

University Libraries in Italy: The Crisis Persists

Italian university libraries are poorly organized and underutilized despite efforts by professional librarians, who are few in number and given little of the deserved consideration in an atmosphere in which the growing importance of the library in the field of learning is not always understood. An international congress to discuss new developments in library technology as applied to academic libraries could contribute immensely to the improvement of the Italian university library system.

CULTURAL EXCHANGES between the United States and Europe reached their highest level in the 1950s and 1960s. Fulbright programs and other initiatives on both sides of the Atlantic offered the economic support to encourage scholars and researchers to pursue the comparative study of social institutions of different countries. Libraries soon became the center of interest of some of these studies and in 1951 an almost continuous exchange of information began between Italy and the United States in the field of librarianship.

Anne V. Marinelli was the first American librarian to go to Italy as a Fulbright scholar in 1951 to lecture to librarians. In 1955 Vernon Tate succeeded in organizing an extended visit to the United States by eleven Italian librarians, and the next year he went to that country in order to assess the practical results of such programs. He contacted each person who had been in the United States the year before and, incidentally, found that only one of them was active

in the academic library field. Stanley West continued the exchange of information by conducting seminars in several Italian cities.

Academic libraries had been ignored, however, until Robert Vosper was asked to survey Italian services in 1960 with the assistance of a Fulbright grant. Vosper found the problems of these libraries so serious that he recommended that another librarian should continue the investigation, and suggested that T. H. Hamlin be invited to do so. Vosper's report was published in 1962 in *College and Research Libraries* and Hamlin's survey appeared in *Libri* in 1965.¹

These studies revealed the deficiencies of Italian university libraries: an almost absolute dearth of funds, both for the conservation and updating of their extremely valuable collections and for the organization of adequate library services to students and scholars. While the lack of financial support was obvious, another basic problem of perhaps more serious character was identified: the absence of coordination among the libraries of the various institutions, resulting in an unfortunate dispersion of already insufficient resources. These problems,

Ms. Segre is head, Acquisitions Department, Adelphi University Library, Garden City, Long Island, New York.

ingrained with the bureaucratic intricacies of the Italian government (which controls all Italian universities), were freely discussed by the two American librarians, without the danger of getting involved in the sort of political controversy that might have discouraged an Italian. Once the questions had been raised, the Italian librarians did not miss the opportunity to follow up the justified criticism with proposals designed to remedy the situation.

It took many years and infinite patience to reach the spheres of government responsible for changes in higher education, but there is now before the Italian Senate a plan for library reorganization in the overdue *rimformazione universitaria*. Italian librarians have emphatically reported that significant improvement can come only with a complete restructuring of the administration of the university library system. Many of the arguments presented in the plan are based on the Vosper report, which after ten years is still of the utmost significance. In the last decade, however, no new significant idea had been heard from the United States. Were American librarians so busy building up collections and services at home that they had lost interest in finding out what was happening abroad?

American university libraries had experienced an entirely novel cycle between 1960 and 1972. The economic prosperity of the United States, coupled with government funds provided through the higher education bills of the 1960s, triggered an unprecedented growth in the collections and facilities of the libraries of the American colleges and universities. The abrupt end of nearly unlimited financial resources in 1970-71, however, forced American librarians to grapple with the problems caused by budget cutting. The skirmishes at home may thereby have caused the relevance of a distant fight to fade. Still, an effort should be made to reopen

among librarians the dialog that, in the past, has proven very fruitful in identifying basic problems.

I felt I had the qualifications to try to do so, and above all the desire to share in the line of communication between American and Italian librarians. I was born and raised in Italy, but my higher education and professional training have all been in the United States. I could combine the advantage of many contacts with friends and relatives active in libraries and universities in Italy with twenty-five years of active working experience in American and Canadian university libraries. When offered the opportunity by Adelphi University to take a sabbatical leave of absence, I was able to carry out my wish to contribute to an exchange of ideas in my professional field of interest.

