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American Library Association

Leaders in Library Work with Immigrants: Eleanor (Edwards) Ledbetter

Part II:

American Library Association Committee on Work with the Foreign Born, work as Bibliographer and Translator, Final Years at Broadway Branch of the Cleveland Public Library, and Retirement, 1919-1963.

by

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Ledbetter shared the varied experiences garnered in her work with immigrants in Cleveland with other librarians and social workers throughout the nation. Her first significant contribution to the library literature was *Winning Friends and Citizens for America; Work with Poles, Bohemians, and Others*, published in 1918 by John Foster Carr of the Immigrant Publication Society of New York. Impressed by the work that Ledbetter had accomplished in the immigrant neighborhood surrounding the Broadway Branch, Carr was anxious that her methods and philosophy be broadcast to libraries in cities throughout the country with large concentrations of immigrants.³⁹

ALA Committee on Work with the Foreign Born

The same year as the publication of this pamphlet, the Committee on Work with the Foreign Born of the American Library Association (ALA CWFB) was organized, with John Foster Carr appointed its first chairman. During the second year of its existence, in 1919, Ledbetter was appointed to the committee, due to Carr's influence and his obvious admiration for her work at the Broadway Branch as well as with the Cleveland Americanization Committee.⁴⁰

For the next nine years, from 1920 through 1926, as the chair of the ALA CWFB, Ledbetter took full advantage of the opportunity to disseminate practical advice to librarians working with immigrants. Under Ledbetter's leadership, the ALA CWFB became a na-

tional force for continuing education of librarians working with immigrant clientele.⁴¹

The Library as a Democratic Institution

Ledbetter believed that "[t]he public library should be absolutely democratic in regimen and administration, giving equal service to the whole public regardless of the place of nativity. Where funds are insufficient, preference should be given to those portions of the community having least opportunity at their own command."⁴² In support of this philosophical stance, she wrote revealing articles expounding upon the idea of the library as a democratic institution.⁴³

In the face of certain criticism, she related her views

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that the public library was not always as democratic as it was purported to be, particularly in its response to the immigrant community. Ledbetter had no sympathy for librarians who complained that lack of funds alone could justify the absence of books in immigrant languages in their libraries

while continuing to purchase books solely for English speakers. According to Ledbetter, "a library which takes this position has no claim to democratic standing. It is a class institution."⁴⁴

Ledbetter believed that the provision of library materials in foreign languages was essential if the library was to serve its immigrant taxpayers. "In order to provide the service which is the just due of all taxpayers, and which is an essential part of the educational and recreational functions of the public library, the immigrant people should be provided with reading matter which they can use, both in easy English books and in books and periodicals in their native tongues."⁴⁵

Ledbetter's prior experiences with the night school classes in Cleveland had made her acutely aware of the paucity of books about America written in the languages of immigrants. Ledbetter corresponded widely with librarians from across the country about this problem and used the ALA CWFB as a clearinghouse to disseminate information on the availability of such publications from a variety of sources. She alerted librarians to the general publications of domestic publishers, including John Foster Carr's Immigrant Publication Society, the foreign language newspapers, and the Foreign Language Information Service. She applauded the endeavors of state library associations, notably the New York State Committee on Work with Immigrants, and the efforts of individual librarians, specifically Jane Maud Campbell of the Massachusetts Free Public Library Commission, to secure financial support for immigrant publications.

Selection and Acquisition of Foreign-Language Materials

Ledbetter and the ALA CWFB were well aware that the expense involved in the publishing of books in immigrant languages was a major stumbling block to their production since the profits to be derived were minimal at best. Ultimately, even the limited

success of the few publishing concerns willing to take the financial risk would be only temporary. The absence of new immigrants, due to the National Origins Act of 1924, as well as the inevitable death of immigrants of the first generation eroded their potential audience. Ironically, the publications produced were almost invariably directed toward immigrants who had been in the United States long enough to achieve economic stability, to establish an ethnic identity, and as a result, to attain political clout.⁴⁶

