

NAPLE Sister Libraries Project:

Škofja Loka, Slovenia and Panevėžys, Lithuania

An Interview with Ms. Saša Ambrožič of the Ivan Tavčar Public Library



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Introduction

Ms. Saša Ambrožič is public librarian at the Ivan Tavčar Public Library in Škofja Loka, Slovenia. She previously worked as an illustrator and also taught art classes at the library part-time. She has incorporated these interests into her current role at the library by working primarily in the children's department and by serving as the curator of the library's art gallery. Her favorite aspects of being a librarian are:

“To have so varied and interesting work, to be in a process for lifelong learning, to help other in building knowledge. To see a spark inside the children's eyes when they found that joy from reading and creating. To be a cultural promotor and encourage many people to be creative, to show their work in our gallery and to participate in the community in so many ways.”

International Collaboration

In addition to her regular duties, Ms. Ambrožič and her colleague Neža Hribernik are involved in the National Authorities on Public Libraries in Europe (NAPLE) Sister Libraries project. The goal of this project is to connect libraries throughout the European Union and thereby foster a sense of European identity and cohesiveness. Currently, the participating libraries represent 15 countries, and more are always encouraged to join. Individual libraries submit an application describing their demographics and goals and the organization helps them select a sister library. The individual sisterships are then responsible for developing goals for the partnership, planning activities, and reporting back to NAPLE. The Ivan Tavčar Public Library has connected with the public library in Panevėžys, Lithuania; the two have been sister libraries since December 2015.

Both partners represent larger library systems, each of which serve a population of around 40,000, including rural communities. Škofja Loka has 6 branches, while Panevėžys has 35. In addition to traditional library activities, both library systems emphasize providing a connection to art, history, and culture. Sharing these traditions was a motivating factor for each to join the NAPLE Sister Libraries project. The libraries' first sistership activity reflected this desire, taking the form of an exchange of photographic exhibits. The Lithuanian contribution was a series of photographs from the “Nights of Museum” event which takes place at the Puziniškis manor museum; both the event and the museum are run by the library. For their part, the Slovenians shared two exhibits covering the Škofja Loka Passion Play, which dates from the 1700s. One set of photographs captured a 2015 staging, while the other showcased illustrated calligraphy passages from the script. A third exhibit contained images from “Faces of the Book,” a children's program from the previous summer.

The second activity occurred in April of this year, when a group of three Škofja Loka librarians visited Panevėžys. Again, cultural exchange played a large role; activities included making traditional baked goods from each country and visits to local artists, museums, and libraries. In a blog post describing the visit, Ms. Ambrožič wrote of the libraries, “Despite being small, they are the cultural centers of the village.”

Indeed, librarians at both institutions recognize the role of the library as more than a repository of books. In the interview, Ms. Ambrožič said, “We are aware that libraries are living organism and its roles are transforming constantly. Library is more and more seen as social, cultural and information centre for all generations. Library is supposed to be a living room of a city, offering various activities to enrich life of local community.” Both libraries are meeting the challenge by providing innovative programming. The

sistership provides the opportunity for the two libraries to share successful programs and discuss possibilities for future ones to add to their repertoire. For example, the Škofja Loka librarians attended a session of the Panevėžys library's "Mama Academy," a storytelling event which promotes family engagement and early literacy. Ms. Ambrožič stated that she and her colleagues might adopt a similar program, and additionally plan to address information literacy for seniors based on a Lithuanian model.

Insight

The partnership is still relatively new, so librarians at the two libraries are still getting to know one another. The exploration of each other's culture, however, is not seen as merely a necessary step before moving on to other projects more directly related to librarianship. Instead, it is an integral part of the sistership. Ms. Ambrožič said, "We will work in both directions, to bring their culture to our visitors and readers and to improve our library work." Instead of approaching the project with a predetermined set of priorities, this approach allows collaboration opportunities to develop more spontaneously.