I started my visit in Rome, and one of the first persons I saw was the director of the Fulbright exchange program in Italy. She showed me a copy of Vosper's final report to that commission and helped me plan my trip so as to follow as closely as possible in the footsteps of Vosper and Hamlin. This was very helpful because of the limited time at my disposal, further restricted by my plan for a thorough visit to the National Library in Florence and for a survey of the results and advantages of the meeting that had been held in October 1968 under the aegis of UNESCO and the Ministero Italiano della Pubblica Istruzione.

In Italy there are twelve university libraries. They are government sustained independent institutions and by law their functions are: (1) to offer to students the necessary assistance for those studies which are being completed at the university to which the library is related, and (2) to provide for the professors the research facilities appropriate to the subjects being taught.² These libraries are usually housed in university buildings, but in all other respects they

are neither dependent upon nor administered by the university. Their collections vary in size from as many as 850,000 volumes in Rome to less than 150,000 at the Sassari University. The holdings of these libraries consist in large part of a wealth of rare book collections and a richness of very long and complete sets of periodicals, many of which started publication well over a century ago. The distribution of the holdings of the Pavia University Library, which is one of the oldest in Italy, may be taken as a typical example. In round figures, as given by a member of the staff, of the total 400,000 volumes there are 1,800 manuscripts, 600 incunabula, 6,000 *cinquecentine* (books printed in the sixteenth century), 9,000 books printed in the seventeenth century, and 22,000 printed in the eighteenth century. Thus almost 10 percent of the entire collection is represented by rare or antique documents. In addition this library currently receives 3,000 periodical titles.

These libraries should function as central university libraries, but in practice their main concern is the conservation of great bibliographical wealth. The funds available for new acquisitions are minimal and are all used to continue the subscriptions to periodical and serial sets and to buy the most important reference titles which may be of interest to the whole university. These libraries are depositories for books published in their region. For the purposes of this paper I will call these twelve libraries university libraries. In Florence, Milan, and Trieste, where there is no national university library, the library of the Faculty of Liberal Arts (I am using the word faculty in the European sense, i.e., department of study) functions as the central library of the university.

A university system serving three-quarters of a million students obviously cannot be sustained by the resources of

these fifteen libraries. Whatever specialized publications and research materials are at hand are to be found in "special libraries" developed by the professors of the faculties and institutes independently, without any coordination and following personal criteria. Literally hundreds of these "special libraries" are found in each university. A special commission of the Italian Library Association reported in 1968 an estimated number of 2,000 such libraries scattered all over Italy, with an approximated total of volumes close to ten million.³ That is about twice as many volumes as those owned by the twelve university libraries. These "special libraries" vary greatly in size and quality. Some consist of a few hundred books shelved in the office of a professor, others are much larger and were developed according to an efficient and scholarly plan, but always limited to the scope and programs of the institute. Many "special libraries" are very difficult for a visitor to find; their location is not known by many people, and most of them are closed for use to outsiders and often to the students. There is no coordination or communication among them or with their university library.

The incredible dispersion of resources and funds caused by such a blatant lack of coordination is commonly recognized as the most serious problem facing the academic libraries. In practice the situation has become even more critical in recent years. The funds assigned by the government to the university libraries become less and less adequate and instead the ever greater specialization of university studies makes the "special libraries" more and more sought after by the professors for the support of their researches.

The director of the Alessandrina, the national central library of the University of Rome, has taken important steps toward improving the situation there. The compilation of a union list of seri-

als received by the university library and by all the "special libraries" of the university is almost complete and will be published soon. An attempt to compile a union catalog of books encountered much greater obstacles. No help was offered by the "special libraries"; the personnel of the university library had to collect all the information and subsequently recatalog each title in order to assure uniform entries in the union catalog. Although this project is proceeding very slowly, it shows a beginning of cooperation among the libraries of the University of Rome. The Alessandrina is one of the most service-oriented libraries that I visited in Italy. It is open to the public from 8 a.m. to 11 p.m. every day, except Sunday, an extraordinary number of hours according to Italian standards. This almost unique orientation is confirmed by the data shown in Table 1. The number of consultations at the Alessandrina in 1970 represents 32 percent of the total number of consultations at the twelve university libraries of Italy, while its holdings represent only 16 percent of the total holdings of the same libraries. New books acquired by the Alessandrina are cataloged by using the printed cards published by the Italian National

Bibliographical Center, similar to our own Library of Congress cards. These cards were not ordered by any of the other libraries I visited, and original cataloging was practiced everywhere, even by the smaller "special libraries" with no professional librarian.