The ALA CWFB acted as a clearinghouse for information on selection and acquisition of books in foreign languages from foreign as well as domestic publishers. Lists of twenty-five books for beginning collections in fifteen languages were compiled and distributed to correspondents writing for assistance. The committee, in turn, referred some requests to persons more qualified to offer suggestions and called for volunteers from the ranks of American librarians to assist with the fulfillment of others.⁴⁷

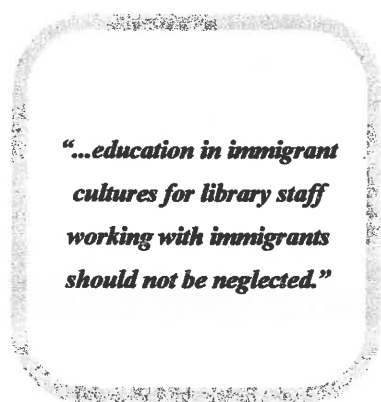
Under the auspices of the ALA CWFB and the Cleveland Public Library, Ledbetter undertook two book buying trips to southern and eastern Europe during the summers of 1923 and 1925. The ostensible purpose of these excursions, Ledbetter related, was "to visit European countries from which Broadway readers come, for purpose of study and better understanding." As she was always ready to combine business with pleasure, Ledbetter took on the added responsibility of establishing contacts with book sellers, publishers, and literati as well as placing orders on behalf of the Cleveland Public Library for books in Polish, Czech, Slovak, Lithuanian, Romanian, Serbian, Croatian, Slovenian, and Ukrainian. During her second European trip in the summer of 1925, Ledbetter extended her services as buying agent for books in these languages not only to the Cleveland Public Library but also to the public libraries of Indianapolis and Gary (IN), Detroit, Pittsburgh, and Lakewood (OH).⁴⁸

During these summer vacations, Ledbetter visited libraries and special collections in Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Yugoslavia, and was profoundly influenced by the experiences she shared with the Slavic peoples of these countries. When they learned of her plans to travel in their native lands, the foreign dignitaries in the United States who had visited with Ledbetter at the Broadway Branch arranged personal guided tours and formal introductions to local offi-

cials. Ledbetter was given the red-carpet treatment wherever she went.⁴⁹

Her European travel experiences provided the basis for several articles that Ledbetter wrote for library and general interest periodicals. She shared her impressions of the public library of Warsaw, her commendation of the student travel excursions sponsored by the Czechoslovakian Ministry of Education as a means of promoting the unity of the Czech and Slovak peoples, and her fascination with Polish history, literature, and folklore. Her experiences were shared also in lectures at the Broadway Branch as well as the public and parochial schools of Cleveland.⁵⁰

Education for Librarians Working with Immigrants



Ledbetter believed that education in immigrant cultures for library staff working with immigrants should not be neglected. "Assistants [i.e., library staff] should be trained for work with immigrants as a special field of library work, and encouraged in the study of racial understandings and of immigrant literatures and of the characteristics of immigrant cultures. Library schools should incorporate work along this line into their regular courses."⁵¹

It was Ledbetter's conviction that librarians entering the special field of library service with immigrants needed not only a uniform philosophical approach, which was, at least for Ledbetter, the model of librarian as social worker, but also adequate educational preparation, both formal and informal. Throughout her career at the Broadway Branch she found time to devote to teaching and lecturing on library work with immigrants.

