The USEK Library: An Academic Library with a National Mission of Conserving the Heritage of Lebanon

Randa Al Chidiac
Executive Director, Library, Holy Spirit University of Kaslik (USEK), Kaslik, Lebanon.
randachidiac@usek.edu.lb

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Abstract:

The Holy Spirit University of Kaslik (USEK) in Lebanon is not very distant from this diversity and history. It is a private Catholic higher education institution founded by the Lebanese Maronite Order (LMO), an order which was founded in 1695. Other than its educational mission, it aims to achieve a synthesis of tradition and modernism, preserving the old for future generations.

The USEK Library has at the core of its mission to support and nurture the University’s vision. Being in the heart of the University, it strives to perpetuate this mission by preserving rare and special collections in all facets of Lebanese cultural and ethnic heritage. The source of the idea came from the origins of USEK and its commitment to the preservation and promotion of the Maronite cultural heritage. It has now developed into a massive undertaking with larger collections, a preservation and conservation centre, a digitization centre, a manuscript collection, an archive and a centre for Lebanese studies. The USEK Library now has a wider scope and mission to fulfil: the preservation and promotion of the Lebanese cultural heritage.

This paper will present the case of the USEK Library: the rationale and goal behind the project, the scope of the project, the collections gathered so far, the achievements, national and international collaborations, and the complimentary projects at USEK.

Keywords: Lebanon, Academic Library, Manuscripts, Archives, Preservation, Digitization

1 INTRODUCTION

Lebanon has always been described as the land of the crossroads: crossroad between East and West, crossroad between the Mediterranean Basin and the Arabian Peninsula, crossroad of religions and crossroad of civilizations. Beginning with the earliest inhabited settlement in Byblos, which is as vibrant as ever, Lebanon was the homeland of the Phoenicians. Their lands were ruled for two centuries by Persian rulers to then become part of succeeding empires: Egyptian, Assyrian, Hellenistic, Roman, Arab, Seljuk, Mamluk, Crusades, Ottoman to finally fall under French mandate ending in 1943.
This broad diversity and expansive history shaped its cultural, religious and ethnic identity which in its turn has inherited the Lebanese people with a rich cultural and historical heritage worthy of being preserved and revived.

2 THE UNIVERSITY

The second half of the 19th century was a period of much building activity within the Lebanese Maronite Order, with new monasteries and schools. Then, in 1950, the Holy Spirit University of Kaslik was founded in Kaslik, Mount Lebanon, the outcome of many years of endeavour on the part of the Order in the fields of learning and instruction. The Order sent some of its monks to the universities of Europe and America to complete their specialisation. On their return, they worked in education, in research and in administration in the institutions of the Order, particularly the University at Kaslik.

The University states as its mission “to contribute to the welfare of the human being, all human beings, throughout education, research and publication in all fields of knowledge.” The Holy Spirit University of Kaslik, is proud of its national identity and mission. Other than its educational mission, it aims to achieve a synthesis of tradition and modernism, preserving the old for the young and future generations. This culture is rooted in the Orient but reaches out, through learning and science, towards constantly changing horizons.

3 THE LIBRARY

The USEK Library has at the core of its mission to support and nurture the University’s vision. Being in the heart of the University, it strives to perpetuate this mission by offering library services and resources of high standards. In addition to the traditional role of a library, since 2004, the Main Library at USEK has undertaken the massive project of conserving the written heritage of Lebanon in all its aspects: cultural, historic and ethnic. The source of the idea came from the origins of USEK and its commitment to the preservation and promotion of the religious and cultural Maronite heritage. This has been interpreted into many facets beginning with one collection in 2003, the archives and manuscripts of the Lebanese Maronite Order.

Another reason behind the decision taken by the library administration was the absence of the National Library after the Civil War. The National Library was founded in 1921 with a donation from viscount Philippe de Tarazi containing twenty thousand books, rare manuscripts and the first issues of national newspapers. Ever since 1975, it has been subject to sabotage and looting; the remnants of its staff working, and its collection of Arab and world book and periodicals dispersed. In 1999, the Lebanese Ministry of Culture launched a project to revive the library and restore the ancient collections and documents. Several attempts were made by foreign governments and institutions to offer financial and professional support with no success. In 2006, a decree was signed by the Lebanese ministerial cabinet outlining the support of the Qatari government and its relationship with the Lebanese Ministry of Culture; however, till now, the project has not seen light.

