

Books open up worlds for people behind bars
Examples of cooperation between prison and public libraries in Germany and selected countries from all over the world

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Abstract:

This paper describes prison services in Germany and other countries. There is special emphasis on cooperation between prison libraries and public libraries.

Key Words: *Media for prisoners , cooperation between prison libraries and public libraries , Germany , Europe, Africa , African Prisoners Project , USA , Horst Köhler , Denis Goldberg , Barbara Lison , Vibeke Lehmann*

1. Introduction

At this IFLA conference, I would like to give an overview of the current state of prison library services in Germany and to some extent in the wider world. A special focus will be on the cooperation between prison libraries and public libraries.²

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² Prison library work in Germany was presented for the first time on an international level at the 2003 IFLA World Library and Information Congress (WLIC) in Berlin, themed "Access Point Library", using the example of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW). At IFLA WLIC 2012 in Helsinki, the prison library of Münster prison, which had won the German "Library of the Year 2007" award, was presented through a poster session, which won the "Best IFLA 2012 Poster Session" award.

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I would like to begin by pointing out some basic guidelines and recommendations by IFLA, UNESCO and the Council of Europe:

In the introduction to the ***IFLA Guidelines for Library Services to Prisoners*** (Lehmann and Locke, 2005) the section Philosophy and Assumptions includes the following objectives:

The prison library should offer materials and services comparable to community libraries in the “free” world ... Prison libraries should emulate the public library model, while at the same time providing resources for prison education and rehabilitation programs, as well as other prison-specific requirements, e.g., legal collections.

A decade earlier, the ***IFLA/UNESCO Public Library Manifesto*** (IFLA, 1994) already demanded public libraries for prisoners:

The services of the public library are provided on the basis of equality of access for all, regardless of age, race, sex, religion, nationality, language or social status. Specific services and materials must be provided for those users who cannot, for whatever reason, use the regular services and materials, for example linguistic minorities, people with disabilities or people in hospital or prison.

For Europe, the ***Recommendation Rec(2006)2 [...] on the European Prison Rules*** (Council of Europe, 2006),³ adopted by the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers in 2006, is of particular importance. These European Prison Rules, which also apply to investigative detention, include the statements that:

28.5 Every institution shall have a library for the use of all prisoners, adequately stocked with a wide range of both recreational and educational resources, books and other media.

28.6. Wherever possible, the prison library should be organised in co-operation with community library services.

The principles governing access to media for people in prison, as recommended by IFLA, UNESCO and the Council of Europe, show both the responsibility of the justice system as well as of public libraries. However, the practical implementation of these guidelines and recommendations remains the exception and is still a challenge for many countries.

³ Council of Europe. 2006. <https://wcd.coe.int/ViewDoc.jsp?id=955747> (last accessed 4 June 2015)

2. Prison libraries in Germany – in particular the examples of the federal German state of North Rhine-Westphalia and Münster prison

The history of prison libraries in Germany runs parallel to that of public libraries and reading rooms and reflects the respective attitudes to education in prisons in different periods of time.

Currently, there are about 200 prisons in Germany with a total of about 62,000 prisoners.⁴ But there are only four professional prison librarians working in 3 of the 16 federal German states (namely North Rhine-Westphalia, Bremen and Hamburg). The Association for the Promotion of Prison Libraries has been supporting the development of prison library work in Germany since 2006.

The legal basis of prison libraries in Germany differs between the 16 federal German states, as each of them is independent with an individual prison system and penal laws. Providing prison library services is statutory only in principle, and gets little practical support regarding budget, personnel and appreciation. After many years of preparation, North Rhine-Westphalia shall be adopting guidelines for library services in prisons in 2015.

Due to the weak base for professional library services in prisons, there is a great need for developing these services in Germany. Apart from the three German states with professional prison library services, employees in prisons and prisoners largely depend on donations and their own voluntary work.

