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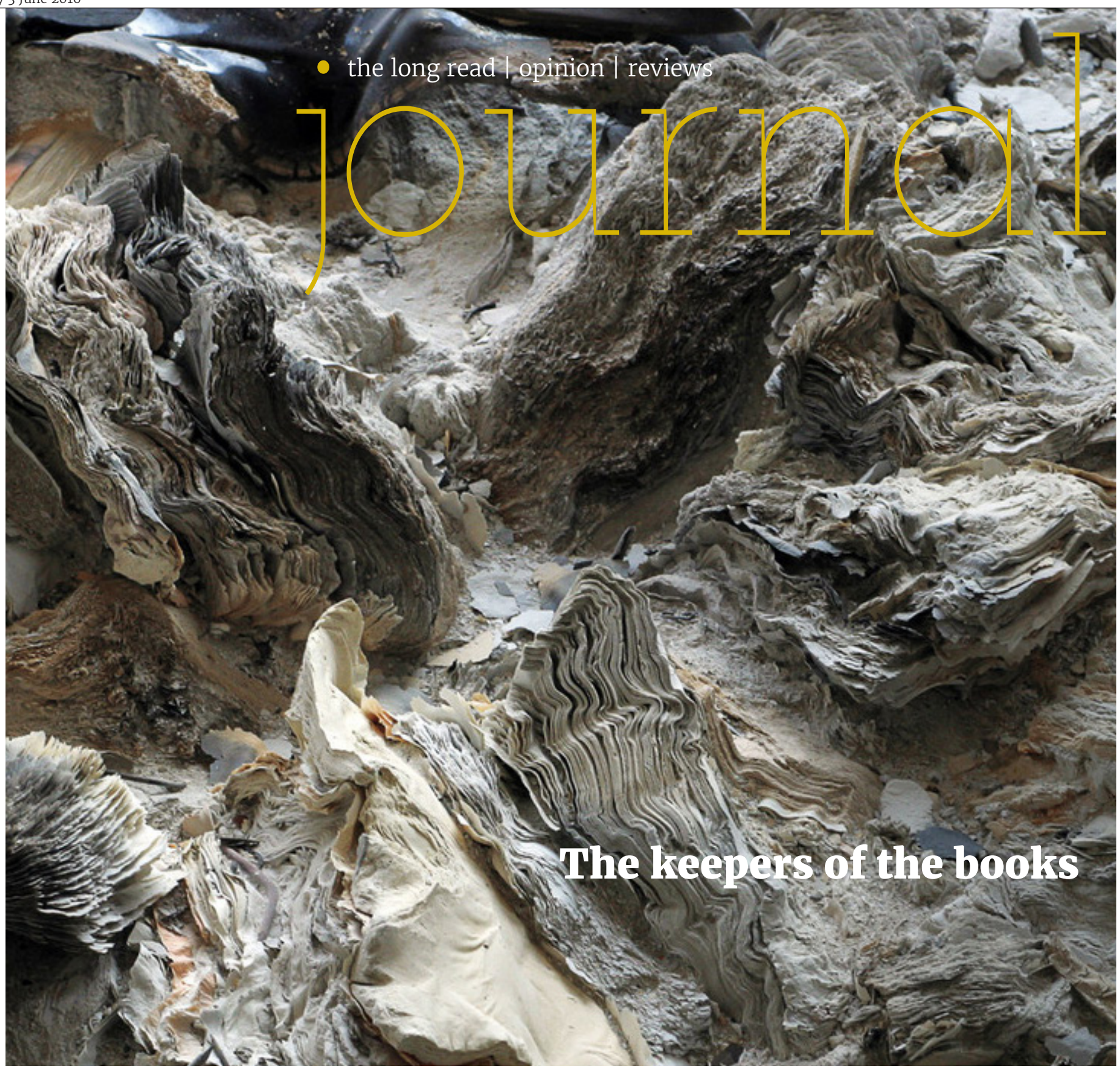


The keepers of the books

the long read
Stowed in banana boxes or safeguarded in freezers: As ISIS ransacks libraries in Iraq, Camilla Sterne looks back on the lengths people have gone to preserve the world's valuable archives

Birds chirp and a voice chatters as smoke twists into the air, cruel spirals crowning its kindling. A flake of ash arcs skyward – blissfully inanimate. The source of this flame is not a pile of neatly stacked logs. This a fire for the purpose of warming hands or roasting food. This is a crematorium – an immolation of hundreds of books deemed blasphemous by the Islamic State (ISIS).

