Some Problems Connected with the Acquisition of Foreign Books in Sweden

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After the Second World War, Sweden became one of the immigrant countries of Europe. The number of immigrants in Sweden is presently about 1 million, which is roughly 12 percent of the total population. They represent widely differing cultures and speak about 130 different languages.

In Sweden there are three main types of immigration. The most common is labor immigration, which is represented by those who come to Sweden to find work or better-paying work. They generally come from the other Nordic countries, especially Finland, and from Yugoslavia, Greece and Turkey. The other two types are refugee immigration, resulting from political, religious and/or ethnic circumstances in their native countries; and specialist immigration, which includes technical specialists, doctors, students, and others.

At first the authorities in Sweden, as in many other immigrant countries, tried to assimilate the immigrants into Swedish society as quickly as possible. In the 1960s, however, some farsighted people tried to convince the authorities that they were on the wrong path, and in the middle of the decade the Swedish government began an investigation of the cultural needs of the immigrants. In 1968 the Swedish parliament drew up the still-valid guidelines for teaching immigrant children their own languages. In 1975 a law on compulsory preparatory schools was enacted. It also included the right for immigrant children to receive

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preparatory instruction in their native languages. In some districts native-language instruction is also available to upper-school immigrant children.

In 1974 two important government studies appeared: the "Report of the Commission on Immigration," and "The Book; Report of the Literary Commission." These studies showed that the amount of books in immigrant languages in Swedish public libraries was insufficient. As taxpayers, the immigrants were entitled to the same amount of books in their own languages in the public libraries as citizens born in Sweden. Following these reports, the Swedish government decided to assist the public libraries in communities with many immigrants in building collections of immigrant literature.

A committee was appointed by the National Council for Cultural Affairs. This committee drew up the guidelines for facilitating this operation. It was decided that communities with a certain number of immigrants should receive earmarked money from the government, provided that the community spent the same amount of money on literature in immigrant languages. It was also decided, in order to achieve an appropriate balance between specialized literature, handbooks, etc., and fiction, that packages of assorted books should be offered to the libraries. At the same time, Bibliotekstjänst, the Swedish Libraries' Central Service Institution, was asked to organize a centralized import of books in immigrant languages.

Bibliotekstjänst is a nonprofit organization owned by the Swedish Library Association and the Swedish Union of Municipal Authorities. Its aim is to contribute to the rational development of the Swedish library system, and to this end it offers libraries a wide range of service and centrally produced aids. Swedish books are offered to the libraries through bimonthly booklets containing reviews of the books. The ordered books are then delivered to the libraries equipped with library bindings, book pockets, charge slips, and bar-coded labels, and are accompanied by the appropriate set of catalog cards.

In autumn 1973 Bibliotekstjänst started to offer libraries books in Finnish (the Finns constitute the largest group of immigrants in Sweden) in the same way as Swedish books. This service was extended in 1975 to include books in English, German, French, Danish, and Norwegian. Although Sweden has a great number of immigrants speaking these languages, it seems that libraries buy such books mainly for Swedish-speaking borrowers rather than for immigrants. The books in these languages offered in the bimonthly review booklets can be ordered by title in any amount, with or without library cards. When the orders
Acquisition of Foreign Books in Sweden

from the libraries have been received by Bibliotekstjänst, the required number of copies are ordered directly from the publishers in England, Germany, France, Denmark, and Norway.

For two important reasons, books in other immigrant languages are offered to the libraries in packages of about thirty to fifty volumes. The first reason is that the National Council for Cultural Affairs has decided that this is the best way for small and mid-sized libraries to acquire a well-rounded collection of books in immigrant languages. The other reason is that, in many of the countries from which books in immigrant languages are bought, it is not possible to acquire books in the same way as in the western European countries. The publishing system is organized differently. It is not possible to order a sample copy of a title, have it reviewed, and when the orders from the libraries have been received several months later, then order the required number of copies. By then the requested title is, in most cases, out of print. The centralized “package import” has therefore continued, although many Swedish librarians have expressed the wish that books in all immigrant languages be offered to libraries in bimonthly review lists.