In North Rhine-Westphalia, two librarians have been coordinating the library services for about 40 prisons with about 50 libraries and 250,000 media items since 1986 and 1988 in two agencies, dividing up the eastern and western part of North Rhine-Westphalia. The agency for the eastern part of Westphalia-Lippe has been situated in the 162 year-old prison of Münster since 2006 and is coordinated by myself. Apart from this regional work, 20 per cent of my post are allocated to coordinating the prison library of the prison in Münster. This library has been spatially and conceptionally completely redeveloped, supported by about 100 donors.⁵ In 2007, the Münster prison won the

⁴ Statistisches Bundesamt, Bestand der Gefangenen und Verwahrten, Stand 2014, p. 5; in: <https://www.destatis.de/DE/Publikationen/Thematisch/Rechtspflege/Strafverfolgung/Vollzug/BestandGefangeneVerwahrte.html> (last accessed 4 June 2015)

⁵ For this occasion and for developing prison library services in Germany, the Association for the Promotion of Prison Libraries [Förderverein Gefangenenbüchereien e.V. (FVGB)] was founded on the Monday before Christmas in 2006. Today it has 110 members. Honorary members are Günter Kunert, since 2014 Denis Goldberg from Cape Town – a former companion and friend of Nelson Mandela, who was imprisoned for 22 years in Pretoria – and Ruth Weiss, who emigrated as a Jew from Germany to South Africa in 1936, but got into conflict as a journalist and author due to her critical attitude regarding the Apartheid system. She had to

German “Library of the year 2007” award, which was well received by the German and the international public.

The EUR 30,000 award money went into several projects. One was holding an international conference on the topic of prison libraries (in cooperation with Goethe Institutes from several countries and Vibeke Lehmann from the USA, who has been active with IFLA for many years). Another was the development of a German-English circulating exhibition on the topic “Reading connects – Literacy as a human right”. Finally, a book entitled *Bücher öffnen Welten – Medienangebote für Menschen in Haft in Deutschland und international* [Books open up worlds – media services for people in prison in Germany and worldwide (Peschers and FVGB, 2013)] was published by de Gruyter publishers in 2013. Currently I am exploring the possibilities for an updated version of this book to be published in English, in cooperation with an international publisher. Please approach me if you are interested in this project.⁶

3. Cooperation of prison libraries and public libraries

3.1 Practice in Germany

In the two cities of Bremen and Hamburg, prison library services are organised in binding cooperation between the legal system and the public library service of the city.

In **Bremen**, the central prison library is a branch of the public library. Its 8,000 media items are administered by one librarian and there are joint events with the public library. The prison library is integrated into the education building of Oslebshausen prison.⁷

In **Hamburg**, two librarians of a sub-unit of Hamburg Public Libraries have been coordinating the acquisition and administration of eight libraries in six prisons since 1968, with currently 2,150 prisoners (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2014, p. 5) and a collection of 16,000 media items. “The legal authorities as a cooperation partner bear the media costs and contribute an annual allowance which covers nearly all other costs. This cooperation between the legal authorities and a metropolitan public library system is unique in

leave South Africa as a persona non grata and, after living in Simbabwe and England, took up residence in Germany again in 2001.

⁶ Since the book has not been translated as a whole yet, all quotations from this book were translated into English for the purposes of this paper.

⁷ <http://www.jva.bremen.de/sixcms/detail.php?gsid=bremen127.c.1840.de> [accessed 5 June 2015]. Neither the homepage of the public library nor the homepage of the prison in Bremen present the services of the prison library.

Germany. The number of items available to prisoners in Hamburg's prison libraries varies from 380 to 4,700 items. In three prison libraries inmates have access to the 1.7 million media items of the Hamburg public library system via interlibrary loan".⁸

In **Berlin**, an innovative prison library with a selfcheck system was opened in 2013 in Heidering prison, but it was not possible to realise a professional cooperation with the public library.

Also in other German federal states there is rarely a binding cooperation between libraries on both sides of the prison walls. Some of the few positive exceptions are remarkable.

In the German federal state of Thuringia (in former Eastern Germany), the public library in **Greiz** cooperates in an extremely exemplary and innovative manner with the Hohenleuben prison by way of joint events and media loans. Prisoners have in their prison cells very restricted access to some preset websites, including the online catalogue of the public library through which they can borrow some items every week anonymously. The public library in Greiz won the German Reading Award 2015 (Deutscher Lesepreis 2015).

In the German federal state of the Rhineland-Palatinate, a professional exchange for advice and occasional events has been in place for several years between the public library and the prison in **Wittlich**.

In the German federal state of North Rhine-Westphalia, the two librarians of the two agencies for prison libraries try to develop the prison libraries in accordance with standards for public libraries and encourage cooperation with public libraries; this will be enshrined in the new guidelines for prison libraries to be adopted in 2015.

Since 1978, the public library in **Gelsenkirchen** has maintained a cooperation with a nearby socio-therapeutic institution, whose inmates regularly borrow items there. In **Münster**, professional exchange has been in operation between the public library and the prison library since 2005, in **Herford** und **Detmold** since about 2008, in **Dortmund** a first official cooperation is currently being established. The cooperation consists of occasional advice, joint events and loans on special occasions.