Thus describes a scene from the terror group's stronghold of Mosul in northern Iraq, where in March members of ISIS' religious police force, the Diwan Al-Hisba, burnt hundreds of Christian books considered blasphemous towards Allah. Though the destruction targeted religious texts, ISIS militants were less selective when they ransacked the Central Library of Mosul in early 2015, smashing the locks and destroying more than 8,000 manuscripts and books, some of which were registered on a UNESCO rarities list.

This phenomenon is not unique, and follows a lengthy legacy of radicals and extremists targeting libraries to strip societies of their cultural and intellectual faculty - from the famed House of Wisdom's destruction in by Mongols in 1258 AD to the Nazi occupation of Poland during WWII, when nearly all Polish libraries suffered damage and an estimated 15 million out of 22.5 million volumes throughout the country were destroyed.

UNESCO's Memory of the World Programme started in 1992 to counteract exactly this kind of deliberate destruction. And though UNESCO's efforts have offered a system for registering, digitising and safeguarding important archives, citizens and library staff often find themselves on the frontlines in efforts to preserve threatened cultural heritage.

Some 12 miles from Mosul at a mountaintop monastery, for example, a group of Iraqi monks feared for the safety of their own library after the barrage of ISIS attacks on cultural institutions in 2015. Together they spirited away 80 of the millennium-old manuscripts to a safe house, where the delicate and ancient volumes today remain safely nestled on a yellow shelf in an undisclosed location.

It's a stunning concept: a person or group of people willing to risk their lives to preserve old books. Yet for many libraries threatened by war, terrorism, or unrest, there exists a single courageous person willing to go to great lengths to protect, rebuild and reinvigorate their beloved institution: a guardian of the library, a guardian of books.

Hands around the library, *Egypt*

Ismail Serageldin peered with his colleagues through the large glass windows overlooking the plaza at the Bibliotheca Alexandrina in the coastal Egyptian city of Alexandria, facing the Mediterranean Sea. Dr Serageldin, the founding director of the library, watched in trepidation as several hundred thousand young Egyptian revolutionaries edged closer to the glass facade of the building. He knew how easily the glass might shatter. As the swarm chanted slogans against the regime, he wondered: "What can I possibly say to calm them? Will they be able to listen to anything?"

It was 2011, and Islamic, liberal, anti-capitalist, nationalist and feminist revolutionaries had taken the city of Alexandria by storm to demand the overthrow of President Hosni Mubarak. Protesters burned police stations, the National Democratic Party's headquarters and a government house only 10 blocks from the library. The library itself was a product of President Mubarak's regime: critics claimed he positioned the library and the city of Alexandria as a linchpin in cultural reconciliation with the West to promote "softer steps" towards democracy. The library's rules and procedures were aligned with those governing the National Democratic Party, the World Bank and other Egyptian organisations at the time. Dr Serageldin's alarm was justified.

But as he watched, remarkably, the very same rioters who had burnt other government organisations to the ground broke away from the crowd and began to link hands, surrounding the library. The protesters unravelled a giant Egyptian flag and laid the flag on the steps of the building, encircling it in a symbolic and protective gesture.

"They were making a statement – that this is the library, and no one touches the library," said Dr Serageldin. "It was one of the most exalting moments in my life."

As I sit across from Dr Serageldin at the Hilton Park Lane in London, he rattles off a list of the Library of Alexandria's storied achievements: "It was there that the great Archimedes was a visiting professor for two-and-a-half years, where the length of the solar year was calculated within six-and-a-half minutes, where Eratosthenes calculated the circumference of the earth to an accuracy of 98.5 per cent of our modern measurements. And it was there that for the first time, the Old Testament was translated from Hebrew into Greek."

It is clear that Dr Serageldin has recited this list

ad-nauseum since becoming the institution's founding director in 2000, when Egyptian and international governments funnelled approximately $220 million into the project over the course of 13 years. The 11-storey, 80,000 square metre Bibliotheca Alexandria officially opened on 16 October 2002 as a contemporary revival of the ancient institution destroyed in approximately 270 AD.

Dr Serageldin offers up pictures of the library as a new mother might her infant. He is incredibly proud of the institution's legacy. He beams, flicking through snapshots depicting the library staff standing in unity with the presidents of each successive Egyptian regime over the last five years: Hosni Mubarak, Mohammed Morsi, Adly Mansour and Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. He makes the point that the library has been accepted and protected at a grassroots level, and embraced by five different presidencies throughout half a decade of notable turbulence.

