

## Mapping professional development: a technical library story

**Claudia Serbanuta**

Graduate School of Library and Information Science, University of Illinois at Urbana  
Champaign, Champaign, Illinois, USA

E-mail address: [cserban2@illinois.edu](mailto:cserban2@illinois.edu)

**Raluca Chitimia (Nutiu)**

Mures County Library, Targu Mures, Romania

E-mail address: [raluarch@yahoo.com](mailto:raluarch@yahoo.com)



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### Abstract:

*The story of professional development in communist Romania includes both official and unofficial programs, resources and relations. Searching for these resources as well as developing productive relations was dependent on each person's interest and context. Based on oral history interviews with librarians that worked in public libraries in the 1970s and the 1980s, this paper maps the professional support available at that time. To illustrate the variety of resources and relations captured on this map, we use the successful case of a librarian from a technical branch of a public library. Through dedication and with the professional support she received over the years, this librarian created innovative aiding tools that helped meet the informational needs of the public.*

**Keywords:** professional development, library training, public library, user needs, technical library.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

For most Romanian professionals, continual development of their craft during the communist era meant significant struggle. This is especially true for librarians, who were expected to both provide and restrict information (Serbanuta 2008, p. 2). This paper uses oral history interviews and documents from library archives to describe the professional support available for Romanian librarians in the last decades of the communist regime. The case of a very passionate and effective librarian from the Mures County library will be used to exemplify different formal and informal ways in which professionals could better themselves at that

time. Fresh out of library school, 19 years old M.F.<sup>1</sup> was hired into a public library in the heart of Romania. In over 40 years as a librarian she worked as bibliographer but also as a manager of a technical branch of the public library. In a historical context where sharing information was discouraged, she created innovative information solutions and services for the public of the library. Talking with M.F. about the search aiding tools she developed for the technical branch, she acknowledged the importance of professional support that helped her along the way. Using this particular case, the paper maps the different types of support afforded to public librarians in the communist regime and discusses their power to support innovation in a very confining context.

## 2 IMPORTANCE OF PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT

For her dissertation project Serbanuta conducted 32 oral history interviews with public librarians who were active in Romania during the 1970s and the 1980s. In the communist state, the public libraries were institutions activated for pushing the envelope of ideology and education of the new (communist) man. Librarians had a hard time accommodating both the political pressure and the library users' requests. Often times these interests were divergent and public libraries could only respond to one of them. As public institutions, libraries could not escape the political pressure. As a consequence, often times the real informational needs of the public had to be ignored. Some of the interviews however reveal that there were librarians that managed to provide innovative professional solutions that would satisfy both political and public informational requests.

In the process of collecting memories about public libraries and their services, one story about a technical branch stood out. In a period when technical and scientific information was heavily pushed onto the population by the political regime (Mocanu 2011, p. 36, 58; Gabanyi 2003, p. 126-142) and the newly created working and middle classes needed support for better performing at their jobs (Fülöp G 1971, p. 55-56), a public library decided to organize a thematic branch to help the general public in finding relevant scientific and technological information. By organizing a thematic collection and then creating fine search aiding tools<sup>2</sup> the library branch of the Mures County Library has provided innovative services for a couple of decades. This was done under the management of M.F., a librarian that worked in this branch since its opening and who had the vision for these search-aiding tools. Using examples from the professional support that she received during that time, we will map a professional support system that crosses disciplinary and national borders. While this example is not generalizable to all public librarians of the time, it maps onto a general structure of professional development opportunities that existed even in the communist regime. In this article we will talk about library training and how it can influence professional development, along with getting support from fellow librarians, readers and family in order to become a better librarian. We will look at these relations that support professional development in the context of a very strict information-sharing regime and will map them in order to better understand their influence on new library tools and services.

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<sup>1</sup>Maria Fülöp (M.F.) is recognized as the librarian that held together the Technical Branch at the Mures County library for more than 20 years. This paper documents personal and professional relations that she had and that helped her in creating innovative services in this technical library. For the sake of focusing on the type of support she received and her professional attitude towards her work, we refrain from using her name in the body of the paper. A brief biography of Maria Fülöp is accompanying this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Tools like keyword and thematic catalogs, collective catalogs, thematic biographies, user's professions catalog.

