

January 21, 2008

Dr. Andrea Mehrländer
Geschäftsführende Direktorin
Checkpoint Charlie Stiftung
Wolfensteindamm 9
12165 Berlin, Germany

Dear Dr. Mehrländer:

I would like to thank the Checkpoint Charlie Foundation for their generous support of the 10-member study tour of German parliamentary and government libraries in October 2007. The study tour, which was comprised of 10 American colleagues from a diverse mix of parliamentary, state and federal government libraries throughout the United States, was superbly coordinated and conducted by Evelin Morgenstern of the Initiative for Continuing Education in Academic and Research-Oriented Special Libraries and Related Institutions. I feel privileged to have been invited to join this illustrious group of American colleagues and to have had this truly wonderful and rewarding experience.

My goals in participating in the tour were three-fold: 1) to visit Libraries and network with librarians in Germany to observe the differences and similarities from our U.S. Libraries, both in practice and design; 2) to make contact with other State Department librarians who are assigned to our embassies overseas; and 3) to see “how things had changed” since I had been a U.S. Army Librarian in Bad Kreuznach in the early 1970’s. Happily all three reasons for wanting to participate were fully realized by this unforgettable trip.

The study tour was a perfect balance of visiting various types of libraries, think tanks and government institutions combined with experiencing German culture, including, of course, kaffee und kuchen. Everything on this tour was done exactly right: from selecting the perfect time of year - October - to the choice of cities and even the location of our hotels within the cities we visited. There were times I felt exhausted from our busy schedule, but aside from adding an extra day to the trip, in Dresden or Munich perhaps to slow down the pace, I have no recommendations for dropping any of the carefully-planned itinerary. The program was extremely well-organized by Evelin Morgenstern, who was an exceptional tour leader and had the perfect personality to lead this type of tour group. She was ably assisted by Dr. Christine Wellems, our so-called cheerful German Shepherd, who seemed to be everywhere she was needed – from answering innumerable questions from our group members to making sure everyone kept together in our numerous walking excursions. It was an excellent idea to have both of them with us for the entire tour and I would definitely recommend that practice for future tours. I also liked the practice of starting the tour with a few days in Berlin and pairing roommates together who didn’t know each other, which led to greater camaraderie throughout the trip. Setting up the blog before the trip was also a valuable way to initiate communications with each other. In retrospect, we probably should have posted our biographies/resumes to the blog as well.

Another important “best practice” on the tour, and in direct support of both the CCS and Initiative’s mission, was networking, both professionally and socially, with German librarians whose libraries we visited and with the U.S. Embassy/Consulate librarians posted to Germany who joined us for part of the tour. It was an enriching professional experience for both the German and American librarians, which I am certain, will lead to future collaborations. It was personally very rewarding for me to meet State Department librarians working overseas whom the Bunche Library supports through its database services and to actually visit an overseas embassy which I had not done in 18 years of working at the State Department. Those meetings have led to a series of exchanges with those individuals which have benefited all of us.

Before this trip, I had visited Germany only once briefly (to buy a BMW in Munich!) since I was a young U.S. Army Librarian stationed in West Germany in Bad Kreuznach in the early 1970’s. When I lived in Germany, I visited East Berlin (I entered through Checkpoint Charlie of course) several times during those grim days of communist occupation. It was wonderful to see how the eastern part of Berlin has thrived both architecturally and culturally. It was such a privilege to be in Berlin for the Reunification Day and to see the great pride which Berliners exhibit for their city and their country. The German people in general, as well as their political and legal systems, seemed much more open than in the 1970’s. For example, Americans and Germans can now actually have a conversation about World War II and the Holocaust without extreme awkwardness, an important step to international co-operation.

Highlights of the trip for me were many, both educationally and culturally. Over the past two years, the Bunche Library at the State Department has been developing architectural plans to create a much more open environment. From that standpoint, I was fascinated by the impressive modern architectural design of several of the government Libraries we saw, particularly the Library of the German Bundestag in the Marie-Elizabeth Lüders Building and the Library in the unbelievably beautiful European Court of Human Rights building in Strasbourg. Both institutions used an abundance of glass to striking effect to emphasize the transparency and openness of those institutions. Since I work at the oldest U.S. Federal Library and we are currently reviewing ways of preserving some of our older and rarer material, such as books from the Library of Thomas Jefferson, I was extremely interested in the demonstrations of the new scanner robot and the manual preservation unit at the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek. Culturally, the most exciting part of the trip for me was visiting Dresden for the first time. It was wonderful to see that the city of August the Strong has been brought back to its original glory. Visiting the Historic Green Vault exhibit was a once in a lifetime experience.

I am most grateful to the Checkpoint Charlie Foundation for this wonderful opportunity. Under the strong leadership of Evelin Morgenstern at the Initiative, this study tour achieved all of its stated objectives and was a resounding success.

Most sincerely,

Fran Perros
Chief, Information Resources
Ralph J. Bunche Library
U.S. Department of State



Bunche Library Information Resources Branch Chief Fran Perros, IIP Electronic Resources Librarian Eileen Deegan, and Information Resources Officer Sheila Weir outside the Federal Constitutional Court, Karlsruhe, Germany.