"In periods of great upheaval, libraries and institutions of culture can play a positive role and we are now trying to challenge the extremist thinking that exists in our part of the world," he says. "Institutions like this have a major role to play, and by their very nature they support visions of openness, tolerance, rationality, debate and discussion. Thus they are the target of zealots, xenophobes, bigots and totalitarianists. We are in direct opposition to extremism and zealotry."

Yet, there is a certain irony to Dr Serageldin's grand assertions of democracy and transparency. The library director was charged with squandering public money through employing overpaid advisors and embezzling donations in a case that has been postponed for more than 14 hearings since 2012. Also in 2012, Dr Serageldin dismissed poet Omar Hazeq from the Bibliotheca after Mr Hazeq was sentenced to two years in jail for violating the Protest Law. Calls to boycott activities at the Bibliotheca were widely circulated on social media in response to what was seen as an arbitrary decision.

Other accounts from January that year describe the director being locked in his office by 400 library staff members who barred his exit, demanding he tender his resignation. Mr Serageldin reportedly phoned the army, who arrived with a ladder to aid his escape through his fifth floor office window. The controversy has since blown over, and Mr Serageldin boastfully attributes the library's success to his own hard work throughout the last 15 years.

"I wrote the law that created the institution," he says. "I shepherded it through parliament. I started with 50 employees and an unfinished building, and then I hired everybody else and created the departments. I now have 2,400 staff. I feel a very strong sense of ownership."

And it's true that the library is a rare bright spot in a country that has infamously disregarded constitutional principles of freedom of information and imprisoned domestic and international journalists. Despite Egypt's political climate, Mr Serageldin has established the library as a learning complex, with a planetarium, art exhibitions, a children's learning centre, a virtual reality chamber and a museum chronicling the life of President Anwar el-Sadat. The institution also serves as a cultural lectern for Mr Serageldin and like-minded scholars and leaders.

He remains the flawed patriarch and loyal guardian of an institution with enduring symbolic fortitude: a secular pillar of universal knowledge that is world famous for once housing the most respected intellectuals of the ancient world. Dr Serageldin thinks the rioters protected the library because the young revolutionaries understood the values of "pluralism, openness and dialogue" that the library stands for.

Not long after the 2011 riots, Dr Serageldin received word of a mural that had been painted on the Eastern side of Alexandria. In bright colours, the artwork depicted the three pyramids of Giza together beside a "fourth pyramid", as president Mubarak had often called the Bibliotheca Alexandrina – the library with a church and a mosque growing together out of its cylindrical roof. The mural has since been painted over, but its message was a reminder to Egyptians in difficult times of a cultural heritage bolstered by this revered space, a space where different religions, ideas and human beings can coexist.

▲ **A manuscript from the Gazi Husrev-Bey collection**
Gerry Steel

> **It is only with books that life makes sense"**

Stowed in banana boxes, ***Sarajevo***

"It is only with books that life makes sense," says Mustafa Jahić.

And despite his imperfect English, Mr Jahić's meaning is precise. Having lived through the four-year Siege of Sarajevo in Bosnia, the former director of the Gazi-Huzrev Bey Library understands senselessness, and therefore, sense. He does not mean that all the mysteries of life are solved in books, nor that he finds the sanctuary of a fictional world more compelling than reality – though these may also ring true. Mr Jahić means that a life lived with books is the only meaningful one.

