

SPECIAL LIBRARIES IN GERMANY

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Summary

In view of the difficulty when trying to define a special library, structural problems are discussed which were the cause of the low degree of organisation of special libraries in Germany. Only the emergency after World War II led to a concentration of special library activities and to the foundation of the *Arbeitsgemeinschaft der Spezialbibliotheken* and later of the - now affiliated - *Sektion 5 / Spezialbibliotheken* of the *Deutsche Bibliotheksverband*. Between 20 and 40 % of special libraries in Germany organise in these associations and are members of the co-ordinating group of the *Bundesvereinigung Deutscher Bibliotheksverbände* which is the most important association of librarianship in Germany. Due to their technical and historical proximity to information and documentation, they take an important mediatorial position between this field and the library world today.

What is a special library? This question, which seems to be answerable so easily, proves to be difficult when trying to find a somewhat right definition. The common statement that a special library is a library which has collections distinct from other libraries or better indexed ones is not sufficient as a look at the special library scene shows. The term „special“ turns out to be vague and its idiomatic proximity to terms like „small, easy to survey, in few number“ is not helpful, too, as the following examples may demonstrate.

The small library of the Institute for Biological Control of the Federal Biological Research Centre for Agriculture and Forestry, which is holding approximately 3500 titles, is a special library even if it may rank among the „Zero-person libraries“ as it is managed without library specialists. Also the library of the Federal Biological Research Centre as a whole - a research institute for the special fields of plant diseases, plant protection and phytomedicine - which covers these fields with more than 1500 current journals and 150.000 monographs and which includes the institute mentioned above, doubtless is a special library. And how about the *Deutsche Zentralbibliothek für Landbau*? With its 320.000 volumes,

46.000 dissertations and well over 4000 current journals it is a large library, but this would not keep off anybody from calling it a special library, too, since it serves an extensive but well defined subject. Even the great university and college libraries often tend to regard themselves as collections of special libraries, which really is obvious in view of the numerous subjects represented by them, f. i. in specific department libraries, and they prove this view by manifold co-operation in special library committees and projects.

It appears that it is not possible to define special libraries by means of the characteristics of their collections. Obviously another approach has to be found. This could be the look at their origins. Special libraries not at all emerged from large general libraries by subdivision and specialisation in order to keep increasing collections easy to survey, analogous to the decimal classification. A view on the history of many of these libraries shows that they developed beside the large libraries, so to speak outside the library world.

As a result of the rapid development of science and technology and the realisation of their results within industrial research and manufacture, new information requirements arose since the end of the last century which could not be served sufficiently by the mainly humane orientated large libraries.

Suddenly it was not any longer a matter of searching for the genius of past generations in the noble halls of time-honoured book collections but of getting quick, precise and complete information for realisation in industrial laboratories and research departments as well as in the decision making bodies in government and business. Rapidity in particular was a new aspect scarcely taken into account in librarianship until then, and now in competition the moment of availability of an information could decide about weal and woe of an enterprise.

Thus it had to come to new forms of organisation of collection and supply of documents, which were practically at that time only books and to a comparatively small extent specialist periodicals. There was no more demand for collections arranged after the *Preußische Instruktionen*, the catalogue code generally used in Germany since the end of the nineteenth century, but for quick and precise access to specialised information. There was no more demand for the overall - generally in the humane disciplines - educated science librarian but for the expert on a special field who was able to find particular contents wherever possible and even by neglecting catalogue codes.

At various places as there are industrial and business enterprises, administrative authorities, institutes and committees, collections of books, journals and documents of all kind therefore came into being. Because of their small size there

was no necessity at first for library classification, arrangement and cataloguing or, what is more, indexing and cataloguing often were made under documentary and not at all under library aspects when these collections grew and became difficult to survey. Subject analysis then was given priority over accuracy in a librarian point of view. As late as the sixties of our century many big industrial enterprises used to acquire their library staff by training their own employees and partly in principle (!) resigned on qualified library staff.

No matter whether these trends were typical of Germany or took a similar course in other countries. The principle of decentralisation of all-area supply with libraries which has been valid in Germany for decades and appears in the absence of a German national or central library and on the other hand in a multitude of state, municipal, university and other libraries in all parts of the country up to this day, may have complied with this trend. Small libraries within easy reach were a matter of course to the normal citizen as well as to the interested expert. In accordance with this situation the German federal structure has been promoting local or territorial concerns more than centralist efforts in the last century and again since 1945.

It would be an error, however, to try a definition on the basis of the neglect of library rules and practices. Many of these libraries have well enough observed these rules and practices and at the latest in the mid of this century it became obvious that even very much specialised libraries cannot meet the requirements without co-operation with other libraries and the German library network. The industrial enterprises mentioned above have known the use of library specialists long since, too. The necessity of employing such personnel also in special libraries today is generally accepted and currently only reduced as a result of the difficult financial situation which now and then is giving reason for considerations whether and how to render possible library work without qualified librarians.

