

Interview

With Mrs. GERLINDE BUCK, LEITERIN DES BEREICHES INFORMATION & BIBLIOTHEK, GOETHE-INSTITUT ATHEN,
to Mrs. Eva Semertzaki, editor of SYNERGASIA
Mrs. Christine Tzimis, librarian, Goethe-Institut participated in the interview

ES. Mrs. Buck, at the beginning of 2007 you started your work as director of Goethe-Institut Library in Athens. However, we know that you have served Goethe-Institut in different countries as director of the library. Could you share with the readers of SYNERGASIA the experience you have gained from all the positions?

GB. I have worked in Indonesia (Jakarta), in Munich where the Headquarters of Goethe-Institut are located, in Prague (the Czech Republic), in London and now in Athens. In Indonesia they do not have library tradition or literacy tradition. Few public libraries exist which mainly cooperate with academic libraries. They are based on universities, which are also poor. Students are forced to read a limited selection of texts but not books. People in Jakarta considered Goethe-Institut as a substitute of a library. They expected too much from our Institution.

In Prague libraries face a period of change after the Revolution. The change affects libraries in general and library laws but also users. After the Revolution the library system broke down and subsidies were cut down. Before the Revolution libraries were the instrument for the official system to change the attitude of the public. They followed a strict order in communist times. Then in the transition period they have to change that attitude and role of libraries. Libraries have limited funds for acquisitions.

In London the situation of the library system is completely different. They are totally developed and public libraries have a central role in the community they serve.

ES. Which of the cities you have been, you regard as excited places to work at and in which places you got bad experiences?

GB. You cannot compare the experiences. London is different. Libraries are very well organized, but they do not have the need to communicate with other countries, except the U.S.A. They staff is highly professional, libraries are well equipped and funded but co-operation with other countries is not so easy.

The less professional place was Jakarta. There were no people to communicate in professional level, although people were very friendly. I must admit that all places have good and bad parts.

ES. During your term in Athens, which are your specific goals to achieve regarding Goethe-Institut, if I am allowed to ask?

GB. I think that for the first year I have to get acquainted with the program, the projects and my colleagues. For the next two years I will be busy to participate in the European Learning Partnership, a project to develop Goethe-Institut as a teaching and virtual library. This is a demanding project.

ES. What is your impression of the situation of Greek libraries so far?

GB. I have visited a lot of libraries since my arrival in Athens. Greek libraries lack common standards that libraries should have nowadays. There are marvelous buildings and services that can compete in international level, especially from foundations. They are funded by their private institutions, they are well equipped and have professional staff with many ideas. For example, the City of Athens does not have a public library equivalent to Athens as the capital of Greece, compared to Thessaloniki which has a marvelous new library building and the library plays an important role for the community. There is lack of consistency that surprises me.

ES. In the cities you worked in, were there any activities organized in conjunction with the local library community?

GB. In London there was a European Group headed by Goethe-Institut. We cooperated with the French, the Spanish and lately the Italian Institutes. Once a year we organized a common event together with the British Library Association. However, the European Group did not have a structure but we collaborated as a working group and that was a successful work. In Prague we had a German-French cooperation. We participated in library conferences. Institutions such as the Italian or the Spanish were not represented. British Council did not have similar activities either. In London the German and French Institutes organized conferences, study tours and exchange of library visits in France and in Germany.

ES. From what you say, I get the impression that the Athens Committee for the Support of Libraries will benefit from your experiences and ideas from other cities. How could you contribute to the improvement of the Committee's activities and consequently, to the development of libraries in Greece?

GB. My contribution could be the people I know from different places and the teaching staff. I can discuss with them a topic and give me some ideas to introduce to the Committee. Each place and case, though, is a specific situation. My experience in London could not help me much in Greece.

***ES.** At the beginning of the 21st century libraries enter a transition period. Will they perish or stay alive? How do you foresee libraries in the future?*

GB. Academic libraries contain a stock of information and they will keep their holdings in print, digital, or other formats, but they will change completely physical appearance. Public libraries, on the other hand, in print and in digital format will help people find the right information. They have to make patrons capable of information literacy. The main task of public libraries will be to promote literacy and communication among users. Their task should be to teach users how to become literate and to teach them the feel and love of reading.

***ES.** Do you think the Committee could participate in any of the EU projects?*

GB. It has to be an institution. The Committee does not have a legal status, but it could become an associate partner, under the umbrella of an institution.

CT. The Committee cooperated as partner to the DILLMULI project. Goethe-Institut was the institution that participated in it on behalf of the Committee.

GB. The Committee does not have a legal status to take part in a project. If they compete for a project, they can work unofficially as an associate partner, under an institution as partner.

***ES.** We rely on good cooperation and we anticipate that you will help the Committee to improve but also from the development of the Committee, the library profession in Greece will benefit, too.*

GB. The Committee comprises of a creative collection of knowledge and people contribute really well.

***ES.** Mrs. Buck, I would like to thank you very much for your time and hope that in the next years of your service in Athens, Greek libraries will apply some of the international standards and they will have a consistency and a closer cooperation than they have today. Thank you!*