3.2 International practice

For reasons of space and time, only a few examples for international practice of prison libraries can be listed here.⁹ It would be desirable if the library associations of individual

⁸ See <https://www.buecherhallen.de/justizanstaltsbuechereien> [accessed 5 June 2015].

countries could commission professional papers on the topic and share them with the IFLA-Section “Library Services to People with Special Needs” (LSN). In the following, I will list best practice examples from individual countries that I am aware of:

As early as 1991, **the UK** regulated how responsibilities and tasks should be shared between prison libraries and public libraries. The Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP), in its capacity as the central actor for library services in prisons, founded the Prison Libraries Group (PrLG), which coordinates the professional design of prison libraries and annual training sessions for librarians working in prison libraries.

In the **Netherlands** and **Scandinavia**, prison librarians are supervised by trained librarians, which ensures a direct connection to the library profession in those countries.

In Europe, the UK, the Netherlands and the Scandinavian countries are closest to fulfilling the *IFLA Guidelines for Library Services to Prisoners* due to their professional library services in prisons. Together with interesting practical examples from the USA, they are best suited to give impulses to other countries.

Since 2009, **France** has intensified the cooperation between prison libraries and public libraries by establishing voluntary partnerships based on what is possible, such as advice, topic related loans and joint events.

In **Spain**, inconsistent regulations in autonomous districts are a hindrance for engaging with the opportunities of cooperation with external libraries and library systems (Peschers and FVGB, 2013, p. 216).

In **Switzerland** – and not only there – prison libraries are relatively isolated. They need to be made visible inside the prison system and to the outside world, while from the library side professional studies about prison libraries need to be conducted and forms of cooperation need to be explored (ibid., p. 254 ff).

In **Japan**, prison library services are very limited and a cooperation with public libraries is rare. “Donations of used books from public libraries are common, while regular lending services and professional advice are rare” (ibid., p. 332). “Cooperation and networking requires willing partners on both sides, but public libraries show no interest for social engagement with prisoners. Although the library association of Japan supports

⁹ The examples listed here are gleaned from extended case studies of individual countries in Peschers and FVGB (2013), and partly from an unpublished paper by Thorsten Ahrens (2015), where case studies from Peschers and FVGB (2013) were evaluated: Ahrens, T. 2015. Bücher öffnen Welten. Gefangenenbüchereien in Frankreich, Großbritannien, Japan und den Niederlanden im Vergleich anhand der IFLA-Richtlinien für Gefangenenbüchereien, [Books open up worlds. Comparing prison libraries in France, the UK, Japan and the Netherlands using the IFLA Guidelines for Library Services to Prisoners]. Unpublished paper.

library services for people with handicaps, it still needs to work on establishing support services for another disadvantaged group, namely prisoners” (ibid., p. 333).

In the **United States**, “each of the 50 states has its own legal administration, which is responsible for its prisons and their libraries. Regional administrations and municipalities organise prisons and detention centres and in most cases have agreements with public libraries and/or voluntary groups to offer reading materials and other library services for prisoners” (ibid., p. 132) to ensure that the collection is user-oriented.¹⁰ Like the UK, the United States implements projects for reading promotion in prisons (ibid., p. 149 ff).¹¹ This includes projects which prepare prisoners and their families for a successful transition from prison back into society (ibid., 2013, p. 151).¹²

3.3 African practice

This is my first time as a guest in Africa. I am here for professional visits to prison libraries in Uganda and South Africa and for attending IFLA. I am not in a position to talk about prison libraries in Africa, but I would rather like to thank everybody who can help me get a first insight into the topic. Unfortunately I do not have any papers on African prison libraries written by legal authorities or African library associations. I would be very grateful to receive any available papers you might be able to provide .

But I would like to draw your attention to the African Prisons Project (APP), which I came across when doing research for my professional visits in Africa.¹³ It was initiated by then 18-year old Alexander McLeans from England, based on his experiences as a

¹⁰ “Since US prison libraries are developed according to the public library model, they should ideally serve their users with the same media which are available in public libraries – depending on available funds. But trained prison librarians are in conflict between the ethical standards to convey free access to information and the existing limitations associated with existing or possible access to reading media in prisons” (Peschers and FVGB, 2013, p. 146).

¹¹ “Breaking Barriers with Books” (BBWB) is a very successful family literacy programme, which includes the children of prisoners and has been operated successfully for 14 years in Oshkosh prison, Wisconsin” (Peschers and FVGB, 2013, p. 149).