While in Rome I was able to visit extensively one institute library and one faculty library. The library of the Institute of the History of Roman Law, housed in the same building as the central university library, is under the direction of a very able librarian who keeps very sophisticated bibliographical controls over a highly specialized collection. The use of this library and the services offered by the staff, however, seemed to be limited in practice to the director of the institute, a few assistant professors, and a small portion of advanced students, who have access to it upon special request. The perfect bibliographical organization of this library is a source of pride at the university and indeed it must not have been a coincidence that this selfsame library was shown to Robert Vosper twelve years earlier. It must be assumed that its performance is not indicative of the conditions of other institute libraries.

Through personal contacts I met the

TABLE 1
TWELVE ITALIAN UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES—COLLECTIONS AND USE

	1960				1970			
	Books and MSS	Period. Subs.	Consultations	Loans	Books and MSS	Period. Subs.	Consultations	Loans
Genova	537,087	801	61,898	6,977	536,652	1,169	43,109	6,722
Pavia	378,088	817	50,962	1,250	403,368	714	59,250	1,419
Padova	418,390	701	32,803	3,577	463,461	1,000	61,319	6,550
Bologna	569,708	4,785	106,974	1,296	632,802	4,063	156,278	1,607
Modena	404,739	650	60,918	2,583	510,570	1,205	63,405	3,443
Pisa	279,450	433	67,593	5,634	310,640	568	75,717	6,486
Roma	732,555	5,909	435,940	2,987	838,651	5,602	320,208	2,137
Napoli	657,105	461	76,780	2,638	690,523	920	60,843	2,670
Messina	145,196	600	36,079	5,836	173,638	604	47,876	7,197
Catania	219,857	664	58,531	9,749	252,944	687	68,673	8,351
Sassari	110,698	462	21,516	1,536	128,167	575	42,104	1,562
Cagliari	430,608	1,860	21,018	3,205	464,164	2,333	22,648	4,560
Total	4,883,481	18,143	1,031,012	47,268	5,432,580	19,440	1,021,430	52,704

librarian of the Facolta di Magistero (School of Education), a large old building at the opposite end of Rome from Citta Universitaria, and had the opportunity of observing the operation of the library housed in a bare, huge room. Its collection of about 30,000 volumes, mainly modern Italian and foreign literature, is shelved in closed stacks and organized by (in the words of the librarian) a broad "personal" classification system. The staff (one librarian and three clerks) does all the original cataloging, which consists of an author list with a few subject entries, added recently. The library serves several thousand students, but it is open to them only twenty hours a week. I believe that I can safely say that this library is representative of the majority of the faculty libraries of the Italian universities.

In Rome there are many scientific institute libraries, but in the limited time at my disposal I was not able to visit any of them. *World Guide to Libraries*, in a partial listing, mentions six faculty libraries, with holdings varying from 68,000 volumes in the Facolta di Medicina to 6,000 volumes in the Facolta di Architettura; in addition twenty-four institute libraries are mentioned, with holdings from a maximum of 50,000 volumes in the Istituto Matematico Guido Castlnuovo to merely 4,500 volumes in the Istituto di Clinica Medica e Terapica. These are valuable collections of specialized publications, but are practically unknown except to a handful of scholars.

The problem of these scattered and elusive "special libraries" is obviously rooted in the age-old financial stringencies, but it is also caused by the scarcity of professional personnel. The university libraries are all staffed with experienced librarians who strive to establish modern methods of bibliographical control that would allow a higher percentage of students and scholars to have ac-

cess to the collections. They are willing to allocate a large part of their budgets to improving library services. On the other hand, the professors responsible for the "special libraries" are specialists in their own discipline and see only the value of spending their allocated funds in buying desperately needed material to support their research. They are unwilling to contribute to the financial and organizational costs of making the collections available to the larger university community.

