

## When memory is turn into ashes... Memoricide during XX century

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### Part 1. Ash flakes

"Black snow fell over Sarajevo,  
darkening the midday sky with ashes  
from the million and a half books burning  
in what was once the National library".

Phil Cousineau  
"Memoricide". From *Night Train*, 2004.

Sunday, August 25<sup>th</sup>, 1992. During the whole night, the gunners of the Serbian ultra nationalistic leader Radovan Karadžić, placed in the hills surrounding Sarajevo, aimed their grenades, in a totally intentional way, at the National and University Library of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which included the funds of the National Archives. The fire they started incinerated the entire building until the basement, and, with it, every contained document disappeared. Converted in ash flakes, around 700 manuscripts and incunabula vanished, together with more than 700 titles of Bosnian periodicals (some of them kept in the funds since XIX century) and a unique collection of *Bosniaca*. Catalogs -this useful tool which allow knowing the titles included in the library's shelves- were also burnt.

Just a 10 % of all documents escaped destruction. The blackened remains of the rest, of an incalculable cultural and historic value, floated over the city during the following days (Lorkovic 1992).

Three months before, on May 17<sup>th</sup>, the incendiary grenades had been directed against the *Orijentalni Institut* (Oriental Institute), also in Sarajevo. Destruction was total. It was lost one of the biggest European collections of Islamic manuscripts, including ten thousands of documents of the Ottoman period and more than 5.200 manuscripts written in Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Hebrew and *Alhamijado* (or *Adzamijski*), Bosnian language written using Arabic script. These two cases were not the only ones. More than 195 libraries were attacked in Bosnian territory, including the Herzegovina Archives, the Library of the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Mostar and the one of the Monastery of Zitomislic (Lorkovic 1993, 1995).

The attacked targets were not military. They were clearly civilian objectives, destroyed as a part of an "ethnic cleansing" campaign launched by the Serbian army during the Yugoslav (Bosnian) war (1992-1996). War does not imply just the seizure of goods, people and territory: it also needs to delete the memory of the adversary, the reasons supporting their identity and pushing them to resist, to fight, to love... In this sense, the destruction of libraries, museums and archives is not just a war objective: it is a destruction strategy.

After the brutal attack to the National Library in Sarajevo, the Croatian doctor and historian Mirko D. Grmek coined the term *memoricide*, defining the willful destruction of the memory and the cultural treasures of the "others", the adversaries, the (un)known ones (Blazina 1992).

## Part 2. Memories

"We know that the loss of our memory mortgages the future. Those who cannot learn from their past are condemned to accept their future without the possibility of imagining it".

Eduardo Galeano  
Uruguayan writer.

Narratives, documents, archives: memory is shared culture, arena for confrontation of different points of view, and social frame which orientates and strengthens the individual perspectives, as remarked by Italian sociologist Paolo Montesperelli in his "Sociology of memory".

Without memory, nothing can work. In a Voltaire's classic tale, famous philosophers Descartes and Locke passionately argue about the importance of memory. Looking for a solution for this controversy, the Muses –daughters of Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory- take part and, as an experiment, they cancel all forms of memory for a few days. Humankind, as can be supposed, plunges into an impressive chaos. People forget everything, from their most elementary notions to their basic inhibitions. But they specially lose their reasons for living and their future projects, evidently based in their history and their past experiences.

To destroy memory means to dispossess an individual or a group of their main tool for giving sense to their present, just because human beings need to extract, from their past, the necessary answers for understanding their current state and acting in the building of their future.