One of the missions of the National Library is heritage preservation to gather, preserve, organize and facilitate access of the national intellectual heritage in its different forms. A mission it has not been able to attain or sustain. This is where private institutions, like the Library at USEK, step in to play an effective and active role. The library has no intention of replacing the National Library and its national role, but to temporarily assist in this mission as an institution of Lebanese identity and roots. It plans to become a collaborative and
supportive partner once the National Library can again play its role as the national repository of Lebanese literature, politics, culture and heritage.

Since then, the USEK Library has launched a major project in preserving, restoring cataloging and digitizing manuscripts, archives, photographs, maps and charts, rare books and old national newspapers.

4 THE COLLECTIONS
4.1 The Manuscript Collection

The history of manuscripts is very closely related to the church and monasteries in Lebanon since the 17th century. The earliest writings and transcriptions of the Lebanese Maronite Order Order (LMO) began with its founding fathers, Gabriel (Jibrayel) Hawwa and Abdallah Qaraali who were figures of the renaissance of the East. In 1770, the manuscripts of the Order were in the Monastery of Our Lady of Tamish, where the General Council resided.

During the 19th century, the monasteries of the Lebanese Maronite Order (Ordre Libanais Maronite–LMO) assigned the monasteries of Kifafne, Qozhaya, El-Maounat, Nesebayh and others as the theological schools of the younger generation. This allowed them to enrich the libraries of these monasteries with the manuscripts that would the teaching of theology, logic, spiritual books, and ecclesiastical and monastic law.

This was also a period of great activity in the field of printing, though it has to be admitted that the books published were only liturgical works of the prayers used by the monks in their daily worship. The Order acquired a printing press, which was first set up in the Monastery of St. Moses the Ethiopian (Mar Moussa al-Habshi) at Duwwar, and then in the early 19th century moved to the Monastery of St. Anthony (Mar Antonios) at Quzhayya. Spiritual works were still copied by hand and reliance continued to be placed on the presses of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith at Rome when a large number of copies were required.

Across the centuries, these manuscripts and collections were susceptible to damage and destruction, especially during the massacre of 1860 when several monasteries were destroyed and more than 40 monks were killed. Then again during the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990), many monasteries were either destroyed or burnt. These incidents led to the loss of numerous manuscripts and collections. In May 2002 the Order decided to relocate and house all the manuscripts of the LMO monasteries (about 27 monastic libraries) in the Holy Spirit University of Kaslik (USEK).

At the beginning, the LMO collection was comprised of 1600 manuscripts, 213 of which were initially part of the Library collection and 1316 manuscripts were gathered from all the monasteries by a decree from the Father Superior Father Athanas El Jalkh. The remaining fifty-four were acquired through donations and purchase. This vast and unique collection is known today as the LMO Collection and the work is constant to complete the task of gathering all the manuscripts from the remaining monasteries, as well as completing the cataloguing and codicology of items that were already deposited.

Once the decree was announced by the Order to safeguard the manuscripts in the University library, a major assignment of physically gathering the manuscripts from the monasteries was initiated. This was easier said than done because some clergy felt that the manuscripts were in their rightful place even though a decree had been announced by the General Council.
With time, word spread about the tasks and achievements that the Library was accomplishing and started to approach the Library. These collections were donated to the library in order to safeguard their preservation and to make accessible for scholarly studies and research. The first collections were that of the Maronite Archbishop of Zgharta (55 mss), Basilian Order Choueirite (905 mss), the manuscripts of the Greek Catholic Church in Zahle (43 mss) and various collections (431 mss).

The number of manuscripts has now reached 2,125, handwritten in different languages and writings: Syriac, Arabic, Latin and Greek. They cover various topics such as theology (including many liturgical Maronite texts), Islam, philosophy, Syriac and Arabic grammar, literature, astronomy and history. Many of these are translations from Latin to Garshuni (which is the form of Arabic language in Syriac letters). Some are very unique such LMO 263, which seems to be the oldest Maronite Syriac Liturgical textbook for Palm Sunday Office of Readings (copied at Qozhaya Monastery in 1493). Another example is the book of prayers during lent, copied in 1571 (LMO 103). Work is still in progress on cataloguing each individual items of the collection according to their content and codicological aspects.

