

Between Then and Now- What's in the Black Hole?

Experiences From Museum-work in Post-war Bosnia and Hercegovina

By

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Per Kåks has been directing different museums in Sweden since 1978 and been involved in the creation of three museums. He has been an active member of ICOM since the beginning of the 70s and has been president of ICAMT and ICME. His last assignment in ICOM was as member of the Ethics committee till 2004. Per Kåks is now retired but still working as a consultant and secretary of the Foundation Cultural Heritage without Borders.

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The foundation Cultural Heritage without Borders, CHwB, was created by a group of Swedish citizens who saw the destruction of cultural monuments in Bosnia-Hercegovina as the destruction of a common human heritage. They formed a group and a foundation in which the founders are The National Board of Antiquities, The Swedish Architects Association, Swedish National Committee of ICOMOS and Swedish National Committee of ICOM. Our funds come to a greater part from Swedish International Development Agency, SIDA, but also from other sources, both Swedish and international. The major part of our work and money has been invested in restoration of monuments in Bosnia-Hercegovina, Kosovo, Serbia and Macedonia. We

have two local offices, one in Pristina, Kosovo and one in Sarajevo, Bosnia-Hercegovina. Both have local staff. Together with the national and regional protection offices we have selected the monuments to be restored, both secular and religious buildings representing the ethnic and religious composition of the countries. Mosques, churches, monasteries, city houses and farmhouses have been restored using local labour and local material but with Scandinavian restorer architects in cooperation with architects both from the local society and from other countries. Every object has also become a training possibility for young architects. We have till now restored approx. 25 buildings, made approx. 10 maintenance plans, arranged 6 educational workshops and employed approx. 30 local architects and engineers. In 2006 CHwB received the Europa Nostra medal.

Working more than ten years in Western Balkan, most of those years with the Zemaljski Muzej, the National Museum of Bosnia- Hercegovina, in Sarajevo, has given me new and interesting experiences on top of my forty years of museum work. These types of experiences are known to those who work with post war politics, with the situation in societies where the social, economical and political structures have collapsed.

Even if I have many years with museum work in many parts of the world I met with a situation that shook my naïve belief that museums and museum professionals are rock solid structures wherever and whenever you meet them. And they are in a way, but the context in which they exist changes the role and function of the museum.

I have never met with such solidarity for the institution as that I found among the staff of the above museum in Sarajevo. The staff had protected the collections with all they had, in one case with the loss of life. One of the directors was killed by a sniper when he was covering a hole in the roof of the museum. Staff members came to the museum even if it meant they had to pass the “Snipers Alley” every day. They stayed over night in the museum to protect it from thefts. The sensitive collections and the library were brought down in the basements and the curtains were used for sandbags.

When I first visited the museum, in 1997 our organisation, the Foundation Cultural Heritage without Borders had already made a couple of support jobs. As we regarded the museum a very vital institution for the protection of the cultural heritage of Bosnia-Hercegovina we had sent one museum curator and two conservators to estimate the

immediate needs which resulted in a shipment of dehumidifiers and plastic film to protect showcases from rain coming through the broken roofs. The first restoration job of the buildings was the glazing of the lanterns.

There were two different sentiments that confronted me when I first came to the museum, the one of loyalty with the museum and with the science, the other of hopelessness and frustration.

I saw the opportunities of making new exhibitions in the empty galleries and was met with frustration and desperation. This was the first glimpse I got of the black hole in which the staff dwelt. No money, no salaries, no heating, no equipment and insecurity about the condition of the collections. Where to start? They started with the work to re-establish the collections and to open the old exhibitions. All they wanted was to get firm ground under their feet.

I started with what I had at hand, myself. I talked, listened, asked questions, observed. I realized that they had no reason to trust me, to listen to me, even if we had come with some material help to the museum. They had received that kind of help before, placed on the threshold by donors who then disappeared. Why should they trust this director from an unknown national museum, I was then director of the National museum of Ethnography in Stockholm. He might be another bureaucrat without any knowledge of museum work. This was the next feeling of the black – don't trust those who come with gifts.

The situation changed when after many meetings with the staff I by mistake gave them my CV. They knew by then my person, now they learned about my professional background. From then on we got a dialogue in which we could talk quite openly. We held meetings with the whole staff, something that had never occurred before. We had one important two day seminar with the whole staff and people from other museums where we together made a development plan and formed working groups around themes of importance in which all staff categories were involved.

What was more important than many other factors for result was that we persisted. We worked with the restoration of the museum buildings and at the same time supporting equipment and training. A busload of tools, furniture, work clothes, electric equipment etc. helped to establish the trust. Our series of seminars was based on their own needs expressed in our dialogue. We concentrated first on the staff of the museum but

enlarged it to all museums in Sarajevo. But it was through a seminar for all the museums in BiH that I was confronted with the black hole that has given this relation its heading.

The first three workshops we arranged were about museological topics, exhibitions, public relations and museum education. We tried to involve as many as possible from the different professions in the museums noting that many professional categories were missing. The museums had no educators, no PR officers or exhibition designers or – producers. The workshops did not create these professionals but revealed the need of more specialists within the museums and most importantly they changed the way to look at the role of the museum as an institution in the service of society. The workshop on public relation had an almost immediate effect for opening the museum to the public.