Bibliotekstjänst maintains a close cooperation with the National Council for Cultural Affairs and a working committee with representatives from the Swedish Library Association, the district libraries, the Swedish Immigration Board, immigrant organizations, the National Council for Cultural Affairs, and Bibliotekstjänst. This committee meets twice a year to decide upon the languages to be included in the centralized book import. The titles are chosen mostly by librarians well versed in the language and literature in question, or by other qualified persons, such as teachers of immigrant languages. The books are bought in different ways according to the quantity of books required and the conditions of the book trade in the country in question.

In 1979 Bibliotekstjänst imported books in about twenty different languages and confronted many problems of choosing, packing, transporting and paying for them. Examples of the different methods of buying and the problems connected with them follow.

Books from Yugoslavia

Books in the principal languages of Yugoslavia, i.e., Albanian, Macedonian, Croatian, Serbian, and Slovenian, were chosen by a Swedish librarian and a Yugoslavian teacher at the Belgrade Book Fair. A sample copy of each title was sent to Sweden, and all of the titles were examined and approved by a committee of Yugoslavians living in Sweden. The books were then ordered in the required amounts from a
book export firm in Belgrade. Since this firm had to order some of the books from publishers in the other Yugoslavian republics, it took many letters, telexes, and telephone calls—in short, a very long time—before all the books had reached our bindery in Stockholm. We also had to eliminate several titles which were not available in the required number.

Greek Books

The Greek books were chosen in Greece by two Swedish, Greek-speaking librarians, one of them born in Greece. As it was difficult to find a bookseller in Athens willing to undertake such a large export job at a reasonable price, all the packing and the export formalities had to be arranged by the Swedish librarians themselves, with some assistance from a small Athenian bookshop. All the books are paid for in cash sent directly to the various publishers, so a bank strike can cause serious delays. This has happened twice. The transporting of the books to Sweden has also been affected by various problems. Once a lorry which was supposed to pick up some boxes of books in the evening was delayed, and a tarpaulin to protect the boxes against rain had to be procured in great haste. Another time a lorry carrying Bibliotekstjänst books was involved in a serious road accident on its way to Sweden. Fortunately, most of the books were undamaged, so we did not have to go through the entire buying procedure again. It took, however, a considerable time and a lot of trouble to get the damaged copies replaced.

Turkish Books

Books from Turkey were selected and bought in Turkey by a Swedish librarian married to a Turk. Initially we had problems finding a bookseller willing to export the books to Sweden because of the complicated formalities involved, so the Swedish librarian and her Turkish husband packed the books themselves and arranged with the Turkish authorities for an export license, and with freight companies to have the books transported to Sweden—all of which was very difficult. In the last two years, a bookseller willing to arrange the export has been found and this has made the mission a bit easier. There are, however, other problems with buying books in Turkey. The shortage of printing paper means small editions, so it is sometimes difficult to find enough copies of good titles.
Acquisition of Foreign Books in Sweden

Books in Arabic

In 1977 and 1978 we sent an Arabic-speaking Swedish librarian to the Cairo Book Fair. The first year it was fairly easy to find books from different Arabic countries at the fair, but in 1978 several Arabic countries chose not to be represented, so the choice of books was limited. Therefore, we decided in 1979 to try to buy books in Lebanon, although shooting was still going on in some parts of the country. Our representative managed to establish contact with a very helpful and skilled publishing and bookselling firm, and the books were chosen and paid for in advance. They were sent by boat to Piraeus in Greece, from where they were to be forwarded by lorry to Sweden. It took, however, an exceptionally long time before the ship reached Piraeus, and having read newspaper articles on modern pirates operating in the eastern Mediterranean, we were very happy when a telex came from Athens saying that the books had arrived safely. This year we will try to buy Arabic books in Algeria and Tunisia, and hope that they can be sent by air, which is more expensive but safer.