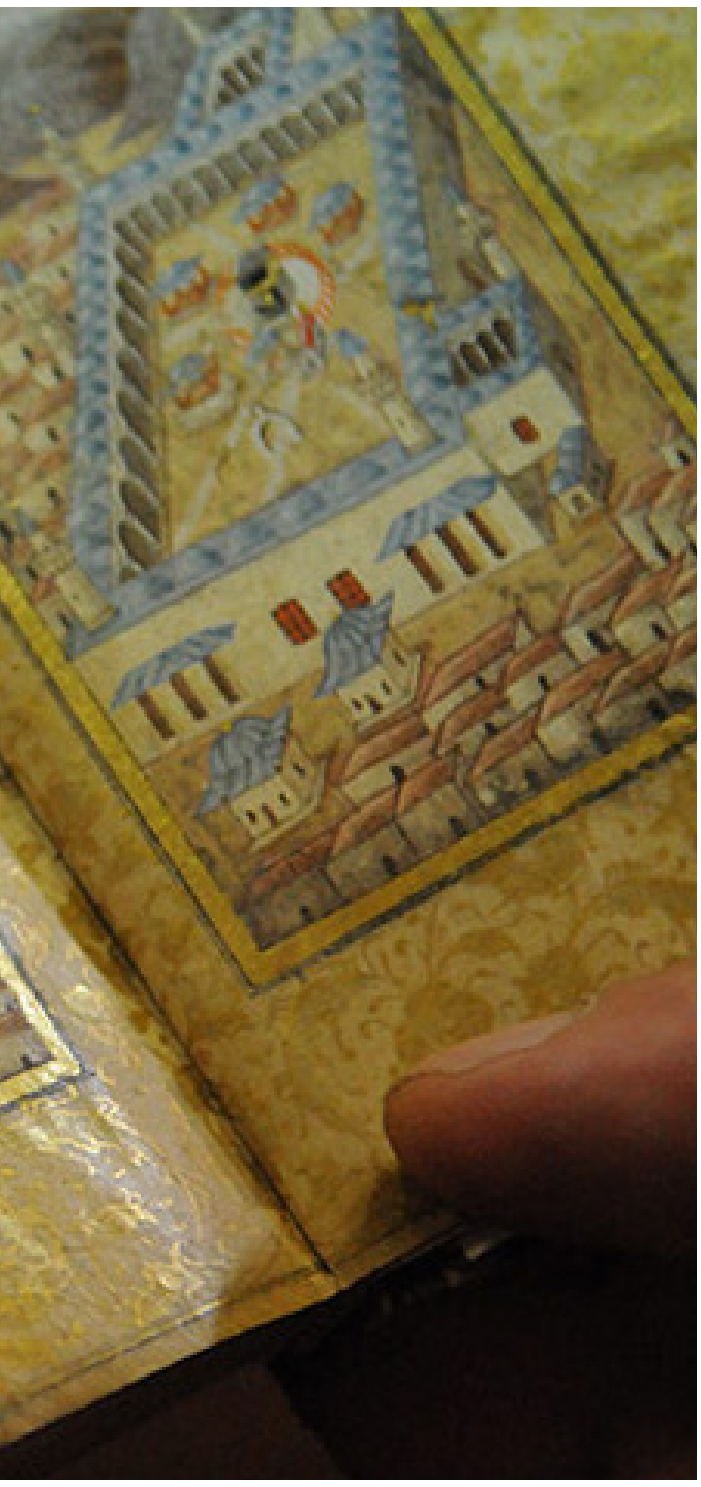
"Living in wartime makes your life exposed to risk against your will," says Mr Jahić. "However, by saving books, you actually save yourself, i.e. your life, because books are witnesses of our living, our memory, the essence of our identity. That is why we strived to save them, regardless of difficulties, and in spite of risking our own lives. Without them, it is as if we are not living."

Established in 1537, the Gazi-Huzrev Bey Library was the product of an endowment charter created by the famous Governor Gazi Husrev-bey for his madrasa, which included the Seljukija Mosque. The charter allocated leftover construction expenses to the purchase of "good books that shall be read in the madrasah and rewritten by readers interested in science". Books purchased under these terms, along with Islamic manuscripts the governor donated, comprised the library at its founding. It quickly grew into a diverse collection.

Mr Jahić had been director of the library for five years when the Siege began in 1992 in newly established Bosnia-Herzegovina, following the breakup of multi-ethnic Yugoslavia. The country erupted almost immediately into a battlefield, with Muslim Bosniak and Catholic Croatian populations targeted by Serbian supported Orthodox nationalists. Mr Jahić was only 38 years old.

The city of Sarajevo was set ablaze. Mortars and gunshots punctuated the sky above gaping apartment

▼ Mr Jahić
Gerry Steel



windows. Glass shards piled up to knee height. Citizens were left with no food, electricity, telephones or gas for warmth. Water became a scarcity. The Serb militia took hold of the city and claimed the lives of nearly 14,000 in Sarajevo alone, including 5,400 civilians. The militia also systematically attacked Bosnia's cultural institutions.

Mr Jahić and his colleagues resolved to save the Bey library's collection from what they feared would be its inevitable destruction. As the violence escalated, the group agreed to relocate the manuscripts to the nearby Gazi-Huzrev Bey madrasa, also known as Kursumli: where the library was first founded.

