

*The guest of the Library blog Geros knygos is our colleague **Ursula Liebmann** (Austria). Ursula is the general manager of Meeting Point Library, the office for public libraries, which is tasked with offering a service and support for public librarians and their work within 260 public libraries in the federal province of Lower Austria.*

**The COVID-19 outbreak is having a global impact, and affecting local communities. Staff in libraries of all types, geographic locations, and sizes are learning the facts about this public health crisis, informing the public, and adapting services and programming to meet changing community needs.**

**What is the impact on Austrian libraries? What activities and services take place in libraries in Austria during the emergency?**

**How have Austrian libraries improved the existing services and have they developed any new services during the pandemic?**

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I am the general manager of Meeting Point Library, the office for public libraries, which is tasked with offering a service and support for public librarians and their work within 260 public libraries in the federal province of Lower Austria. Furthermore, it is responsible for the development of librarianship as well as for generating visions and strategies to implement the paradigm shift that is taking place. I collaborate closely with all the other provinces of Austria and I am a board member of the Büchereiverband Österreich (Library Association Austria).

The Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown had a major impact on public libraries. Overnight, the libraries had to close and were no longer "meeting places", because, according to the federal government, meeting up in groups had to be kept to a minimum. The province of Lower Austria reacted quickly and opened the online library noe-book.at free of charge for all Lower Austrians. This decision was taken quickly and unbureaucratically in order to provide an attractive reading offer and more during this time of restrictions. The registration was handled by the service centre Treffpunkt Bibliothek.

The team was challenged - and positively surprised - by the rush of interested people. The online library contains e-books, e-audios, e-videos, e-learning language courses and the online encyclopaedia Brockhaus.

A total of around 6,700 Lower Austrians registered within 5 weeks to take advantage of the offer. In order to be able to offer enough reading material and audio books, the media content was increased and the range of language courses was expanded.

Registration for the noe-book.at online library run by Treffpunkt Bibliothek is normally done directly via the public libraries. During the Covid-19 crisis this was changed. Registration was possible by e-mail and free of charge.

The newly registered readers were informed about the further procedure after the re-opening of the libraries on how to continue to use the online library noe-book.at: All you need to do is visit a public library, register as a member and your account will be activated for noe-book.at use. In addition, an online survey was conducted to further develop the offer and to be able to look to the future according to the dynamic requirements for noe-book.at.

You can find out more about noe-book.at at [www.loslesen.at](http://www.loslesen.at) (link is external).

All other provinces of Austria also started to open their online libraries limited in time and they were similar successful.

### **How can libraries attract readers today?**

Libraries of today are much more than „a place to lend books“, they attract by being a third place for people. Everybody is allowed to visit a public library, without having the obligation to consume anything, but is getting the chance to use services, to meet people, to have the possibility for conversation or just to relax by reading f.i. the papers while drinking a cup of coffee.

Libraries offer all kind of information concerning the latest medias within different genres. Librarians also prove to be experts in literature mediation and support e.g. parents in choosing suitable media (bookii, tonies, books and audios, ...) for their children. Visitors to the library can always rely on the quality of the recommendations for various media, as well as the quality of the information passed on.

### **So many new books appear every day! Is it hard to choose a good one?**

In a way it is of course difficult to decide on a certain number of media, but the budget regulates the amount of the purchase. There are certainly many good media, but not all of them can be bought.

However, the choice of whether they are good media or not is sometimes very subjective and usually several staff members make the selection to ensure diversity. Many libraries also offer a "book for customer wishes" in which the library visitors can write down their media requests.

### **Do you like visiting book fairs? What is most interesting to you there?**

I have not visited big book fairs yet, but I would like to do so next year, if it is possible concerning Covid19. I would like to attend Bologna Fair for Children books and the Leipzig book fair.

### **What genre is your favourite? What book is the best in this genre, in your opinion?**

I do not have a favorite genre, but I love beautiful language. If an author uses specially chosen language, I devour the books and they have a much more intense effect on me.

### **What are your favourite Austrian authors or books of Austrian authors?**

One of my favourite Austrian author and essayist is Thomas Sautner, a former journalist who wanted to go more into depth when writing and researching. The results are wonderful books that touch, e.g. „Fuchserde“, or „Das Mädchen an der Grenze“, „Die Älteste“ and many more.

### **If you were going on a trip now, what book would you take with you?**

A friend of mine, she is a bookseller, gave me a book as a present: National Geographic: *Women. Of the courage to change the world.* But the book is so heavy, so I would have to make this trip by car! ;-)

**What three books would come to your mind first, if we asked you to name three favourite ones?**

My favourite 3 books at this moment are: Jorge Bucay „Let me tell you a story“, Michael Ende „MOMO“, Stefan Zweig „Fantastic Night and other stories“.

**What book are you reading at the moment?**

I always read a couple of books in parallel, at the moment: Rebecca Makkai „The Optimists“, J. Courtney Sullivan „Summer in Maine“, Jonathan Rauch, „The Happiness Curve“.

**„Libraries change lives for the better.”— Sidney Sheldon. Do you agree with these words of the famous American writer? What would you like to add to these words referring to the present situation in the world?**

Sidney Sheldon speaks from my heart!

I earned a Master of Arts degree in Social Work, which defines the strategies I use in my librarian work towards social inclusion. Learning or “Bildung” means participation within society, so libraries should collaborate or work closely together within the field of (adult) learning, the formal and the informal learning as well.

I will never forget the story of a Canadian professor, whom I met when I attended a satellite meeting of the IFLA multicultural section in 2017. She was working as a volunteer in one of the Jordanian refugee camps and showed us pictures of an old trailer, that she spied out in the middle of the camp. Within this trailer she found dozens of books in all kind of languages, that were given away from Europeans for refugee camps. The refugees were proud, when they were allowed to work there for a day as a „librarian“ to get the books in order, or to lend them to other refugees, that walked in. Even if they could not read the language the book was written in, but it made all those people happy to have a meaningful activity on the one hand, and to be allowed or empowered to read, to receive a piece of media, on the other hand. And the most important fact was, that they felt connected together in some way.

My desire to build and work in libraries is based on the idea that people feel welcome and at home there. Thriving relationships create a feeling of security and generate joy in learning and developing together. A democratic and supportive society can thus be created.

**Thank you for the interview!**

*Photo from Ursula Liebmann's personal archive  
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