### 3 LIBRARY TRAINING

From the beginning of the Communist regime, interest in the role of librarians was predominantly political. Professional education was viewed from the early years of the regime as holding far less importance than ensuring that librarians had proper political and cultural education<sup>3</sup>. One by one, the undergraduate and graduate level library education programs were restructured and then closed down. Participants in those programs remember them as very informative and as having well prepared faculty. M.F. repeatedly referenced advice that she got from a renown bibliographer Dan Simonescu<sup>4</sup> that guided her professional work<sup>5</sup> through the years. Since these courses were not available after 1973 (Regneală, 2001, p. 346), other means of formal training were offered for people hired as librarians.

The Council of Socialist Culture and Education organized continuing education courses as a replacement for library education programs. Six-week courses were implemented, consisting of “200 hours of lectures, seminars, and hands-on activities focusing on various topics, such as library management, planning, collection development, cataloging, classification, inventory, and *relation with the public*” (Anghelescu 2000, p. 342-343). All personnel hired in the 1970s and 1980s in libraries had to enroll in these courses during their first years of employment on the job, but were not otherwise required to have any previous experience or interest in the profession.

In the 1970s there were few new theories and practices from the worldwide field of Library and Information Science reaching Romanian librarians through formal education. For the most part, the professional development courses were using materials from previous decades (Serbanuta 2014). Librarians invested in keeping up to date with their professional training had to find alternative means for professional support. Among these alternatives, we discuss in detail apprenticeship practices in libraries and library visits.

After finishing the post-high-school education for librarians and cultural activists,<sup>6</sup> M.F. was recruited by a county library and moved into the heart of Romania with the job. As a young librarian she gained experience with multiple services of the library and learned from her more experienced colleagues. Just like her, numerous librarians mentioned benefiting from the informal practice of apprenticeship in their own library. This was not a formalized practice; it happened in many library departments and often even crossed departments. As part of the informal apprenticeship, a new librarian would find a mentor among the more experienced librarians and would often ask this person for guidance and advice. This support provided not only an introduction in the profession’s requirements but also in the informal aspects of the job (like the informal relations between librarians, informal practices and expectations, s.o.)

Library visits provided informal training education opportunities as well. Organized by the

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<sup>3</sup> A 1951 ministerial decision to enhance the activity of the library states that the new librarians should correspond from the point of view of “their political, cultural and professional qualifications” (Mătușoiu & Dinu 2001, p. 23)

<sup>4</sup> Dan Simonescu (1902-1993) - bibliographer, historian of literature, full member of the Romanian Academy, author of the first Romanian bibliography course book, and of the first library science course book for high school.

<sup>5</sup> “Even now I can hear his voice when he was talking about structuring a bibliography and he insisted that one should create a plan from the very first moment. If you have a good plan for a bibliography, you are already winning.” (M. F.)

<sup>6</sup> In Romanian: Școala Tehnică de Activiști Culturali, secția Bibliotecari.

libraries, these visits introduced the opportunity for librarians to see what their colleagues were offering in terms of services and tools. Managing the first technical branch of a public library in Romania, M. F. received visits from other librarians but was also invested in visiting other libraries. She “learned something from each meeting” where professional experience was shared.

#### 4 COLLEAGUES

Collegial relations are important for professional development. Interactions among librarians, be it librarians from the same library, from the same region or from afar, were very important in the communist times. However, the usage of these relations towards a professional end depended on the interest that individual librarians had. In this regard F. M. is a very good example as she was not only passionate about her work but also in permanent search for better solutions to the informational needs presented to her library.

We have already talked about the importance of apprenticeship relations among librarians from the same library. Libraries were institutions where learning from fellow librarians was possible. Moreover understanding what the job of one's fellow librarian was offered valuable information. This was an important way to access additional resources available in libraries, resources that were otherwise hidden from the public. For example, interlibrary loan was, at that time, was supposed to be a public service but in reality, could be used only by a handful of knowledgeable librarians. M.F. was one of them. She learned who was in charge of that service in the library and used it to get materials for herself, her readers and her husband's research<sup>7</sup>.

Knowing how to communicate with one's colleagues is important for effective activity in libraries. Many librarians were excited to talk about how close they felt to their colleagues during the decades under investigation. Sharing professional but also personal information among themselves created very powerful relations that, if one was interested, could have been used for professional development. This was the case for M.F. as she made the decision of emphasizing the professional work in her relation with the other librarians<sup>8</sup>. This was done in detriment of close personal relations that other librarians recognized as valuable. In doing so M.F. was able to also use the informal relations with fellow librarians for professional development.