With Sarajevo under shellfire and in constant fear of snipers, the group loaded thousands of cumbersome books into banana boxes and carted them one at a time across the river to the madrasa. These protectors darted one-by-one between buildings, fearing for their own lives yet determined to save their irreplaceble cargo.

The books came to rest at Kursumli, where Mr Jahić visited them every day. Each day he journeyed seven kilometres from his home on the outskirts of the city by way of a large cemetery. He sprinted through a wide section of narrow white Islamic tombstones to the Catholic and Orthodox plots, where the wider and darker gravestones offered more shelter from sniper fire. Each time he left home, he turned to look at his family as if for the very last time.

On the 25 August 1992, a fire engulfed the National Library, which held 1.5 million volumes and over 155,000 rare books and manuscripts. Citizens and librarians attempted to save some books while they were under sniper fire, but the majority of the books were destroyed. Ashy pages and partial bindings could be found up to seven kilometres from the ruined building. As shells fell from the sky like ripe pears, Mr Jahić worried for the fate of his own library.

"I was almost sure that the same would happen to my library," says Mr Jahić. "I felt helpless as if anticipating the unavoidable loss of a dear one."

Again, the team relocated the Bey's manuscripts, making a longer trip to an unused fire station where they rested unharmed for some time. In October 1995, Mr Jahić decided that microfilming the books was the only way to ensure their preservation. He enlisted the help of microfilm technician, Muhamed Music, to begin micro-

Knowledge should be free like water and oxygen"

filming some 15,000 books using a machine imported by way of Vienna and through a tunnel running under the airport. Music said the process would likely take 20 years, given the shortage of water, chemicals to develop the film and unpredictable access to electricity.

They began the gruelling process, but soon found relief when the siege finally ended in December 1995. Over four years, 250,000 people were killed in Bosnia-Herzegovina and two million refugees fled the country. A peace agreement marked the end of the war, and heralded a fruitful conclusion of Mr Jahić's fight to save his books. He and his colleagues had successfully protected 10,067 irreplaceable manuscripts.

The collection now rests in a new Gazi-Huzrev Bey library, some 250 metres from the slow, melancholy Miljacka River that runs through central Sarajevo. The three-story library was built over the course of 10 years and opened on 17 January 2014. Its graceful glass and marble curves hold reading rooms, a conservation room, a 200-seat auditorium and a museum dedicated to Bosnia's history of literacy.

Mr Jahić was overjoyed to see a new library built, but often thinks back to a time when his life and that of his fellow Bosnians and Herzegovinians were under threat.

"I sometimes feel sorrow and fear, asking myself how it would have been if my library were destroyed like the Oriental Institute and National Library," he says, though nowadays his sense of pride often outweighs his sorrow. "Books inspire us for new civilisational and scientific efforts. They are mental and scholarly bastions on whose foundations civilizations were born. At the same time, they defend the achieved cultural, religious, moral, and other values that are part of our identities. In simple words, it is only with books that we can build our future."

Under lock and freeze, *Iraq*

Saad Eskander became the director of a library that was already in ruin.

The Iraq National Library and Archives (INLA) was set fire between the 10 and 12 April 2003. The United States had invaded the city of Baghdad just days prior, and with the head of the Iraqi body politic removed, the capital descended into chaos. Looters and mafia members seized the opportunity to ransack cultural institutions, burning artefacts or salvaging them for sale on the black market.

The INLA was reduced to rubble. The former director general had been dismissed due to close links with Saddam Hussein's regime. Around 25 per cent of the publications and rare books and 60 per cent of the records were destroyed or looted. Books were diminished to ash. Waterlogged and pulverized fragments of parchment were scattered across the ground.

"I didn't know the extent of the damages," says Mr Eskander. "After I went there and I saw for myself, I was stunned. I had a huge task on my hands. I had to start from below zero. There was no money in the Ministry of Culture, or the institution. We didn't have a government or a budget."

Mr Eskander took over in December 2003, on the eve of the escalating US occupation, and remained in his position throughout 12 years of sectarian violence, political restructuring, the Blackwater shootings, Turkish raids and constant suicide bombings. The US Library of Congress had allocated $2 to 3 million to the rebuilding of the library with US Secretary of State, Colin Powell, pledging to recover and repair looted antiquities, amid criticism that US troops should have prevented the damage.

"The American and the British occupying forces should have protected cultural and academic centres and institutions, but they didn't," says Mr Eskander. "They did not live up to their responsibility."