For example, Ms. Ambrožič and Ms. Hribernik's experience and interest in art and working with children has influenced the types of activities they have shared with their partners in Panevėžys. During their visit, they saw that the Panevėžys library has similar programs, and this could be an area for collaboration.

I also noticed that both libraries value inclusion and accessibility, particularly for those with visual impairments. Ms. Ambrožič described in her blog post an exhibit at the Panevėžys library of tactile picture books for blind children. Given that the Škofja Loka library system has a lending unit at the local Centre for the Blind, Visually Impaired and Elderly, I asked whether increasing library accessibility for the blind and visually impaired might be a topic to explore for further collaboration. She agreed this is possible.

Interview Experience

When I first considered potential interviewees for this assignment, I decided to focus on Europe, as we have not much discussed that continent during the course of this semester. The NAPLE project seemed like an especially good source, as the resulting partnerships are among nations that on equal footing. This, I presumed, would allow me to interact with individuals whose international librarianship experiences were truly motivated by an interest in cross-cultural exchange and mutual collaboration, rather than by philanthropy or the opportunity for cultural imperialism, as we have discussed in this class.

I contacted several individuals and institutions listed on the NAPLE website, and received a reply from Mr. Diego Gracia, of the Spanish Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports, which coordinates the program. He in turn put me in touch with Ms. Ambrožič who graciously agreed to an interview by email, despite having limited time due to her upcoming vacation. In order to make efficient use of time, I did some background reading, including Ms. Ambrožič's blog posts on the NAPLE website. This helped with the development of my interview questions.

All in all, it was a very positive and informative experience. I initially found the prospect of contacting an international librarian and requesting an interview very daunting, but Mr. Gracia and Ms. Ambrožič were both very kind and generous with their time. It was very interesting to learn about library initiatives in

Europe on both a broad scale, such as the NAPLE Sister Libraries project, as well as specific programs at the Škofja Loka and Panevėžys libraries.

Interview Transcript

Personal and professional background:

Why did you want to become a librarian?

I was an illustrator and my part time job was in the library as an art teacher. I have been having art and craft workshops for children for nearly 17 years. In our country is difficult to make a living just as an illustrator and to become a librarian was a good solution to work with kids and with books and to earn for living.

What did you have to do to become a librarian? (e.g. university degree or certification, etc.)

I had my first university degree in arts and became an art teacher and an illustrator. To be a librarian I had to do additional exams from information and library science.

What are some of your current duties at the library?

I work as a public service librarian most of the time on a children's department, directing pupils in the use of the systems available in the library, as well as recommending the materials needed for research and learning, having art and craft workshops for children, having storytelling hours for children, being a curator for an art gallery in our library, and working in the Naple program together with my colleague Neža Hribnik.

What is your favorite aspect of being a librarian?

To have so varied and interesting work, to be in a process for lifelong learning, to help other in building knowledge. To see a spark inside the children's eyes when they found that joy from reading and creating. To be a cultural promotor and encourage many people to be creative, to show their work in our gallery and to participate in the community in so many ways.

What is your proudest accomplishment as a librarian?

I think the accomplishments were built together with all team of my colleagues. We are proud, that readers and other visitors are satisfied with our work. Statistic shows growth in membership and our public library is becoming a space, where visitors are spending quality time in socializing, reading, learning, attending cultural events...

Overview of Slovenian Libraries:

Does your library or other libraries in Slovenia provide any innovative services aside from access to books?

The library runs various activities to promote reading for all generations. To highlight just few most innovative:

- storytelling with therapy dog

- musical storytelling events (in collaboration with Škofja Loka Musical School)
- literary and cultural events of all kind: storytelling, artistic workshops, animation film workshops, literary events with writers, ect.
- participating in national project Rastem s knjigo (Growing up with a book)
- participating in national project Bralna značka (Reading badge)
- participating in a project called Family Reading- promoting reading within a family (in collaboration with Municipal Library Kranj)
- participating at local festivals
- summer reading challenges for children
- book club for adults
- art and literature exhibitions for children and adults, promoting local artists and schools
- open air cinema in the summer (collab. with local cinema)

Do some groups of people have more/better access to libraries than others?