Meeting with other local librarians serving (parts of) the same community was a rewarding experience. Being librarians working with similar collections or from special libraries, meeting, discussing common issues of interest, or simply following each other's work created a learning inducing context. M.F. praised the weekly meetings that librarians from the public library had with people working in a special library and museum<sup>9</sup> from the same city. These

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<sup>7</sup> Fülöp Géza (n. 1930) - chemist, information scientist. Research area Information: Science, Information theory. Selected works: *Munkában az enzimek*, Cluj (1973), *Ember és információ*, București (1973) Budapesta (1984), *Az információ nyomában*, București (1978), *Az információ*, București (1990), Budapesta (1996), Cluj (2001).

<sup>8</sup> “If you are firm enough and realize that is not so important whether your fellow librarians love you, but rather that they do the right thing... and you assume this, then things start working better.” (M.F.)

<sup>9</sup> *Teleki-Bolyai Library (2006) from Tg. Mureș* is one of the first public libraries in the Habsburg Monarchy. The Transylvanian Count Teleki Sámuel founded it in 1802 and ever since it has been open to the public. Its collection counts over 200.000 volumes, one of the richest from Transylvania with the two main collections - the original 40.000 volumes Teleki Library and 80.000 volumes - Bolyai Library, the rest is made up of several private libraries, books from former religious schools and from a Franciscan Monastery - it has all traditional types of Transylvanian book collections. After the library was nationalized in 1951 and in 1955 the two main

regular meetings were times when local librarians and museographers came together to discuss their recent activities. Learning about inside aspects of people working in local memory institutions proved useful for M.F. These meetings allowed for a space where professionals could discuss their work and plans. The multidisciplinary aspect of these meetings increased their value. For example learning about the history of this special library in the city inspired M.F. to focus the services of her technical branch to users' needs.

At the county level the demand for up-to-date and relevant information for local industries was high. Existing libraries functioning in factories or union libraries<sup>10</sup> were small in size and unable to respond to all the requests they were getting (Fülöp 1971, p. 56-57). The technical branch of the public library was a practical solution to help address the insufficient technical information available for the public. This new service geared towards people interested in science and technology paid attention to the readers' requests. A collective catalog of foreign scientific and technical materials available in local and regional libraries was started in the early 1970s. M.F. invited fellow librarians from local industrial services to aggregate data from their collections. A catalog with over 2,000 entries was developed and it provided structured information that was not available in any other place.

Learning from peer librarians as well as learning with colleagues were practices discovered in all libraries where interviews were conducted. For those invested in their profession, meeting with fellow librarians occasionally at conferences was also a time that could be used for professional growth. Librarians meeting occasionally during library school or library training, at conferences, or during library visits often developed more personal relations. In some cases these relations could get activated in libraries when professional issues arose. The personal connection with other librarians remained valid even as the time passed. M.F. recalled a library director from Hungary that visited the county library before 1989 and how he recognized her decades afterwards. These personal relations not only connected people but gave them a shared community to work with if they were so inclined.

M.F. used this community to test her intuitions and discuss the products implemented in her library. She remembered a heated professional conversation at a conference that made her cry. The topic was the role of mass activities in public libraries activities. She was questioned by another librarian about why she would be so invested in providing activities and organizing events for the readers. This conversation forced her to recognize something that guided her work ever since she was hired in that library: “[activities for masses] are important because are serving the public and I can fully understand the importance of meeting with one's readers”.

## **5 LIBRARY LITERATURE**

Another professional resource available to librarians was the library literature. However the quantity and quality of available journals were often not enough to stimulate professional responses. The only library journal in the 1970s and the 1980s called “Biblioteca” (published from 1948 to 1989), was made available in most libraries. However, for librarians speaking other languages the number of printed library resources that they could access was higher. For example articles about libraries published in Hungarian could be found in cultural magazines in Romania but also in magazines from outside the country.

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collections were unified, in 1974 it has become a branch of the Mures County Library.

<sup>10</sup> In 1971 there were 22 libraries in industrial factories and unions in Tg. Mureş (Fülöp 1971, p. 55)

The Mures county public library was serving, since its creation, a multi-ethnic community. Both Romanian and Hungarian ethnic populations have a long-standing tradition in the region. Cultural and educational institutions in the region were reflective of this multiculturalism. For a long time M.F.'s library had good professional relations with Hungarian libraries and was so reflected in the collection<sup>11</sup>. The library purchased professional library magazines and the collection development policies closely followed the publishing market of Hungary. M.F. considered Hungarian professional journals "more practical" than the sister journals in Romania which were more theoretical. Besides reviews of recent literature, these journals provided translations of articles published in library journals from across the world.