“The Maryland “Family Literacy@Your Library”-programme is a good example for cooperation between a prison library and a public library: the employees of the prison library receive professional assistance from the children’s librarians of the Howard County und Enoch Pratt libraries [Baltimore], by training the coordinators of the prison library programmes in how to select materials and promote reading. The inmates prepare themselves by reading to themselves and jointly planning activities for their children. To improve the collection of donations, the Enoch Pratt library provides a loan collection of children’s books” (Peschers and FVGB, 2013, p. 150).

¹² “The Institutional Library Development Department of Colorado National Library has developed very useful guidelines for the reintegration of prisoners and their families, including instructions for public libraries how to reintegrate prisoners into the community” (Peschers and FVGB, 2013, p. 151). “In the year 2008, the same team of the Colorado Criminal Justice Reform Coalition worked together to prepare a presentation for public libraries entitled “Life after 20-to-Life: Library materials for a successful transition from prison to the community” and a video for prisoners and former prisoners entitled *Out for Life: How Your Library Can Help*. The video is on YouTube” (Peschers and FVGB, 2013, p. 151).

¹³ See <http://www.africanprisons.org/>.

volunteer in Uganda in 2004. Since 2007 the project has been recognised as a charity; it cooperates with prison administrations¹⁴ and has been able to secure external support for working jointly towards improving health, education, justice and reintegration of prisoners in selected countries in Africa. Its main focus lies on reading promotion and by now 10 prison libraries have been set up.

4. Final remarks

Both my knowledge on this topic as well as the time available is too limited to comprehensively introduce the topic of prison libraries in international comparison in this short presentation. This paper can only give a fragmentary reflection of the whole picture of the variety of media offers being made available to prison inmates. Nevertheless, it may stimulate reflection and action.

At this point we should consider the experiences of Vibeke Lehmann, who worked many years as a librarian in the penalty system of the United States and was internationally active in IFLA. She says that prison libraries reflect a societal prism of a country's basic attitude (see Peschers and FVGB, 2013, p. 9 ff). Thus each country might ask itself how it would like to offer media services to prisoners.

Barbara Lison, head of the public library in Bremen und member of the IFLA governing board, observes: "Prison libraries fulfil the genuine mandate of a public library by enabling participation in public life in a very specific, but at the same time also very traditional way" (ibid., p. 7).

The *IFLA Guidelines for Library Services to Prisoners* are a kind of "policy statement for the basic right of prisoners to read, learn and have access to information" (ibid., p. 8).

The former president of the Federal Republic of Germany, Dr Horst Köhler, who made a special effort to support Africa during his presidency, said that improving media services for prisoners is an "investment towards more humanity in the world" (ibid., p. 4).¹⁵

In this context it would be interesting to know which experiences imprisoned authors and personalities from Africa, such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Wole Soyinka or Nelson Mandela, can or could share about the importance of media in prisons. What has changed since their time in prison? Denis Goldberg from Cape Town, a personal

¹⁴ APP is among others official partner of the Uganda Prisons Service, see <http://www.prisons.go.ug/>

¹⁵ Dr. Köhler visited the prison and prison library in Münster on 17 March 2012. On this occasion he gave a reading entitled "African Destiny", where he got talking with prisoners, including some from Africa. He edited a book on the topic in German (Köhler, 2010).

companion of Nelson Mandela and honorary member of the Association for the Promotion of Prison Libraries in Germany, for example shared the following with me:

Thank you for reminding me about this project. I accept with great pleasure your invitation to me to become a patron of Libraries for Prisoners project. My pleasure arises from my memory of how important it was during my 22 years of imprisonment in South Africa for my active opposition to apartheid. The prison library was badly stocked and we were not able to select books we wanted to read. Books were simply sent to us. I was fortunately allowed to study at university level by correspondence. The University of South Africa had a well-stocked library and the books sent for study purposes were of tremendous importance in keeping me and my comrades focused and aware of modern thought as well as providing some novels for language studies which were also great entertainment. Books were especially important because we were for 16 years not allowed to get newspapers and news magazines. Books became a replacement for real life and they were a great way of staying connected and interested in the world around us.¹⁶

Denis Goldberg was imprisoned from 1964 to 1985. – How have media services for prisoners in South Africa developed since then?