The imposition of collective amnesias has been fulfilled, throughout history, through the elimination of written documents kept in libraries and archives. These institutions have been, since time's dawn, *the main managers of human memory*. But it must be remembered that this intangible heritage –source of identity, warranty of cultural diversity- is just a little part of all the information kept by the different cultures all around planet's surface. The principal store of these stories and memories is the very human mind. Written things are, like Socrates pointed out, just a pale reflect of the main ensemble of the knowledge of human beings. And it must be remembered that *this* memory –deeply neglected by libraries and archives- is also attacked, deleted and destroyed by means of cultural pressures, acculturation, ethnic massive executions, language banning, imposition of foreign traits, murdering of *living books*, discrimination... In a way or another, the attackers, the winners or the dominant ones try to eliminate the identity of the defeated, the minority, the dominated ones... When the forces of the Red Khmer took the power in Kampuchea (1976-1979) they assumed a policy of systematic destruction of all the previous "corrupt" culture. A result of such a decision was the destruction of the National Library in Phnom Penh, whose collection was scattered in the street and publicly burnt. It is estimated that just a 20 % of the existing documents escaped incineration

(including the famous manuscripts written on palm leaves). Anyway, these survivors probably suffered intense damages later due to the inappropriate conditions of conservation, handling and storage.

From Chinese Qin dynasty's policies to the destruction of Alexandrian library, from Mayan manuscripts eliminated by Spanish bishop Diego de Landa to disappeared African sub-Saharan classical texts, history is sadly plagued with this kind of actions. It could be believed that XX century, time of evolution and development, would not witness such barbarisms. Nothing further from reality.

### Part 3. Minority heritage

"The defeated are not totally dominated if they kept the tragic memory of their struggle".

Juan Goytisolo  
Spanish writer. *El País* (Spanish newspaper),  
14.04.2002.

During the dawn of August 11<sup>th</sup>, 1998, Taliban troops destroyed the library of the Foundation *Nasser Khosrow*. With its 55.000 volumes, it was considered by Afghans themselves like one of the most valuable and beautiful collections of their nation and their culture. It lodged 10-centuries-old Arabic manuscripts, texts in English and *Pashtu*, and an impressive Afghan heritage written in Persian. It possessed unique documents, like the letters that Hassan-i-Sabah, the leader of *fidai'iyin* sect (best known as *hashishin*, from were the word "assassins" is derived) wrote to his followers, the seals of the first Aga Khan or the innumerable calligraphic and illuminated marvels of the Timurid period (1370-1506). But maybe the most appreciated treasure was one of the six remaining copies of the *Shahnama* (*Book or Epic of the Kings*), by Persian poet Firdusi Tusi (935-1020); this one was dated in XII century.

When *mujaidins* entered in Kabul in 1992, the library moved to the city of Pol-e-Khomri. In 1998, 15.000 Talibans entered there, executed Afghans in mass and attacked with bazookas the building where the library was lodged. As happened in Sarajevo years before, the flames turn all the bibliographic, documental and historic treasures into shapeless spoils. An immense national, cultural heritage was consumed as a result of a totally irrational action.

Latif Pedram, the director of the library, attributed the attack to an open campaign of annihilation of Persian language and identity, a persecuted culture since Islam arrived to Central Asia. *Pashtu* -whose Talibans consider themselves direct descendants- have a traditional elimination policy of everything related to Persia. Since Muslims arrived in Afghanistan, Persian culture looked for refuge in books and literature, giving shelter to their thoughts and memories on paper and parchment.

In 1943, the library *Mefitze Haskole*, in the Jewish *ghetto* of Vilna (Lithuania) was totally destroyed. Known as the "Jerusalem of *ghettos*" because of its active cultural and intellectual life, its library possessed an impressive collection, as well as archives and a museum, and it was the meeting point of the whole community. Between 1941 and 1943, the whole *ghetto* population was exterminated, through *SS Aktion* campaigns or through massive deportations to

concentration camps. All the documents and materials of the library had the same fate of their users.

On April 14<sup>th</sup>, 2002, during an "anti-terrorist" operation, Israel army dynamited part of the Cultural Center *Khalil Sakatini*, in Ramallah (Palestine). This center had a magnificent library and there was placed the editorial of the journal *Al-Karmel*, one of the most famous and open publications of Arab world. Its director, Palestinian poet Mahmud Darwish (whose house was sacked during the same operation) edited the journal in Lebanon until Beirut was under siege; then he moved to Cyprus, and finally, looking for a little bit of peace in his homeland, he settled in Ramallah after Oslo Accords (1993).