We are trying to ensure equal opportunities to our users. Nevertheless children up to 18 years old don't pay membership fee.

What are some examples of the library's goals, challenges, or accomplishments?

We are aware that libraries are living organism and its roles are transforming constantly. Library is more and more seen as social, cultural and information centre for all generations. Library is supposed to be a living room of a city, offering various activities to enrich life of local community. Its a place where people meet, exchange knowledge and spend quality time in. One of the important aspects of our library aim is connecting with local organisations- schools, museums, clubs, ect.

NAPLE Sister Libraries Program:

How and why did your library become involved in the sister libraries program?

The director of our library let us know about Naple sistership program that he had heard about in library blog. We decided to look for a sistership with a library similar to our library profile (by the size and community that is serving). We contacted Lithuanian library by email and since one of their representative was visiting Slovenia for a conference at that time, we have met and established a sistership. We continue with exchanging emails and organised art exhibitions exchange between libraries. Director of our library went on a conference in Lithuania where he presented slovenian e-book landing platform BIBLOS and visited our sistership library. Two years after our sistership was established three librarians from our library went for a visit in Lithuania.

Was there any insight you were hoping to gain?

Exchanging of ideas, knowledge, experiences, innovative practises.

Did you do anything to prepare for the program?

We filled up a form and contacted the library. Aside from that, everything was going on spontaneously.

Sistership with the Public Library of Panevėžys:

What is similar about the two libraries and what is different?

We have similar historical background, we are both small nations and having our own language. The difference is, that they have problems with lack of educated young librarians, because they are looking for better job opportunities abroad. The difference is that because of that Europe Union is investing in their informational system to keep the people in their country.

What have you learned from working with your sister library?

We are exchanging good practices and ideas for cultural events. We will incorporate hours for informational literacy for seniors as they have it in Lithuania.

What do you think the sister librarians have learned from you?

As you see, we have similar system in Lithuania and in Slovenia. There are just little differences. Most of our collaboration was getting to know each other's culture and to get some ideas to improve library work and practice. Our director presented them our national BIBLOS E-book landing platform for Slovenian public libraries.

What challenges have you faced working internationally?

To overcome language barriers, to make connections with other librarians.

Partnership Activities:

It seems that your partnership activities (such as the photographic exhibit exchange and the visit to Panevėžys) have had a focus on getting to know each other's culture. Do you think future activities will be more library-focused? Do you have any ideas or plans for future activities?

We will work in both directions, to bring their culture to our visitors and readers and to improve our library work. We will continue with exhibition exchanges, maybe to host their authors, we invite them to visit us. But as always we are financially limited.

It also seems that children have been very much involved in the partnership activities ("The Face of the Book" exhibit, making Dražgoše honey breads, "Mama academy"). Was that intentional? Is childhood literacy a topic the sister libraries might continue to collaborate on?

Me and Neža, we are working in children's department and that's the reason the children have been much involved in our activities in the program. We will work in all directions in the future. The Face of the Book was not international program. That was result of one of my summer art workshops for children. Making Dražgoše honey breads was an idea, to bring a little piece of our heritage to Lithuania. Making simple thing as a bread is great to overcome language barrier and bring a piece of other cuisine and tradition. Lithuanian "Mama academy" is storytelling and creative program for toddlers, that we might incorporate in the future. Now we have program for children over 4 years.

You wrote that during your visit to the sister library, you saw an impressive exhibit on books for blind children. I also read online that your library has a lending unit at the Centre for the Blind, Visually Impaired and Elderly in Škofja Loka. Do you think the sister libraries might incorporate the topic of library access for the blind and visually impaired in their work together?

That is an idea that we might work on in the future.

Is there anything else you would like me to know?

Your questions were exhaustive and I don't have anything to add.

Background Reading

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Map