Books from Hungary and Poland

These books have been chosen on the spot and then shipped by government-approved book export firms. In both countries we have had problems getting the total number of copies ordered and have had to send several letters and telexes with reminders. We have also bought Polish books from exile publishers in England.

Czech and Slovak Books

Books in these languages have been bought entirely from catalogs. Books in Czech are purchased both from exile publishers and from Czechoslovakia, and books in Slovak are bought solely from Bratislava. We had to remind both the exile publishers and the Czechoslovakian export firms several times before receiving all of the books we had ordered. Many titles from Czechoslovakia went out of print very quickly, and we had to replace them with other titles.

The same problems apply to Romanian books. It took a very long time to receive a sufficient quantity of books, as most titles went out of print almost immediately.

Books in Urdu, Gujarati and Hindi

Such books have been chosen from catalogs by experts. We did not receive all of the titles that were ordered and, because of the distance, it took a long time to get them. The technical quality of the paper and
bindings of many of the Indian books is causing our bindery major problems. It is hardly possible to equip some of these books with library bindings.

**Kurdish Books**

Acquisitions of books in Kurdish has caused a number of problems as most of them are published in the Soviet Union, where books must be ordered a long time prior to publication. We managed, however, to receive some titles from Turkey and some from exile publishers in Germany and Sweden. Also, it was not possible to find books on a wide variety of subjects for the Kurdish packages. They mostly contain classical novels, poetry, dictionaries and grammars.

**Books in Farsi**

An Iranian student in Lund was prepared to go to Iran and buy books in Farsi (modern Persian) for us, when the political situation made it impossible and his journey had to be postponed indefinitely.

When books arrive, one copy of each title is sent to an expert who writes a short description of the book (twenty to thirty words) in the original language and in Swedish. This text is then printed on large labels which are fastened to the inside of the front cover of each volume. To find experts in every language who are able to do the work properly and have the time is very difficult, even in a university town such as Lund. Although the staff of Bibliotekstjänst's cataloging department master many languages, we also depend on outside help for cataloging books in some languages.

The aim of the centralized “package import” is to give immigrants a library as comprehensive as possible. In many languages, however, it is not possible to find books on some subjects, for example, sex education. In some languages there are very few, if any, good picture books for children. From some countries, books printed on poor paper, with poor illustrations and bindings, must be accepted to get any books at all.

Since many countries need the same kinds of books for their immigrants, it was natural to start some kind of cooperation among the various national centers for library services. The International Federation of Library Association (IFLA) Round Table of National Centers for Library Services (ROTNAC) working group in the field of foreign literature was founded in March 1976. Since 1977 Bibliotekstjänst has provided EKZ (Einkaufszentrale für Öffentliche Bibliotheken) in Germany with bibliographical information on books in Greek, Serbo-
Acquisition of Foreign Books in Sweden

Croatian and Turkish, and has ordered books in these languages to be sent directly to Germany. Since 1979 the Dutch library service firm NBLC (Nederlands Bibliotheek en Lektuur Centrum) has received the same service for books in Arabic and Turkish. Furthermore, Danish and Norwegian libraries and one Australian library regularly buy complete packages of books in immigrant languages from Bibliotekstjänst.

This system of cooperation seems to be a splendid and rational idea. In practice, however, it has its limitations. It is sometimes a problem for Bibliotekstjänst to get enough copies of a certain title, which makes the choice of books limited, but the problem is much greater when several firms want many copies of the same title. This limits the choice even further, at least in countries with a shortage of paper.

Although many problems are connected with the centralized acquisition of foreign literature, the foreign-language package program approved by the government has enabled many small Swedish public libraries to build a basic collection of books in immigrant languages in a fairly short time, which had not been possible for them without help.

Reference

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