Similar to the previous resources presented, using professional literature was dependent on the individual librarian. M.F. recalls the physical place where these journals were stored in the library but cannot remember seeing other fellow librarians using them. To further develop this example we can also look at documents created by National Institute for Information and Documentation (INID<sup>12</sup>). This institute coordinated and provided resources for all information and documentation institutions (Decretul 138/1974). This included libraries; however, the INID resources<sup>13</sup> and publications were not necessary very popular in libraries. But for M.F., INID was not only an inspiration source but also a provider of valuable information about the publications in the field of science and technology<sup>14</sup>.

## 6 READERS

A good professional development program for librarians includes helping them develop the ability to understand and meet reader's informational needs. The formal training of Romanian librarians offered them little preparation for understanding the communities they served. In this situation, a librarian that acknowledged the importance of readers' needs in defining library service was, in fact, allowing library users to contribute to his or hers professional development. M.F. was such a librarian and understanding her local community helped her tremendously in better doing her work.

The communist political regime in Romania invested in the industrialization of the country. The Mures region had natural resources and a long tradition in manufacturing. In the 1970s and the 1980s the region was very active in industrial fields like chemistry, wood industry, power plants, and natural gas. In 1971 in the community of about 600.000 people were almost 60 factories from various industries (Soneriu & Mac 1973, p. 110-125).

A natural consequence of having such a large industrial park was the fact that people in the community were interested in learning more about their crafts (Fülöp 1982a, p. 13-14). Having interests in formal education programs or in improving factory products and processes, the public inspired solutions for organizing the collection, solution that the technical library put in practice. M.F. acknowledges that the readers "came and asked for some topics or some tools and I knew I had not known them. And then I realized that there is

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<sup>11</sup> A sample of Hungarian library journals available in the library: Könyvtáros (renamed Könyv, könyvtár, könyvtáros)- since 1959, Könyvtári tájékoztató (renamed Könyvtáry Figyelő)- since 1955, Tudományos és Műszaki Tájékoztatás - since 1960, Könyvtári és dokumentációs szakirodalom - since 1968, Tájékoztató a megjelenő könyvektől - since 1964].

<sup>12</sup> Institutul Național de Informare și Documentare (in Romanian)

<sup>13</sup> During the last years of the communism the library of INID had more than 2.000.000 items.

<sup>14</sup> Mihiț (1982) provides a summary of the information and documentation services provided by INID.

hidden information in books”. This brought about the creation of a thematic fine catalog for the Technical branch. Without being experts in the technical fields, the librarians created a tool that allowed them to mine the collection in detail.

For a tool like this to remain effective over time it had to have continual feedback from the public. So the relation that the library had with its visitors had to be nourished. In the case of M.F.’s library, this was achieved through meetings where professionals from science and technology fields would be invited to present to interested parties from the local community. The topic of interest in the community was found using various methods ranging from informal discussions to sociological surveys (Fülöp 1982a, p. 13-14; Fülöp 1984, p. 25; Fülöp 1982b, p. 226-238). Depending on the public’s interest, the library invited professionals to host those meetings. To assure that the interested patrons attended those meetings, the technical branch created a catalog of users’ interests. Once M.F. was sure this catalog of professions would be a useful tool in the library, she implemented it “to the dismay” of the other librarians.

Focusing public librarian's professional development to the needs of the public is an effective way to train an information professional. In the 1970s and the 1980s, educating this sensibility about the public was only to a small degree part of formal training of librarians. As we described before there were informal ways in which a librarian could have become knowledgeable about hers/his community; however, this was dependent on the individual efforts of the librarian.

## **7 FAMILY**

Among the informal relations that influence the professional development, our interviews revealed that for many librarians, the family context was important. Some librarians remembered how the fact that they had children influenced the type of programs they were more invested in doing in the library. For M.F. the family context positively influenced her continual professional development. When she started working in the technical branch she met there a young man who was a documentarist for one of the local factories. As they became a couple, their relation remains to this day one where discussion about information professional topics is welcomed. F.G. was conducting research in the field of information theory and in the process he gained access to literature from outside the country. This was possible through visits to research libraries in the country and through interlibrary loan. Moreover, during his visits he got to learn about other ways in which catalogs can be organized<sup>15</sup>. All the information organization related experiences that F.G. had in his work were shared with his wife and that positively influenced the quality of her work in the library<sup>16</sup>.

## **8 PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT RELATIONS**

In this paper we analyzed some aspects of professional development as they were presented to us in interviews with public librarians of the 1970s and the 1980s. The professional development of librarians was important but was not a given. The training courses organized at the national level and library journals published in the country represented formal ways for

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<sup>15</sup> F.G. mentioned the alphabetic catalog from American Library in Bucharest that had materials listed after title, author name and topic in one singular catalog.