But I had during these years learned that the attitude to the museum subjects, the collection areas, was very conservative. When I saw a Roma camp outside the museum I asked one of the ethnologists whether they had any collections from this group, the answer was no. The explanation was that according to the Tito doctrines no ethnic groups existed, they were all Yugoslavs. When at a discussion I asked why I had not seen a bicycle or an ordinary brown polyester suit from the 70s and only wooden tools and traditional dresses the answer from some of the older staffs was that these objects were not important. The bicycle was for the non-existing technical museum to collect. Had the museum interviewed the tram drivers about their existence during the years when they drove their trams along “Snipers Alley”?

It is easy to come from the outside and ask questions like that. I knew I stepped on soft ground and I felt that my questions were frustrating or even aggressive for them. I realized that BiH did not have Ethnology or Archaeology at the university. I learned that the older staff members had studied in Belgrade and Zagreb before the war and that they still had very much of the thinking from the Tito period in their way of working. Many of them had been abroad as refugees and the possibilities to keep in touch with colleagues and contemporary literature had been very limited. Telephone lines, fax and internet had not been functioning. The exchange of books between the museum and foreign museums had been broken.

My theory is, though, that the real obstacle was the old tradition, perhaps even as old as from the Austro-Hungarian period that meant that the present ongoing life is not worth studying or collecting. I recognized the attitude as we had the same situation in Sweden far into the sixties. As late as in 1968 an older museum director told me that there was nothing interesting in the life of the sawmill workers as they all were sons of farmers who had moved to the factory and did not form a different social life.

What I saw here were museums with no material, either written documentation or material from the last 50-60 years, covering the whole period from after the WWII, the Tito period when Yugoslavia was formed and became a heavily industrialized state with a completely new social structure and economy. Its mineral resources and heavy industry made Yugoslavia into a rich and prosperous country. It exported both goods and skilled labour to the rest of the world and was self supporting. But the museums only described the old farming society. I had seen it in the big museum in Sarajevo but also in the smaller museums in different towns in BiH. In dialogue with the director and the staff we decided to make a workshop on Ethnology in the museum for all museums in BiH and to invite lecturers from other countries to talk and discuss new attitudes, methods and trends in contemporary ethnology and how to cope with this lacuna in collections and knowledge. The program was planned together with the Zemaljski Musej and involved lecturers from Scandinavia, BiH and Croatia. The participants came from all museums in BiH and many of them are very small and many of them do not have ethnologists. But again, the idea was not to create professional scholars but to open the eyes and to make them aware of the quick transformation of the society that was going on and to catch the moment before the country is totally changed and those who have lived through these last fifty years are all gone. It became very obvious when we visited one of the big industries, the steel works in Zenica, which before the war occupied 12000 workers and now only 2000. How to document what had happened, what to collect - and who shall do it and who shall pay for it? But also in the small scale we could observe insecurity about what to collect. One problem with collecting in this society was money. People, who have lost most of their property or had to sell it during the war to get food, were not willing to donate to the museum, there was not a surplus.

The need for contact with the colleagues in other museums and other countries was obvious. The contact between the colleagues from the parts of the former Yugoslavia

still existed, because they had studied together, they spoke the same language and they needed each other and their knowledge. Zemaljski Muzej was a natural head institution in BiH and acted as such in giving support to the smaller museums by lending curators and objects for exhibitions. One important improvement was the recreation of the BiH ICOM committee, with members from both BiH and Republika Srpska. The museum has also got an embryo to a 'Friends of the Museum' association.

The museum functions now rather well, even if it has not yet got the necessary economical support from the government. Still it is not clear if they will have heating the whole winter. But their programme is full of exhibitions, lectures, excavations and school activities.

Next big workshop will be about Archaeology in museum but this will be organized within our new scheme, the Museum network for Western Balkan.

This network has a dozen member museums, big and small, from Albania, BiH, Serbia, Macedonia, Kosovo and Montenegro. We have already held six seminars, two about management, one on documentation and digitalization, one on museum education, one on travelling exhibitions and one on the ICOM Code of Ethics. The overall programme was formed in a meeting in Sweden in 2006 and the member museums divided the individual programmes between them. They are provided the economy from Sweden but arrange the local programme themselves including invitation, visa information, tickets, lodging, food and entertainment and of course the accounting. Lecturers are both local and from other countries. As these programmes cover many different topics we also get a good spread of participants from the museums involved. At every occasion there is always some extra persons participating who come from the neighbourhood and who don't cause extra costs. I think you recognize this from the ICOM committee meetings.

And again we see professionalism prevail over ethnicity and religion. They all speak the same language except the Albanians with the Kosovars who speak both Serbo-Croatian and Albanian. They all have the same background in former communist regimes and the elders have all studied at the same universities. They all seem to appreciate the opportunity to meet again and renew the contact under a neutral and professional label.

We are now planning a new project, Museums and persons with special needs. CHwB has received funds from the Stavros Niarchos Foundation for a three year project and will start this year with a survey of the present situation in the countries in our network. Together with the colleagues and specialists we shall list existing methods and material and technical solutions and try to find new ways of making the museums more accessible to those with special needs.

We have experienced a lot of this solidarity from our Swedish museums who willingly and without cost have let their staff members act as specialist lecturers on our workshops and who have welcomed colleagues from the Balkan to come to spend a week or two to learn in their museums. A travelling exhibition about the cultural treasures in Bosnia-Hercegovina was shown in 15 museums in Sweden and Norway.

Finally I appeal to you, dear colleagues, to think about in which way you can help and support colleagues in countries and situations that are threatened by war or other catastrophes. We are interested in your experiences and your expertise and will share what we have learned with you.