The start of the digitization project of the LMO collection was done in collaboration with the Hill Museum and Manuscript Library (HMML) on one camera and one staff member. The digital copy and the bibliographic records were supplied only to be uploaded on the HHML website. Since then, the library has come a long way of creating its own cataloguing database of Arabic, Syriac and Garshuni manuscripts. Beth Gazo was developed under the .NET platform on an SQL database server. Its unique features begin with the fact that cataloguing and searching can be carried out in any language, even the less known like Garshuni and Syriac. The codicology of each item consumes time because each page is studied and analyzed in detail to provide a comprehensive bibliographic description and summary. Beth Gazo might in the future provide authority headings for cataloguers of religious and historic material, especially those related to the Maronite and Eastern Christian churches, as well as the Arab world.

4.2 The Archives Collection
As the Holy Spirit University of Kaslik is the only institution of higher education that was established as one of the missions of the Order, the library was designated as the depository of all the archives and records of the Order, its monasteries as well as other establishments under its patronage. The next step was to preserve the archives of the University and the Office of Rector. When the library stated its mission of preserving the patrimony of Lebanon, another idea came to mind: securing and conserving the archives (registers and records) of official governmental departments from municipalities and Qaemmqamias (the geo-political distribution of a specific area).

This was easier said than done for several reasons. The first and most important is the condition in which these materials were stored and packed. The reality of the matter is that the Lebanese, as individuals or institutions, have never cared for private or public manuscripts and archives of any type (official, private or family papers) or content (literary, political, historic, artistic, etc…). Government offices have never had the financial or administrative resources, nor the policies or procedures, to organize and manage their public records or registers. Papers and records would be filed, placed in boxes and stored in rooms or depots in uncontrolled environments. With time, they were deteriorated, infested with pests, insects and fungi, covered in dust and damp with humidity.
The projects that the USEK Library has undertaken are numerous:

1. archives of the Qaemmqamia and Municipality of Gezzeine;
2. archives of the Municipality of Batroun;
3. archives of the Mutasarrifiyya period (an autonomous district, a governorship established within the Ottoman).

The archives available at the Library went beyond governmental and official institutions; they now hold the records and the private collections of prominent figures of Lebanon in literature (e.g. Youssef Ghossoub), in politics (e.g. Maurice Gemayel) and in history (e.g. Kamal Salibi). This collection is growing on a daily basis with each new acquisition and figure being targeted.

4.3 The Newspapers Collection
The library has also been able to acquire copies of several newspapers considered part of Lebanese heritage because of the topics they covered and because they are out of circulation. The most prominent are Ad-Dabbour (1923), Al-‘Andalib (1935), Ṣada al-Shimal (1925), Az-Zajal Al-Lubnani (1933), Al ‘Amal (1939) and L’Orient (1934). These items have all been digitized and saved on RAW and PDF formats. The library houses an impressive collection of newspapers currently circulating in Lebanon, with possible future plans in mind.

4.4 Other Collections
These collections are rare books, photographs and negatives and 8mm film reels and sound recording, all of which are relate to the heritage, history, identity, culture and ethnicity of Lebanon.

5 THE CENTERS
The library then faced a bigger challenge: how to house these materials under the most suitable conditions for preservation and longevity, while at the same time making them accessible to clergy, researchers and library patrons. For this effect, two centres were established: the Centre of Reprography and Digitization and the Centre of Written Heritage Conservation. Both are under administered by the library and were initially established to cater to the needs of the library by providing a controlled space for storage, in conserving and restoring these collections and in digitizing and converting these collections from their original format to a digital component.

These centres were the first of their kind to be established in Lebanon and are currently well-known. The services they offer are not limited to the collections in the library, but they are being approached by individuals and national and governmental bodies.

The external projects that have been handled by the centres range from conservation to digitization based on the requirements of the customer. One of the major projects is the Gibran Khalil Gibran collection, containing manuscripts and archives. Other projects are the Elias Abou Chabké (poet and writer) collections, the Sursock family archives, the Nehme family archives and the photographic collections of Adolph Uhlmann, Salem Nassif and Moussa Prince.

For all the projects that the centres undertake, an agreement is signed stipulating that the library would, likewise, acquire a digital copy for academic and research use. All library patrons are informed of this stipulation and sign a letter of acknowledgment of the terms of use.
The Centre of Reprography and Digitization

The first feat was achieved in October 2002 with Father Joseph Moukarzel, current library director, who was able to provide the human resources (two staff members), technology (one camera) and space to set up the Centre. At that time, the material converted was 1600 microfilms only. The centre currently has six full-time staff members and three contractual members, in addition to student assistants. It has four digital cameras, a microfilm scanning machine, five scanners and the necessary software and applications that assist in the conversion and digitization process.