<sup>16</sup> “Well then I can say that I was an honorific librarian and that we helped each other with many issues that came up” (F.G.)

professional development to take place. However their effectiveness was questioned by librarians (Serbanuta, 2014). On the other hand there were more direct ways in which librarians developed their skills and knowledge of the field. Informal means like apprenticeship practices, sharing professional knowledge, accessing international journals of LIS, learning from users or from acquaintances, these were ways that could further the development of a librarian. While most of these ways of development were identified in our interviews, the effectiveness of using these professional development solutions was dependent on each librarian's context. The case of M.F. was a fortunate one because she had strong support for her work coming from different directions.

M.F. not only organized a new library department but she created tools that would make her technical branch more easily accessible to its public. This innovative work was not common in communist public libraries. And for the work to be successful, to overcome the inertia that settled in the librarianship, M.F. needed all the professional support she could get. The fact that her spouse was also invested in the Information Science field gave her the needed confidence to propose practical solutions in the library. This way she was able to indirectly access resources about information science and observe library practices from a number of large research libraries<sup>17</sup>. Moreover, as they both are part of a very culturally active Hungarian community in Romania (Bottoni 2010, p. 201- 202, 293; Tomita 2009, p. 132), they had access to professional materials that were not accessible to most librarians in the country<sup>18</sup>. These resources crossed over not only the librarianship field (as they were addressing the information science field in general) but they also crossed the national closed border. Materials published in Hungary were acquired in a number of public libraries but effectively used by only few librarians.

Even though M.F. was invested in finding solutions for the information needs of the public, even though she had an intuition about what needed to be done and eventually put it in practice, to this date she has a feeling that her professional decisions were based on "guessing" more than knowledge. "I guessed what needed to be done" she said thinking back at her work in the library. Moreover M.F. "never understood before [1989] what professional relations mean". The informal and often private character of professional development relations in those times severely diminished the feeling of being part of a community of practice. As we looked at a successful case of M.F., we can imagine that the feeling of professional isolation was quite inhibiting for Romanian librarians in the last decades of the Communist regime.

## 9 CONCLUSIONS

In one of the longest regimes of information control in Europe, public librarians were given very little support to develop professionally. The official support formally offered through state institutions<sup>19</sup> was focused on the theoretical aspects of the profession and left little room for the reality of public's informational needs to be integrated. Unofficial and often informal ways of gaining professional support existed and were used by librarians. However, since these practices were very dependent of each individual case context, their effect on the community of librarians was not uniform. The idea of a shared professional community had little base to stand on in practice.

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<sup>17</sup> Examples listed in the interview: The American Library, INID library, Central State Library, Bucharest University Library.

<sup>18</sup> To this date F.G's books on information for example were not translated into Romanian.

<sup>19</sup> Like the Center for Continuing Education from Council of Socialist Culture and Education.



The map of professional support for public librarians that we documented in this article includes library training, collegial support through interactions and shared resources, user's feedback and one's family. We documented here how one librarian could organize a library and provide innovative services to its public and at the same time mapped the ways in which she/he received support for professional development. Personal relations had a great importance in this system and they influenced the quality of professional support offered.

For decades, the Berlin Wall separated two worlds. The culture of information on the two sides of the wall differed greatly. There is a substantial LIS literature documenting the changes that took place in information institutions in the second half of the 20th century in the Western side of Europe. However our understanding of the ways in which the profession of librarianship was affected by the Communist rule in Eastern Europe is very limited. This research contributes to the understanding of information history in this region by taking a micro-history approach and documenting the professional support of Romanian public librarians. This map tells the story of passion about organizing and sharing information, of professional development and personal investment of individual librarians in a context of strict sharing policies, limited support and discouragement of personal initiatives.

FÜLÖP MÁRIA (b. 1940) - librarian and bibliographer. From 1959 to 1999 she worked in the Mures county library for the most part as bibliographer and manager of the technical branch. She authored and co-authored local bibliographies and several collective catalogs. She published more than 60 studies and articles in library and cultural magazines. For her activity in the library world she was awarded several cultural prizes from EMKE, ANBPR, Romanian Government.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors would like to acknowledge the Fülöp family to whom we extend our heartfelt gratitude for their willingness to share their memories with us. We would like to also thank all librarians that were generous in sharing their professional memories with us. The authors are also grateful to Tiffany Chao, Aiko Takazawa and Traian Serbanuta for providing feedback during the writing of this paper.

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