As early as 1918, she gave a lecture entitled "The Library as an Americanization Agency" at the Immigrant Education Institutes held during the summer in the principal cities of New York State. From 1919

through 1922, during Herbert Adolphus Miller's tenure as professor of sociology at Oberlin College, Ledbetter regularly planned lectures and tours of immigrant neighborhoods in Cleveland for his students. One of the highlights of these sessions with Miller's students from Oberlin was always attendance at a worship service at one of the immigrant churches of Cleveland. These visits, coupled with Ledbetter's inquisitiveness regarding the religious experiences of her patrons and her own religious convictions, found expression in several periodical articles written during this time period. Ledbetter wrote on Greek Catholics, Serbian Christmas celebrations, Easter services in immigrant churches, and Saint Sava, a thirteenth-century Serbian archbishop.⁵²

Ledbetter gave a regular series of lectures on "Library Work with the Foreign Born" to the Western Reserve University Library School in Cleveland during the early twenties, and on several occasions presented similar lectures to the Carnegie Library School of Pittsburgh.⁵³ In addition to frequent addresses to the American Library Association, the Ohio Library Association, and various civic and cultural organizations throughout Cleveland, Ledbetter was guest speaker with the National Association of Social Workers in 1924, on the topic "Recent Development in Library Work with Immigrants," and at the annual Conference on Children's Reading held in Grand Rapids, Michigan, in 1927, on the topic "Immigrant Parents and Their American Children."⁵⁴

The ALA CWFB assumed the responsibility for providing informal avenues of education for librarians involved in work with the foreign born who might not have the time or opportunity for formal courses or access to experts in the various foreign literatures. Beginning in late 1921 and continuing through 1924, a series of articles was written to introduce librarians to various ethnic and national groups of immigrants, to discuss their particular library needs, and to provide a common understanding upon which to base Americanization programs and library activities for immigrants.

Each article in the series was written by a committee member with expertise and familiarity with a specific immigrant group and presented information on immigrants' backgrounds as well as their contributions to American society. The series, edited by Ledbetter as chair of the committee and published in the *Library Journal*, included in-depth articles on

Yiddish, Polish, Japanese, Romanian, Greek, Czechoslovakian, and Italian immigrants.⁵⁵ Ledbetter herself wrote the articles on Polish and Czechoslovakian immigrants, the groups with whom she had a special affection and affinity. She received laudatory reviews of them in the foreign language press of Cleveland, where huge concentrations of immigrants of these nationalities resided.⁵⁵

The three articles on the Polish, Italian, and Greek immigrants were later revised, expanded, and published separately in pamphlet form by the ALA CWFB in its *Library Work with the Foreign Born* series. Ledbetter wrote the pamphlet entitled *The Polish Immigrant and His Reading* as well as the introductions to the two remaining pamphlets published during her tenure as chairman, May M. Sweet's *The Italian Immigrant and His Reading* and Alison B. Alessios's *The Greek Immigrant and His Reading*.⁵⁶ Each of the pamphlets included a selective bibliography that demonstrated the compiler's familiarity with the literature of the immigrant group in question. The bibliography accompanying Ledbetter's pamphlet on the Polish immigrant consisted of not only an annotated list of about two hundred Polish titles but also an additional list of translations into Polish from other languages.⁵⁷

"Ledbetter believed that libraries serving large immigrant populations should be considered community centers...."

In 1928, at a dinner sponsored by the Cleveland post of the Polish Army Veterans Association, Ledbetter was presented the Sword of Haller cross from the Polish government for distinguished service to Poland. The medal, which she proudly wore at the round table meeting of the ALA CWFB during the last year of her tenure, was a symbol of the international as well as local impact that her work had had both at home and in Europe.⁵⁸

The Library as a Community Center

Ledbetter believed that libraries serving large immi-

grant populations should be considered community centers for the immigrant groups served. She regularly attended activities sponsored by immigrant communities in the proximity of the Broadway Branch and throughout Cleveland, including dramatic performances, festivals, and church services, all of which afforded her firsthand knowledge of the artistic, musical, literary, and oratorical talents that often remained at best, untapped, and at worst, undiscovered. Ledbetter resolved that the Broadway Branch was the perfect setting for bringing these newly found talents to appreciative audiences of Clevelanders.⁵⁹

In the winter of 1920, Ledbetter inaugurated a series of lectures on *Slav Conditions of Today*, which was delivered in the auditorium at the Broadway Branch. The lectures brought old and new Americans together on a ground of mutual interest. The lectures were followed by informal receptions that afforded the residents of the Broadway community the opportunity not only to meet Clevelanders from all parts of the city, but also to gain a deeper acquaintance with and respect for other members of their particular immigrant group.⁶⁰

