



HERMAN LIEBAERS

1919 – 2010

Memories by Margreet Wijnstroom

Herman Liebaers, an Honorary President of IFLA since 1974, has left his captivating life. Herman was a brilliant man, an original thinker, a bibliophile, a lover of the good life and a true friend to many world citizens—be they librarians, artists, staff or just the man in the street. Though less so of politicians.

His friendship also extended to me and can best be illustrated by his first and last words. Herman and I (Herman an imposing figure in the scientific and interested library community, I a newcomer on the scene) met for the first time in 1960 at an IFLA Conference in Lund, Sweden. At the time he was the Chair of the Section of National and University Libraries, I was representing the Dutch Central Association of Public Libraries.

As newcomer I looked around uncertainly, wondering whether I would ever feel at home between all those distinguished names, which I only knew from the professional literature. All at once one of a group who had welcomed each other as old friends approached me smiling. He was a sturdy fellow with a Burgundian aura and introduced himself in Dutch: “Hello, you must be that top Dutch sporter who has decided to dedicate herself to the revival of sleepy librarianship. By the way your Royal Librarian pointed you to me. He seems to have tried coaching you, but you had your own strong views, according to him. Well, then we belong together in spirit, because I am stubborn and was a top sporter too as a member of the Belgian basketball team, like you on the Dutch hockey team. We both know how to plan, fight and win a game.” He shook my hand firmly and continued: “I have a strong premonition that somewhere in the near future we will fight together for the furtherance of librarianship in the world. And what a team we will be!”

Nearly fifty-years later, Herman's last (written) words fell in my letterbox. His letter was dated 13 January 2007, shortly before he perforce had to enter a care-unit. He complained (in Dutch of course, our normal communication language) that he hardly could find the internal rest to write: "writing is a form of thinking, but to think is getting too much for me these days." He continued this – clearly final – word of farewell with an analysis of the nucleus of our long cooperation, which according to him had benefited everybody. "There was no hierarchy between us. You were your own boss, and I mine. This awareness led to an agreement between us expressing the richness which we owe each other. I know no other relationship between man and woman as excellent as ours." Now three years later, I try to examine what this unforgettable man has meant in my life and work, as in so many other lives I presume. In my case: practically everything.

Herman recruited me into international librarianship when he was elected IFLA President in 1969. He still had to find the funding to set up a proper central IFLA bureau with full-time staff. He succeeded through his American network and convinced the Council on Library Resources of the realistic chance that after some years IFLA could stand on its own feet. The ultimate result was a three-year-grant which covered the salaries of a SG and a personal assistant, along with grants from the Netherlands' government and from UNESCO for overhead costs and working quarters; the birth of a new IFLA came true in the beginning of 1971. Herman relied on the background-guidance of Kees Reedijk, the then Royal Librarian in The Hague, a thoughtful character (an Erasmus-specialist) who used to translate Herman's sometimes surprisingly wild ideas, into an acceptable proposition. They were assisted by Wim Koops, University Librarian of Groningen, who managed to show the world that IFLA had reached maturity using the IFLA Publications.

But it was Herman himself who created the basis on which the flourishing IFLA of today still builds, in particular the important Professional Board (with Reedijk as the first chair) whose diversity of cultural background and professional expertise provided content to IFLA's planning. One of the projects created by Herman was UBC (Universal Bibliographic Control), which he used as a PR example of IFLA's reasons for existence. In one of his many autobiographical writings he observes: "I guess that in twenty five years I shall be remembered as the UBC president of IFLA." In this case, however, he underestimated himself. There were many other areas upon which he left his indelible mark, such as the involvement in the Third World in library and Information development.

I myself hold the opinion that Herman's greatest achievement was his successful advocacy of librarianship in general and IFLA in particular to the world. Although the phrase "advocacy" was unknown in our days (now the term adorns every page of the IFLA Annual report), it is precisely what we did under the driving force of Herman's ideas. What he achieved in his years as President, until he in 1974 accepted his high post as Grand-Maréchal at the Belgian Court, borders on the unbelievable. When he left, IFLA was transformed into the globally acknowledged voice of librarianship with its numerous sections for specialized library services. The Federation had become all he had hoped for in less than a decade.

After he left his library position, Herman made himself always available to IFLA for word and deed when needed. I remember in this respect the General Conference in Brussels (1977)

where he intervened when the organising committee became more or less disabled through personal circumstances. He managed to conjure up at the last moment two main speakers who appealed to everybody's imagination: President Senghor from Senegal and the Russian astronaut Yuri Gagarin. Both were surrounded by a large delegation and encircled by a safety-cordon when they arrived precisely on time in the main hall where Herman and I were ready to welcome them. Unfortunately they entered through opposing doors and marched straight ahead towards the middle, where we back-to-back anxiously were awaiting the clash. "Now we must show that IFLA can hold its own in all circumstances" whispered Herman, "good for the press-releases" (the press had appeared mainly to interview Gagarin). "You take the astronaut, and I will see to President Senghor." I still can remember tension in Yuri's eyes when he had to make an abrupt stop in front of me. The man obviously found this performance amidst stern looking Russian bodyguards a terrible ordeal. He spoke little English, but while shaking my hands he whispered urgently: "toilet please, toilet please." Fortunately my assistant was hovering nearby. She took action and dragged the poor man with his bladder problems away from his astonished entourage and into the nearest toilet. That this by chance was a woman's toilet added to the general confusion!

Herman used to give dinners in his apartment at the top of the Royal Library, mainly to induce his guests to sponsor some of his projects or to contribute to the acquirement of some costly manuscript for the library. Those dinners were given in a most relaxed atmosphere, and form a highlight in my happy recollection of those times.

Another side of Herman's character was revealed to me when we once visited Moscow together. Our hosts insisted to take us to the Kremlin, where we were allowed to pass through president Kosygin's working quarters. He actually came out to greet us, discussing with Herman the future of his daughter as a possible library director (which post she by the way indeed acquired as well as a position on IFLA's Executive Board). Thereafter we were led into a little back-office where supposedly Herman's father had lived and worked in the 1930s when he had been expelled by Belgium because of his communist sympathies. His old desk was still standing there. Herman was really moved and had to sit down with tears in his eyes. Then he told me about his difficult youth and his hard working mother who had to replace a father who had chosen his political beliefs above his family. That Herman proved, in fact, to be a self-made man has contributed to the admiration for his brilliant career. But when after some time our hosts returned to lead us to another engagement while curiously asking Herman how he felt in the shadow of his father's ghost, Herman showed his old self by remarking: "This proves once again that an individual from a small country has major advantages on the international scene. May I too count on you whenever Belgium decides that it would like to get rid of me?"

No, Belgium never showed Herman the door, although his proverbial directness in voicing critical feelings did eventually cost him his position at the Court. Nevertheless he continued up to a high age to play an important role in the Belgian cultural and artistic life (Europalia!). In his native country as well as in the world at large and in the library history his name will remain in the fond memory of his many co-workers and friends, who feel privileged to have known Herman Liebaers.