The African Prisons Project is a concrete example of my dream of a book tree growing on top of a prison wall, which has been moving me since 2008 and which I have shared with many people, resulting in a circulating exhibition and a website: “Libertree – Bücherbäume überbrücken Mauern”.¹⁷

I hereby invite everybody who is interested in the topic of prison libraries to find their own way in supporting dialogue and integration overcoming dividing prison walls – for example by providing media for prisoners.

For further information and for an exchange about prison libraries in Germany, I invite you to visit me during the poster session, where I can give you an introduction to my book “Bücher öffnen Welten” [Books open up Worlds, discussing in German prison libraries in Germany and selected international countries], as well as the work of the prison library in Münster, where I work.

¹⁶ Unpublished e-mail from Denis Goldberg to Gerhard Peschers on 28 November 2014.

¹⁷ Libertree – book trees bridge walls. See <http://libertree.eu>.

5. Further reading and websites

Professional literature

- Council of Europe, Committee of Ministers. 2006. *Recommendation Rec(2006)2 of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on the European Prison Rules*.
<https://wcd.coe.int/ViewDoc.jsp?id=955747>
- IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions). 1994.
IFLA/UNESCO Public Library Manifesto. <http://www.ifla.org/publications/iflaunesco-public-library-manifesto-1994>
- Köhler, H. 2010. *Schicksal Afrika – Denkanstöße und Erfahrungsberichte*. Reinbek: Rowohlt. 381 p. [Destiny Africa - includes contributions by Henning Mankell, Thabo Mbeki, Volker Schlöndorff, Asfa-Wossen Asserate and others]
- Lehmann, V.; Locke, J. 2005. *Guidelines for Library Services to Prisoners*. The Hague, IFLA, 3rd edn. 24 p. <http://www.ifla.org/files/assets/hq/publications/professional-report/92.pdf>
- Lehmann, V. 2011. Library and Information Services to Incarcerated Persons: global perspectives. In: *Library Trends*, 59(3). Baltimore, USA. [contributions about prison libraries in Canada, Great Britain, Germany, France, USA, Italy, Poland, Spain, Japan]
- Peschers, G. and FVGB (Förderverein Gefangenenbüchereien e.V.) (eds.) 2013. *Bücher öffnen Welten. Medienangebote für Menschen in Haft in Deutschland und international*. [Books open up Worlds. Media services for prisoners in Germany and international]. München, De Gruyter. 417 S. (Bibliotheks- und Informationspraxis, 54) [articles from *Library Trends*, 59(3) were translated into German and further case studies from the Netherlands, Switzerland as well as projects from Goethe-Institutes in Argentina, Brazil, Peru and Palestine were added]
- Statistisches Bundesamt 2014. Bestand der Gefangenen und Verwahrten, Stand 2014 [German prisoner statistics as of 2014]
<https://www.destatis.de/DE/Publikationen/Thematisch/Rechtspflege/Strafverfolgung/Vollzug/BestandGefangeneVerwahrte.html>
- Sutter, Th. 2015. *Lesen und Gefangen-Sein, Gefängnisbibliotheken in der Schweiz*. [Reading and being imprisoned: Prison libraries in Switzerland]. Springer VS. XII, 479 p.

Exhibitions and websites

In English:

- UNESCO: Effective Literacy Practice: Münster Prison Library (Germany)
<http://www.unesco.org/ui/litbase/?menu=9&targetgroup=15&programme=110>
- African Prisons Project (APP) <http://www.africanprisons.org/>

In German:

- Ausstellung: "Lesen verbindet – Alphabetisierung als Menschenrecht" [Exhibition "Reading connects – Literacy as a human right"] <http://www.rausblick.de/ansprache/ausstellung-lesen-verbindet.html>

Ausstellung: "Libertree – Bücherbäume überbrücken Mauern" [Exhibition "Libertree – Book trees bridge walls"] <http://www.libertree.eu>
Förderverein Gefangenenbüchereien e.V. [Association for the Promotion of Prison Libraries in Germany] <http://www.fvgb.de>
Gefangenenbücherei der JVA Münster [Münster Prison Library] http://www.jva-muenster.nrw.de/aufgaben/freizeit_der_gefangenen/buecherei/index.php
Hamburger Bücherhallen, Abteilung Justizanstaltsbüchereien (JAB) (Hamburger Public Library, Department Prison Libraries) <https://www.buecherhallen.de/justizanstaltsbuechereien>
Stadtbibliothek Greiz [Public Library Greiz] <http://www.greiz.de/bibliothek>
Stadtbibliothek Bremen [Public Library Bremen] <http://www.stabi-hb.de/Suche.html>