The centre has cooperated in digitizing and exchanging the data with the Institut français du Proche-Orient (IFPO), the Department of Geography in the Lebanese Army and the Institute for Palestine Studies. A very important aspect of the work is not only the transformation of the data according to the required standards, but also safeguarding it whether on a server, CDs or external drive. Many questions arise on the durability and longevity of this format and continuous updates of the technology. Another problem arises when dealing with manuscripts that arrive in very bad condition and are very delicate even to human touch. Should they be digitized and place them under the threat of being destroyed?

The future plan of the Library and the centre is to create digital repositories and a searchable platform for all this material, specifically those that have not been catalogued yet.

Centre of Written Heritage Conservation

Established in 2002, the Centre of Written Heritage Conservation (CWHC) aims to develop a strategy for the conservation and restoration of written heritage (manuscripts, rare and valuable books, archives, maps, photos, etc.). The CWCH was also staffed by two full-time employees to grow now to a team of four. The centre is fully equipped with the required machines (Vacuum Packaging Machine), materials for dusting, scrubbing, using Japanese paper and creating acid-free boxes of all sizes and form.

The various activities of the CWHC consist of:
- Conserving and preserving collections;
- Raising awareness and providing professional training to interested individuals;
- Providing expertise and advice.

The Centre of Written Heritage Conservation has a vault, named the Heritage Vault, where the valuable collections of manuscripts, archives and rare books are stored. This safe is also offered as a service for collectors and owners of valuable collections to safeguard and maintain their collections in the best conditions. The centre is now being approached by Lebanese individuals as a point of reference to preserve their personal treasures.

This vault is set according to internationally recognized standards of conservation:
- Air conditioning and ventilation by the VRV system which regulates a continuous supply of fresh air and the extraction of used air;
- Ideal humidity rate (50 %± 5) and stable temperature (18ºC ± 2);
- Shelves coated with a baked thermosetting powder;
- Walls painted with antifungal painting;
- Protection against fires ensured by a sophisticated system, composed of fire and smoke detectors, fire doors, fire alarm, and a non-toxic gas harmless to humans and books (FM 200);
- Protection against burglary ensured by surveillance cameras and an alarm system.
With the CWHC focusing mainly on conservation and preservation, the second focus will be to strengthen the restoration aspect. In this case, staff will have to be trained, and professionals whether national or international will have to be called in.

6 AFFILIATIONS
The USEK Library is closely affiliate with another centre on campus - the Phoenix Centre for Lebanese Studies, founded in 2008 and dedicated to the study of Lebanon in all its fields and the dissemination of the written heritage of Lebanon. The centre is currently focusing on the collections in poetry and theatre. Other activities carried out by the center are to publish research on Lebanese history and its sociological components and to assist researchers and scholars in accessing the required material available in the Library.

7 EVENTS
The USEK Library project is not only to safeguard Lebanese heritage through its preservation, restoration, cataloguing and digitization but to also promote Lebanese heritage through publications and events. An annual event that is held in collaboration with the Phoenix Centre for Lebanese Studies is the fair on old books, archives and manuscripts. Each year a specific culture is highlighted on such as Maronite, Armenian…. In its 9th year, the exhibition and the theme was the Sharfeh Monastery, which belongs to Syriac Catholic Church. The fair included workshops on poetry, iconography and miniatures of Syriac tradition. The purpose of the event which is open to the public is to raise awareness of the richness and diversity of Lebanese customs and heritage.

8 PARTNERSHIPS
USEK Library strives to facilitate the development of collaborative partnerships with several international associations and organizations. One of the objectives of the USEK Library is to “expand its network through national and international initiatives and partnerships” as such it has partnered with several international organizations:
1. The Centre de Conservation du Livre (Arles) and its digital library e-corpus;
2. The World Digital Library;
3. Hill Museum and Manuscript Library;
4. E-ktobe for Syriac manuscripts.

9 CONCLUSION
The USEK Library has embraced this project as a major part of its overall library mission and objective. The USEK Library has gone beyond being a traditional academic library. The USEK Library is now engaged in the preservation of the cultural, historical and ethnic heritage of Lebanon; the USEK Library is now playing a major role in what is considered a national endeavor.

REFERENCES