There, in Ramallah, other libraries were destroyed during 2002, including the ones placed at the French and Greek Cultural Centers, the Health, Development, Information and Policy Institute, the Ma'an Development Center, the Union of Palestinian Medical Relief Committees, the Al-Bireh municipality, the Bureau of Statistics and the Ministries of Agriculture, Civil Affairs, Culture, Economy and Trade, Education, Finance, Health, Industry, and Transport... (Twiss 2003). This destruction was a part of a campaign of systematic erasing of cultural instruments and organs representing minority or non-dominant peoples. A similar case happened in northern Sri Lanka, cradle and home of the rich Tamil culture. On May 5<sup>th</sup>, 1989, around 200 policemen of the official Sinhalese majority entered in the commercial area of the city of Jaffna and burnt the Public Library. With its 95.000 volumes, it was the second biggest Asian collection. It had invaluable Tamil manuscripts, including ancient books written on palm leaves.

By this way, majorities try to impose on minorities, to force their pride, to eliminate their memories, to dominate their reality. Attackers try to break the attacked ones' will, to delete their reasons for resist and defend themselves. The winners try to sweep away the defeated ones' future, to compel them to resign, to force them to lose their identity, to be assimilated.

And sometimes the answer of these peoples to these actions takes the same form, so violent and vindictive. On April 5<sup>th</sup>, 2004, the library of the *United Talmud Torahs Elementary School*, in the suburb of St. Laurent, Montreal, Canada, was destroyed by an incendiary bomb. A message stuck in the building's front linked the attack with the murder of Muslim radical Ahmed Yassin (March 2004) by Israeli militias in Gazah. Out of 10.000 volumes, just 25 books were saved.

#### Part 4. Losses and recoveries

"Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits".

Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Art. 27.1

Between April 10<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup>, 2003, and under the indifferent eyes of western occupation forces (mainly from USA), the Archaeological Museum and the National Library of Iraq, in Baghdad, were sacked. The latter, together with the National Archives and the Koranic Library, were set on fire until being reduced to a heap of smoky wastes. The institutions were meticulously spoiled by professional thieves before being willfully incinerated with white phosphorus

grenades. British journalist Robert Fisk prevented the incident (without any concern by invading authorities) and witnessed the huge blaze, giving a detailed account in a moving article published on "The Independent"<sup>1</sup>.

The National Library lodged Arabic treasures, as the original manuscripts of Averroes (1126-1198) and of the Persian mathematician and astronomer Omar Khayyam (1048-1131), the first Arabic translation of Aristotle's work and the testimonies of Iraqi life under Ottoman rulers. It preserved Sufi poems, Persian literature, ancient maps, and hundreds of novels. One million books disappeared besides of the millennial clay tablets stolen from the Museum, the million documents lost in the Archive, the 700 manuscripts which were destroyed and the 1.500 which just "vanished".

It was not Iraqi religious fanaticism. The greatest international experts on Islamic culture declared that national identity and tradition of Arab peoples stand over their beliefs. Even so, if a religious reason was the origin of such a disaster... how to explain the burning of the Koranic Library?

To break Iraqi moral by destroying their higher symbols of traditional identity? Nobody knows. But an important detail was underlined by international observers: the Archives of the Oil Ministry in Baghdad did not suffer even a little damage, strongly guarded by western soldiers.

It is necessary to remember that 13 years before, during the invasion of Iraqi troops to Kuwait, all libraries and information centers were sacked and burnt, or, as in the case of the National Scientific and Technological Information Centre, directly moved to Baghdad (Salem 1991).

However, not everything is lost.