The chaotic state of the university library system is at the center of the argument presented by the librarians in their pleas for inclusion of the libraries in the wider plan for the restructuring of Italian higher education. The Italian Library Association took the lead in furthering this position. The report of a special commission for the study of university libraries, presented at the eighteenth annual meeting of the association in 1968, described the situation in detail and once again pressed for the inclusion of library reform in the bill providing for changes in the administration of the universities.⁴ The major theme of university reform is based on the principle of establishing departmental units as centers for the teaching of similar subjects and disciplines, rather than the many independent units now in existence. The commission proposed a parallel reorganization in the administration of the libraries: the university libraries would act as coordinating centers, taking advantage of their professional expertise and bibliographical wealth, and the hundreds of independent "special libraries" would be grouped into new departmental units, thus avoiding the waste now caused by frequent duplication of materials.

The highlights of this report were finally officially submitted to a senate hearing in 1969 by a librarian, F. Bolboni. The language used in his presenta-

tion strongly emphasized the need for reform:

The wealth of the Italian Universities is pulverized among hundreds of special libraries at the personal disposal of certain professors, who often deny their use even to the students, who are actually contributing to their financial support.⁵

On this occasion Bolboni repeated once again the idea that the institute libraries should be consolidated into fewer departmental libraries and that the twelve national university libraries should become "Biblioteche d'Ateneo." The focal point here is to constitute a unique university library system, where the university libraries and the "special libraries" would become part of the same administration. Specifically the proposal envisages the functions of the central university library limited mainly to organization and coordination of resources, and those of the departmental libraries dedicated totally to serving students and professors. While such radical changes involving the transfer of the ownership of the collections and of the personnel from one branch of government to another would encounter many bureaucratic involvements, extremely difficult to surmount in the present Italian political climate, the obvious benefits that would derive from them should encourage their acceptance, which in the end might relieve considerably the present economic pressure as well as some of the student and faculty discontent.

No one expects the government to act quickly in adopting the proposals of the Italian Library Association, but the calls for changes are heard and understood, and meaningful legal dispositions are occasionally passed by parliament with the hope of improving the situation. These scattered efforts, however, often lack the financial and administrative support that would be necessary to put them into practice. A government de-

ree to the university libraries in 1967 recognized the need for coordination among services and charged these libraries specifically with the responsibility of instituting union catalogs.⁶ It failed, however, to provide the funds necessary, and it ignored the fact that the university libraries and the "special libraries" had never had any effective contacts among themselves and that there was no administrative force that could supervise interlibrary cooperation. The very important coordinating function was never assumed by the university libraries, except in rare cases such as the Rome library.

As early as 1961 the Office of Higher Education approved 295 library positions assigned to the university institutes.⁷ But unfortunately at the same time this law limited the function of these librarians to that of bibliographical experts and assigned all administrative powers to a professor appointed director of the library. This ruling, obviously, caused resentment and embarrassment to the library profession and proved to be self-defeating. Most institute libraries continued to be regarded as personal collections and very few took advantage of this authorization to hire professional librarians.

After ten years this incongruity was redressed by yet another official ruling by which the librarians were clearly invested with final authority in all library matters, and faculty committees and deans were given advisory roles with responsibility for procuring adequate financial support for their libraries. The functions of the academic librarian were thus officially recognized. This final ruling should be encouraging to the young librarians, striving for an improvement in status, which thus far has been at a very low level with respect to salary and to academic prestige.

These provisions and proposals prove without doubt that the academic librarians in Italy have not been standing still

in the last ten years. Unfortunately I found no concrete significant innovations in the practices of the libraries. The lack of funds kept their physical growth to a minimum. Their collections increased very modestly, as shown in Table 1, and the statistics for the use of materials by the students and professors show a decrease, an almost paradoxical situation when we take into consideration the fact that the number of university students has more than doubled in these years, going from 245,000 in 1960 to 635,000 in 1970.⁸ Many believe that most resources have gone into the "special libraries," but there are no data to prove it.

