which gave local institutions a certain administrative autonomy.

4. The National Library Service (Servizio Bibliotecario Nazionale) is the network of Italian libraries supported by the Ministry for Cultural Activities and Heritage, with the cooperation of the regions, and coordinated by the Central Institute for the Union Catalog of Italian Libraries and Bibliographic Information (ICCU).

5. Italian prisons are divided into two categories: institutions for preventive custody and prisoners awaiting trial, and institutions of confinement and for serving sentences.


7. In Italy, the Ministry of Justice is charged with the administration of civil, criminal, and juvenile justice, as well as prison administration. The latter is exercised through the DAP.

8. One should note that Italian library science believes in the fundamental value of communication and of collaboration among partner institutions, with the goal of promoting the development and growth of all libraries according to the development of the communities to which they belong, and in line with international scientific discussion. A library that has no dialog with the outside world is no more than a place of storage, even though orderly, for documents useful only to a few. As one of the fathers of the library science, S. R. Ranganathan, once said, “A library is a growing organism.”

9. Data provided by the system librarian, Brianzabiblioteche, March 2010.
References


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