Between a 30 % and a 35 % of Iraq National Library's collections were saved. There were several causes for this miracle: fate (some collections were eventually placed in other buildings, like the 250.000 volumes lodged in the Al-Hak Mosque); greed (Saddam Hussein appropriated thousands of manuscripts for his private collection) or even generosity: foreseeing the sack, already suffered in 1991, a good number of Iraqi citizens hid in their houses the greater bibliographic treasures.

In Europe, something similar happened. Since it opened its doors to public, in 1950, Oriental Institute in Sarajevo had allowed the use of its collections under totally open policies. Researchers, documentation centers and libraries had access or exchanged these materials, so a great part of the funds were photocopied or microfilmed and kept in foreign centers. Now, using the system employed by libraries in northern Italy after II World War, Bosnian librarians have started to look for these copies. The answer came quickly: the National Libraries of Macedonia and Slovenia gave the first step, and later, Universities in Harvard, Den Haag and Michigan, and the Spanish NGO "Paz Ahora" (Peace Now) started to facilitate more material for helping in the recovery of the lost heritage.

It was not the first time that international cooperation helped to the recovery of destroyed libraries and its documental goods. Tibet rescued most of its cultural heritage through a program of the USA Library of Congress.

During Cultural Revolution led by Mao Zedong, all Chinese territory stood the campaign against the *Si Jiū*, the "Four Olds" (Culture, Customs, Habits and Ideas). Starting 1967, such a campaign destroyed every cultural trait understood as traditional and old (stone carvings, art, books, aristocratic architecture) and, in consequence, different of the new mentality supported by

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<sup>1</sup> The Independent. 15.04.2003.

communist regime (Ting 1983). The minority and millennial Tibetan culture suffered a tremendous loss, for a high percentage of its cultural heritage was burnt in public acts (Neterowicz 1989, pp.61-62). Fortunately, a good number of the most valuable manuscripts were taken out of the territory before Chinese invasion to Tibet, by those who followed the Dalai Lama in his Indian exile. Considering that Buddhist Scriptures (called *Cho* in Tibetan and *Dharma* in Sanskrit) are the most important basis for the religion, it is understandable that, during this "exodus", whole libraries were moved. The support of USA Library of Congress allowed that, during the 60's and 70's, most of these texts were re-printed.

But maybe the most famous case of international cooperation and recovery is the one of Leuven's Library.

During the summer of 1914, in the first days of First World War, German army invaded neutral Belgian territory. Leuven (Lovaina), Flemish city famous for being the site of one of the most ancient European universities, was declared "open city" and, without presenting any resistance, it was occupied without incidents. A week later, on August 25<sup>th</sup> (exactly 78 years before the destruction of National Library in Sarajevo), several German soldiers were killed. As a reprisal, more than 200 citizens were summarily executed, and the library of the *Katholieke Universiteit* (Catholic University) was sprayed with inflammable liquids and condemned to flames, which burnt for days. The losses included more than 230.000 books, a famous collection of 900 manuscripts and more than 800 incunabula, printed before 1500.

Such an action provoked indignation and repulse all over the world.

Immediately, it started the organization of an international fund (*Lovaina Book Fund*, in 1915) for allowing the restoration of the valuable library. The reconstruction labors started after the end of the war. As a clause of the Versailles Treaty, Germany was compelled to pay 10 millions francs destined to buy books, and the most important German libraries were forced to contribute with duplicated copies of their most valuable treasures, as a indemnification for the damages inflicted to the Flemish university.

In May 1940, Germans invaded Belgium again. And they repeated –even if not in such an open way- the vandal act against the restored library. There 900.000 volumes, 800 manuscripts, all the incunabula and around 200 engravings of ancient masters were burnt once more (Vanderheijden 1946).

As happened 25 years before, the library was rebuilt again thanks to the international collaboration and support.

## Part 5. The phantom of war: numbers for horror

"When they have burned books, they will end in  
burning human beings".

Heinrich Heine  
From *Almansor* (1821).