The Italian academic librarians are in dire need of help to carry out the changes that they so earnestly espoused in the last ten years. They showed appreciation for the criticism first offered by Vosper and Hamlin and they incorporated many of the principles of the American school of librarianship, which emphasizes service over conservation. Now it would be most advantageous to bring into the exchanges the best methods of applying some of our modern technological innovations to library structures so different from ours, whether Italian or of other nations.

The procedure employed at the National Library in Florence might guide efforts to offer practical solutions to the problems of academic libraries. In this case librarians from all over the world participated in the UNESCO-sponsored congress. The American Library Association asked John Finzi of the Library of Congress to study extensively the reorganization of the National Library. He then presented a paper on this subject to the congress in 1968. Professor Beck on the same occasion outlined a program for the automation of library procedures.⁹ These major contributions encouraged the director of the National Library to approve a pilot project for

the computerized production of special monthly supplements to the Italian National Bibliography using the MARC format of the Library of Congress. The pilot program was successfully concluded this year and the Automation Division of the National Library is ready to go ahead with the entire Italian National Bibliography as soon as the funds are approved.

In conclusion, the advantages of an international congress on university libraries similar to the one held in Florence should be obvious. Participants from all over the world could expose the problems confronting their libraries, and solutions could be pooled for the benefit of all participants. Italian librarians could certainly gain from the experiences derived from automated projects in other countries; United States librarians could gain from a re-examination of traditional library theories. Most American university and college libraries are planned on the theory of bringing the students to the books in large central libraries, which at least until now proved to be a better solution than the Italian system of bringing the books to the scholars. On the other hand, the possibilities of producing book catalogs and of controlling electronically the location of books might influence innovative approaches.

The Italian proposal for a central library functioning principally as the nerve center of a system of departmental libraries might be attractive to the American scholar and could be a solution to controlling the growth of huge collections, the access to which becomes more and more difficult to nonspecialists. From a distance one tends to criticize the jealousy with which the Italians cling to their collections, but one cannot help admiring at the same time the great personal pride and dedication invested in creating some bibliographical jewels in the tradition of the classical

independent scholar. And on further reflection, one may assign to a modified Italian system greater value than may be apparent at first.

However, the adoption or rejection

of evolution and revolution in library administration can only be preceded by thorough, open, and wide discussion of all possibilities. Let us work toward the realization of such opportunities.

REFERENCES

1. Robert Vosper, "A Recent Look at University Libraries in Italy," *College and Research Libraries* 22:199-210 (May 1961); Arthur T. Hamlin, "The Libraries of the Universities of Italy: A Study of Their Services and Collections," *Libri* 15:138-58 (1965).
2. Silvano Gerevini, "The Organization and Problems of University Libraries in Italy," *Library Trends* 12:550-57 (April 1964).
3. Giovanni Coiro, "Problemi delle Biblioteche Universitarie e Prospettive," *Accademie e Biblioteche d'Italia* 37:277 (July 1969).
4. *Ibid.*
5. "Cronache e Notizie," Associazione Italiana per le Biblioteche, *Bollettino d'Informazione*, n.s. 9:146 (May-Oct. 1969).
6. Coiro, "Problemi delle Biblioteche Universitarie," p.279.
7. *Ibid.*, p.278.
8. *Annuario Statistico dell'Istruzione Italiana*, vol. 23, 1961 and vol. 33, 1971.
9. *Razionalizzazione e Automazione nella Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale de Firenze*. Incontro di studi organizzato dall'U.N.E.S.C.O. e dal Ministero dell'Pubblica Istruzione. Firenze, 29-31 ottobre 1968. Atti a cura di Diego Maltese. (Florence: Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, 1970). All other library statistics were taken from Istituto Centrale di Statistica, *Annuario delle Statistiche culturali*, Anno 1960, tavola no. 66 and Anno 1970, tavola no. 32.