Therefore it has to be taken into account that the degree of specialisation or the size of special libraries are as manifold as their bodies. Whereas not only the public libraries but also the large university and college libraries apart from the state and national libraries are basically government controlled at federal, national or municipal level, this is not at all right for special libraries. Of course there are many office libraries and libraries of federal or national research institutes among them. But the majority certainly is located with private corporations, business enterprises, industry, unions and committees, scientific associations, research institutes of various affiliations, or is privately owned. This variety is curse and benefit at the same time for the German special libraries. It is a guarantee for their remarkable multiformity as well as their exceptional flexibility in view of

changing information requirements and their quick reaction on recently developed fields of research. On the other side and resulting from this they are less organised and less orientated by the general German library system rather than by their own parent institutions.

From this a definition might be deducible, declaring a special library as a library the collection maintenance and services of which are only or mainly oriented by the requirements and interests of its parent institution.

This orientation on the parent body accounts for many characteristics of German special libraries and certainly of those in other countries, too. This applies to the above mentioned priority of technical aspects over library related ones as well as to the restraint of many special libraries to render services beyond their parent institutions and it explains their low degree of organisation. Whereas the libraries under government control are faced a category of parent institutions largely comparable to legal and budget status and thus easily are in a position to define common demands and to join within respective associations, this is not valid for special libraries. So their greatest association in Germany, the *Arbeitsgemeinschaft der Spezialbibliotheken e.V.*, did not arise by the awareness of common demands and representation of interests but in 1946 in emergency caused by largely destroyed and damaged industry libraries, trying together to record and make available the stocks which had withstood the war, due to necessity and for mutual benefit.

As the emergency, which was the reason for the foundation of this working association, soon was surmounted the association could proceed to other tasks such as continuation training, making clear of common demands, participation in the German library system in general, and other questions. At the same time the responsible persons both in the executive board organising the working association and in the advisory board representing the multitude of libraries within the association always knew that among special libraries and especially among their parent bodies the sense of common responsibility and concern was bound up with the look at the parent institution's benefit.

When in 1973 the *Deutsche Bibliotheksverband* was founded in Germany, divided into state associations on the one side and into sections representing the several types of libraries on the other side, Section 5 - Special Libraries - remained to be an insignificant group compared to the other sections and from the beginning it was open to close co-operation with the much older and well established *Arbeitsgemeinschaft der Spezialbibliotheken*. Some special libraries and their parent institutions hardly understood the organisational union of *Arbeitsgemeinschaft* and *Sektion* in 1988, which doubtless was imperative in view

of the German and international library situation, even though they commendably fully shared it.

Even if in this *Arbeitsgemeinschaft* and the affiliated section of the *Deutscher Bibliotheksverband* nowadays more than 1000 libraries are organised and co-operate effectively, it is a fact that this number according to expert estimates includes not more than 20 per cent of the special libraries actually existing in Germany.

The official German library statistics, too, in 1994 only recorded 1074 special libraries (only libraries not organised in other sections as university libraries, central libraries, factory libraries etc.) with 2817 employees, a collection size of 54,1 million volumes and acquisition costs of 97,1 million; in this connection the *Deutsches Bibliotheksinstitut* editing the library statistics proceeds from an under 40 per cent co-operation of special libraries in the statistics.

This is a great pity because it leads inevitably often to an underrating and neglecting of number and importance of special libraries in Germany, their collections, their employees, by the authorities, as lately in spring 1996 the discussion about the *Bundesförderungsprogramm für Information und Dokumentation in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland* [Federal Support Programme for Information and Documentation in the Federal Republic of Germany] showed when in the working papers special libraries were not mentioned at all. It results from the aforesaid that this little participation in statistics and organising activity, however unfortunate this may be, yet is system-immanent since many bodies of special libraries and thereby they themselves are afraid to publicise details concerning their stocks, staff, budget, etc. By the way the extremely perfected and precise *Deutsche Bibliotheksstatistik* is overtaxing many small special libraries with its questions, which are doubtless adequate to large and universal libraries. It is one of the functions of the association to solve this problem.

In contrast with the little inclination of special libraries to organise under general aspects is their great interest in specialised co-operation according to the basic idea of a special library. Thus in Germany parliamentary and administrative libraries, medical libraries, art and museum libraries and others, organise, and often these organisations turn from the library into the documentary field, such as the *Gesellschaft für Bibliothekswesen und Dokumentation des Landbaus*, and even the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Dokumentation* numbers a great many special libraries among its members.

An additional aspect of special library work becomes evident here: the close connection with the field of information and documentation. Many documentation

centres arose from special library collections in the mid century since the above mentioned priority of subject analysis to cataloguing often led to card catalogues and retrieval systems which met the requirements of a documentary file or easily could be transferred into peek-a-boo cards or edge-punched cards in the early years, later into EDP-databases. This development was rendered easy as special libraries, due to priority of subject-matters of their documents, less thought and acted in categories of collection than universal libraries, so that retrieval of entries early included technical literature of other libraries. Not to collect documents but to know where to find them is one of the principles of documentary work early accepted in special libraries.

Even nowadays special libraries are closely connected with the field of information and documentation. Thus the members of the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Dokumentation (DGD)* at an opinion poll in 1994 regarded the *Arbeitsgemeinschaft der Spezialbibliotheken* as the most important professional association after the DGD.

Special libraries in Germany show a multifarious scene of forms of organisation, size and technical responsibility. Nevertheless or maybe just for that reason they are an extraordinary lively, active, flexible field of work with competence and a sense of responsibility for their parent institutions, their users and librarianship in Germany.

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