The Belgian example was just one more of those happening during the two biggest –and most terrible- wars of human history: the World Wars. Even if the conflict scenarios were extended, in a way or another, throughout the whole world, the main actions were concentrated in European territory. Through intentional attacks against bibliographic repositories or as a consequence of

bombings, the damages produced on libraries, archives and bibliographic funds were highly significant.

Maybe the WW II (1939-1945) produced the most terrible damages to human cultural heritage.

The German and allied air raids provoked the loss of 20 municipal –and several public- libraries in Italian territory. More than 2 millions printed texts and 39.000 manuscripts disappeared. The destruction included the Public and the National Libraries in Torino (December 1942) and the *Biblioteca Palatina* in Parma (Näther 1990, p.12).

In France, German attacks destroyed 42.000 volumes in Beauvais (June 1940), 23.000 manuscripts in Chartres, 110.000 texts in the *Bibliothèque Municipale* in Douai, the whole library of the *Société de Géographie Commerciale* in Le Havre, a collection of manuscripts in Metz (1944) and the *Bibliothèque Nationale et Universitaire* in Strasbourg, with 300.000 volumes, in September 1944 (Kühlmann 1992, pp.222-247).

In the United Kingdom, the German bombs (1940-1941) reached libraries like the public one in Coventry (100.000 books) and several ones in Bristol, Liverpool and London (Kelly 1977, p.328). In Russia, the damages produced just in public libraries reached the number of 100 millions books.

In Belgrad (April 1941), German projectiles hit the Serbian National Library; during the fire disappeared 1.300 manuscripts written in Cyrillic alphabet (XII-XVIII centuries), as well as original works of Serbian authors, incunabula, ancient documents and books printed between 1832 and 1941.

The allied bombs provoked the destruction of countless libraries and collections in Japan, especially in Tokyo between 1944 and 1945 (Borsa 1984).

German libraries suffered terrible losses during the attacks in their territory by Russian and allied forces. Millions of books were lost, though a good number of the most valuable documents were saved because they were deposited in foreigner countries. Anyway, a third of the whole German existences were eliminated.

The *Staatsbibliothek* in Berlin lost 2 millions books; the University Library of the same city, 20.000 volumes. Serious damages were suffered by the *Stadtsbibliothek*, the one placed inside the *Reichstag* (this building being completely destroyed), the *Deutsche Heeresbücherei* (German Army Library) and a number of specialized collections. In Bonn, the University Library lost a 25 % of its texts.

Bremmen *Staatsbibliothek* lost 150.000 books, including rare and precious works, volumes with ancient engravings, 2.000 separatas and complete periodical collection. In September 1944, the *Hessische Landesbibliothek* in Darmstadt was destroyed during a bombing, losing 760.000 books (including 2.217 incunabula and 4.500 manuscripts). The losses of the *Stadt- und Landesbibliothek* in Dortmund were of about a quarter million of volumes, including warrants and a historic collection of maps.

In Dresden, the *Sächsische Landesbibliothek* was destroyed by bombs between February and March 1945. Around 300.000 books disappeared. The *Stadtsbibliothek* of that city lost its reference collection and 200.000 volumes, and the library of the *Verein für Erdkunde* (Geographic Society), around 12.000 documents. The *Stadt- und Universitätsbibliothek* lost 550.000 volumes, 440.000 thesis and 750.000 warrants. In Hamburg, the *Staat- und Universitätsbibliothek* was burnt during attacks in 1943 and 1944, losing more than 600.000 works, the reference collection and the catalogs. In the same