Soon after assuming his role, Mr Eskander discovered that the money promised by the US Department of State had been withdrawn. He had to rely on his own initiative to gain financial support from outside of Iraq, appealing to governments and NGOs in Italy, Czech Republic, Britain, the United States and others.

With the library building in ruins, Eskander and his colleagues searched the city for any intact buildings that might serve as a temporary holding for the library's remaining collection. Mr Eskander found an abandoned freezer in the kitchen of a bombed-out private club previously occupied by Ba'athist elite officers. He acquired a generator to power the freezer and hired a guard to keep watch over the space. The mildewing remnants of the Ottoman archive, with over 400 years of Iraqi history, were contained for a time in a bombed building, frozen, their disintegration slowed by an old kitchen freezer until conservators could apply proper conservation methods.

It was determined that the original site could, after all, be successfully renovated. Structural damage to the building and access to electricity and water were restored by March 2005, and by July 2005 the National Library had six computers with internet access.

▲ **Dr Eskander assists restorators at the INLA**
Gerry Steel

Mr Eskander's guardianship of the library was an on-going one. From time to time, he received intelligence reports that the INLA was under threat from terrorists. He purchased guns and ammunition on the black market and hired guards to protect the building. Seven of his employees died, most lost to the civil war. One Shia staff member was kidnapped and killed by Al Qaeda when he exited through the rear door of the library, which laid some 200 metres from an Al Qaeda stronghold.

Mr Eskander pushed constantly to gain funding for new library initiatives, and credits American NGO JumpStart and Italian NGO Un Ponte Per for their support. He feels, however, that American and European organisations often undervalued the importance of fostering secular culture in Iraq.

"I asked them to please invest in the cultural and academic institutions of Iraq," he says. "This is the only way to fight fundamentalism. That was a mistake. They thought giving arms would be enough to fight these groups. You must fight ideas with ideas. It's cheaper and it will be more successful in the long run."

Mr Eskander also spearheaded the construction of a five-storey building called the Digital Library, and secured $19 million from the Iraqi government for its construction. The space would offer on-site or remote internet access to digitalised audio-visual collections, periodicals, books and records. Mr Eskander said the digitisation halted after in April 2015, but reports by the AP point to it resuming, prompted by ISIS' destruction of the library in Mosul.

Sadly, Mr Eskander was removed from his role as director in 2015 due to what he characterises as the inevitable shifting of roles within a volatile country. His staff and international intellectuals protested his removal, but Mr Eskander was not surprised. He says he was one of many people that fell "victim to personal agendas" adopted by ministers in his country. He has since joined his family in Sulaymaniyah, Kurdistan, where he advises the Kurdish parliament in establishing a national archive. He also serves on panels as an expert on cultural documentation and human rights recourse. Despite the pain of leaving the INLA, he is proud of the work he accomplished there.

"Knowledge should be free to everybody, like water and oxygen," he says. "After all it's my duty as a human being. I don't do these things because I'm patriotic or nationalist. I do it because I'm a human being. Culture, civilisation, and cultural artefacts – all of these things don't have a national identity. It's world heritage."

There is a certain desolation to the thought of a pillaged library: the dreams, insights and discoveries of previous generations left to disintegrate across quiet floorboards. Mr Eskander calls it the "cemetery of books".

The destruction of a library represents a gap in the annals history: an unprecedented intellectual cleansing; knowledge that will never be entrusted to the next generation. The lost Library of Alexandria is one such gap. It is a hierarchical crime, based not upon need or desperation, but with the distinct aim of denying humanity access to knowledge. Ironically, these tactics fully acknowledge the weight carried by language and ideas, yet seek to forcibly silence opposing or differing ideologies.

US Secretary of State John Kerry reacted to ISIS' cultural cleansing in March 2015, saying: "ISIL's twisted goal is clear: to eviscerate a culture and rewrite history in its own brutal image. This crude attempt to erase the heritage of an ancient civilization will ultimately fail. No terrorist can rewrite history." And Senator Kerry's words point to hope – because for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction.

So it is in this reaction that libraries find their strength and rebirth: in the directors, library staff, citizens, intellectuals and governments willing to suffer great risks to protect their cultural heritage of books and archives. Books cannot guard themselves. Yet if protected, they, in turn, safeguard the "brighter future" envisioned by Mr Jahić.

The Latin root of library - *liber* - means book. The Latin root of liberty - *liber* - also means free. It is no coincidence that a society without libraries is also a society without liberty. ●

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