Ledbetter realized all too well that all immigrant groups did not act as one block; each group had its own idiosyncrasies as well as strengths, and even within the same ethnic group there was often a wide range of temperaments and opinions. As the lectures provided common ground on which to base a lasting understanding, the public library provided neutral territory for the expression of diverse ideas. Due to the success of the inaugural series of lectures in terms of not only bringing people together but also introducing newcomers to the Broadway Branch, Ledbetter determined that a series of *Slav Evenings* would be an annual cultural event for the community. Approximately twelve lectures and receptions were presented during the winter months from 1920 through 1930.⁶¹

International scholars from the University of Prague, the University of Krakow, and the School of Slavonic Studies of the University of London as well as visiting dignitaries from Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia visited the Broadway Branch.⁶² Ledbetter was particularly proud of the visit of A. Tresic Pavicic, minister of Yugoslavia to the United States. Ledbetter commented that his visit marked "the first time that any foreign minister has made an official

visit and address in an American library, and it constitutes a mile-stone in the history of work with the foreign born, as a definite recognition of the value of the library to the immigrant."⁶³ Ledbetter acknowledged the impact that such events had not only on the civic life of Cleveland but also in the creation of goodwill both in the United States and abroad for the American public library and its services with immigrants.⁶⁴

Tangible evidences of international goodwill appeared in foreign publications as a direct result of the *Slav Evenings*. Descriptions of the Broadway Branch and its services to Czech immigrants appeared in a Czechoslovakian school methods textbook written by Vojta Benes, inspector of schools for the Czechoslovakian Ministry of Education. The Czech woman's periodical, *Rude Kveti*, published a feature article on the Broadway Branch written by Marie Majerova, editor and noted Czech author.⁶⁵

Ledbetter, both under the auspices of the ALA CWFB and on her own, publicized the library's Americanization programs through newspaper and periodical articles of general interest. In 1922 Ledbetter wrote a provocative article entitled "The Human Touch and the Librarian," for the popular periodical *Scribner's Magazine*.⁶⁶ In this article, Ledbetter includes a story about giving counsel to a young student interested in pursuing librarianship as a profession. The student, related Ledbetter, "had intended to go into social work, but has had a vision of library work as social work, and has been sent to me to discuss it on that ground. I assure her that certainly it is the finest kind of social work, since it is constructive, and it has for the worker a wholesomeness which does not exist in those types of social work which deal always with the abnormal and frequently with the pathological."⁶⁷

Ledbetter undertook two publicity projects of significance during her period as chair of the ALA CWFB to bring the work of librarians working with immigrant clienteles to a general audience nationwide. To this end, news releases were provided regularly to the Foreign Language Information Service from 1924 to 1926, and a series of articles was written for the library column of the *Christian Science Monitor* from 1926 to 1928.

Editor's note:

The conclusion of this article, along with the notes, will be in the summer issue of the EMIE Bulletin.

Libraries of the Third World

The José Martí National Library is organizing the forum, Libraries of the Third World, as part of the conference on "Culture and Development," which will take place in Havana's Palacio de las Convenciones on June 9-12, 2003. The important topics to be discussed will be enriched by your presence. If possible, please confirm your participation by February 20 and provide the title of the paper you would like to deliver. If you do not have this information by the deadline, it can be sent to us at a later date. We would also appreciate your promoting this event among colleagues at your institution as well as others with similar interests.

Topics to be discussed:

1. Libraries and cultural identity among peoples of the Third World.
2. Role of libraries and sustainable development programs
3. Role of libraries in strategies for the development of human potential
4. National libraries and the defense and conservation of historical memory and the bibliographic patrimony of nations
5. Contributions of libraries in the struggle for solidarity and social justice in a globalized neoliberal world

Registration: US\$150.00

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