days, the *Stadtsbibliothek* in Hannover lost 125.000 books. Libraries in Karlsruhe, Kassel, Glessen, Graifswald and Essen suffered terrible losses as well. The *Stadtbibliothek* of Nuremberg lost around 100.000 volumes and a part of their catalogs in January 1945. The *Bayerische Staatsbibliothek* in Munich was reached four times by bombs between 1943 and 1945, losing half a million books (including thesis and a part of the *Bavarica* collection). In the same city, the University Library lost a third of its collection (around 350.000 volumes); the *Stadtbibliothek*, around 385.000 and the Benedictine Library, around 120.000 books. The University Library of Münster was reached during different attacks since October 1943, losing 360.000 texts (almost two thirds of its collection). The *Württembergische Landesbibliothek* in Stuttgart lost 580.000 books during a bombing in September 1944. Also there, the Academy of Music was totally destroyed and the Technology University Library lost 50.000 out of its 118.000 documents. The collection of 270.000 manuscripts and incunabula kept by the *Thüringische Landesbücherei* in Gotha was confiscated and moved to the URSS by Russians during 1946.

During the siege of Budapest (1944-1945), every little library and an important part of the big ones were damaged. The ones belonging to the Parliament and the Academy of Sciences were touched, and the one placed in the Polytechnic Institute was totally destroyed (Réthi 1967; Kiss, 1972 p.13). In Romania, something similar happened during the same period: 300.000 volumes disappeared from public libraries. The Polytechnic Institute Library in Jassy lost 15.000 books and 4.000 volumes of periodicals.

Intentional fires were usual actions. The University Library in Napoli (Naples) was burnt by German troops in 1943, losing 200.000 texts. The same army set on fire the *Bibliothèque de l'Assemblée Nationale* (Library of the National Assembly) in Paris just a year later (destroying 40.000 documents) and the provincial library of Zeeland (Netherlands) in 1940, eliminating 160.000 ancient texts (Tellegen 1953, p.3). The "Germanizing" policies adopted by the German army produced the confiscation and movement to Germany of thousands of volumes stolen from the occupied territories. Local libraries were compelled to replace these lost books with German works. Such a case happened in the French territory of Alsace-Lorraine (1940-1943). After the liberation, the national troops of resistance destroyed the German collections.

These "Germanizing" policies were strong and hard even inside Germany, especially with those texts concerning Jewish people. After the upraise of the National-Socialist (Nazi) Party to the power, "black lists" with prohibited authors were prepared for German public libraries, including 10 % of the titles of their collections. This was the first step of a long process which ended in the sadly famous "book burnings", the most important one carried out during May 10<sup>th</sup>, 1933. A much longer list (around 5.500 titles) was prepared in 1935 (Jütte 1987).

The policies developed for Polish Jews was clearly harder. German occupation forces created the *Brenn-Kommandos* or "Burning Squads" (1939-1945), meant to destroy synagogues and Jewish books. By the action of these squads, the Great Talmudic Library of the Jewish Theological Seminar of Lublin was set on fire. The rests of this library (around 24.000 books) were later sent to Germany together with hundreds of thousands of other Hebrew texts taken from public and private collections. A great part was destroyed during the bombing on Berlin; the rest was burnt during public acts, or turn into paper pulp (Borin 1993).



After Munich Conference (1938), ex-Czechoslovakia lost a great part of its territory: the Sudets (Sudetenland). Soon, every Czech book –on Geography, Biography, History and national authors- were confiscated from the libraries in this region. Most of them were burnt, and the collections were destroyed or carried to Germany. After the occupation of the rest of the country by the German troops (1939), the National and University Library of Prague lost 25.000 volumes, most of them art books. The collections of the Natural Sciences Faculty were dispersed and destroyed, including the catalog. A great number of other libraries stood severe losses, e.g. the *Slavata* Bible, or the seven codexes from the ancient library of Jan Jodejovsky. It was estimated that the total loss, including incunabula and manuscripts, was around two millions documents (Zivny 1946).

In Poland (1939-1945) such damage also took place. After invasion, German forces started a violent policy of destruction, aimed at Polish libraries, archives and museums. In Poznan, the Raczynski Library and the one at the Sciences Society were destroyed, and the Cathedral Library –with a unique incunabula collection- was burnt. In October 1944, the Warsaw National Library was totally destroyed, losing 700.000 documents (almost all the ancient texts, the map and music collections and the old printed works). The Central Military Library (including 350.000 books on Poland's history) was burnt; this collection also included the Rapperswill Library (60.000 volumes on Polish immigrants during XIX century) and the Krasinski Library, both deposited there for their safeguard. The day after the German evacuation from Polish territory (January 1945), the main collection of the Warsaw Public Library was incinerated. Many other books were moved to Germany, and they were just partially recovered after the end of the conflict. It was estimated that 1.5 out of 2.5 millions books were lost (Bilinska 1946; Biblioteka 1958; National Library of Warsaw 1974).

Russian occupation forces developed similar campaigns of national identity erasing. From 1940, list of prohibited books were published in the Baltic States under Russian power. Texts on history, politics and national authors, especially those written in the national languages (Latvian, Lithuanian, and Estonian) were forbidden, taken out from libraries and bookstores and publicly burnt (Misiunas and Taagepera 1983, p.36).

During the Chinese-Japanese War (1937-1947), Chinese territory suffered the destruction of a great number of collections of valuable information (Pelissier 1971, pp.143-146). The Tsing Hua University Library in Beijing lost more than 200.000 volumes, besides its catalog; the one at the Nan-kai University, in T'ien-Chin, was totally destroyed during July 1937: more than 224.000 books disappeared. Libraries at Ta Hsia and Juang Hua Universities (both in Shanghai) were totally incinerated by Japanese bombs; such a destiny was shared by the libraries of He Pei University (in Fao-Ling) and the Hu-nan University Library. After 1939, a 10 % of the collections of the Nanking University –along with its catalog- were moved to Japan. It is supposed that the collections of the Royal Asiatic Society and the Shanghai University Library followed the same destiny: the latter lost a 27 % of its western collections and a 40 % of its Chinese documents.

## Part 6. Destroying power, saving power

“(...) Damage to memory is worst than physical destruction, because human beings, through cultural

monuments, try to turn their mortality into a piece of immortality”.

Carmen Verlichak

Director of the Center for Danubian Studies. *La Nación* (Argentinean newspaper), 12.11.2003

The destruction of memory is not related necessarily with wars or actions developed by majority peoples. Some of them are simple hatred acts. In January 1984, left-wing radical militants destroyed the Library of the *Nederlands-Zuidafrikaanse Vereniging* (Netherlands-South Africa Society) in Amsterdam, throwing the books to the channels. In April 1986, a criminal fire destroyed the third public library of USA, the *Central Library* in Los Angeles. Around 400.000 books were reduced to ashes; the water used for putting out the fire damaged 700.000 texts, and the rest was touched by smoke. Among the lost documents were the most famous leaflet collection from USA Far West, and one of the most important North American collections of cooking books.

USA librarian Sylvia Bugbee wrote that the destruction of a people's memory is, without doubts, a form of genocide (vid. note 1). The events of Sarajevo (destruction and "ethnic cleansing") were just one example more of a inhumane and irrational chain of actions carried out by majorities all over the world (Tutsis vs. Hutus in Rwanda, Sudanese Muslims vs. non-Muslims in Darfur, ethnic fighting in ex-URSS Central Asia countries...). However, this particular fact in ex-Yugoslavian territory provoked such a horror that UNESCO adopted, in 1993, the resolution 4.8, employing some ideas of UN Security Council Resolution 827 (May 25<sup>th</sup>, 1993, vid. note 2). UNESCO's text "expresses grave concern at the ... destruction of the cultural, historical and religious heritage of the Republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina (including mosques, churches and synagogues, schools and libraries, archives and cultural and educational buildings) under the abhorrent policy of 'ethnic cleansing'".

In 2003, after the destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan by Talibans in Afghanistan, UNESCO repeated its recommendation with its "Declaration concerning the intentional destruction of cultural heritage".

Human genius –lights and shadows of a changeable spirit- is able to produce the most overwhelming and the most degrading actions. It is either able for creation or for destruction. Memoricide is an example of the last one. But from shadows and darkness, light and new hopes can be created. The crisis and falls, the big defeats and the most miserable situations can turn into generative factors – despite all- of the greatest opportunities. The destruction –intentional or not- of the documental heritage of a nation clearly demonstrates the fragility of the materials chosen for the conservation of the human memory throughout time, and the instability of elements of such an importance for peoples' identity. The history of any society, its best intellectual products, its glories and failures, its heroes and villains, its greatest discoveries, everything is currently kept on the shelves of libraries and archives. The power of this cultural heritage surpasses the highest standards. It is the most valuable treasure owned by humankind: it includes its memories, its desires and the solutions for those problems arisen along the path walked by the previous generations through the past centuries. All this power, all this valuable experience, is placed right now in the hands of librarians.

Librarianship cannot be understood as a simple technical profession anymore. At present, librarians are *memory managers*; their active role at war times, being

aware of the existence of serious disagreements, hatred, violence and many different conflicts (political, ethnic, etc.) is fundamental and strategic for the future preservation of any people's cultural heritage. Upon the decisions and actions of librarians depends identity survival: they have the key to allow children and young people be able to know their roots, their past, the place they come from and the dreams they should pursue and accordingly guide their steps to make them true.

Librarians are not expected to face the violence, bombings, injustices and summary executions featuring war and vandal acts in a direct way. Nor are they to risk their lives and self-security in order to defend and protect the heritage they manage. To ask for such a thing would be unreal. However, if they are conscious of their role in the conservation of their community's memory, they should take preventive actions and implement new policies in order to secure their collections in case of disaster and avoid a possible loss of them. The responsibility assumed for possessing power must be considered at the same level, realizing of its magnitude, the same as the power itself. A great power – the one associated with information- involves a great responsibility – the one of protecting information in order to assure everybody of the possibility of its present and future use.

Perhaps one of the most precautionary measures to achieve the aim of safeguarding from loss or damage any heritage is its reproduction in safe copies and its widespread diffuseness. By allowing the biggest bibliographic treasures to spread over a wide area, copying their information in a different way, duplicating them and assuring their open and free access, librarians could guarantee that their community will continue being the owner of their memory. In this way, violence still could damage a valuable masterpiece or a historic document, but such violence will neither be able to kill ideas nor to destroy the knowledge collected as it has been done until now. The community, the people, will own its memory forever.

In order to achieve this goal, librarians should put aside the idea that the library is a museum, a closed place consisting of several shelves in a line, and four walls jealously protecting the books placed on them, from any kind of external contact. The library must be kept alive and should have the opportunity to breathe like a living creature, to grow, expanded and become greater not only in size or number but in importance within the society which gives sense to its existence. Librarians must (re)produce knowledge and spread it, they must help their users to be conscious of the high value of the knowledge they handle, share and enjoy, teaching them to be responsible and to protect their own history and their own culture, in many cases collected in books and documents. Just by changing libraries' policies and librarians' attitudes, trying to set those repositories free from their bounds and succeeding in joining them to their community, the knowledge accumulated inside their walls will belong to everybody.

Only then, we will be certain that there will not be any chance to eliminate our cultural heritage, not even by making use of the most terrible acts of violence.

## Notes

(1) "Murdering a people is the greatest crime, of course. But killing the memory of a people as preserved in their records is the second worst crime, a form of genocide. As keepers of memory, we have an obligation to speak out against its

destruction" [online]. Available from:

<http://listserv.muohio.edu/scripts/wa.exe?A2=ind9904d&L=archives&T=0&P=4469> [cited 27 May 2007]

(2) It sets up the International Tribunal of War Crimes, empowered "to prosecute persons violating the laws or customs of war" including but not limited to "seizure of, destruction of or willful damage done to institutions dedicated to religion, charity and education, the arts and sciences, historic monuments and works of art and science" (art. 3, par. (d) of the annex to the Secretary-General's report S/25704).

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