

IBBY Documentation Centre

Books for people with disability

Tordis Ørjasæter's article in "IBBY Norway – 50 years" magazine

Translated by Cathrine Senje

Sometimes it happens that one gets an idea. A vision of something that should be done. As a single person you cannot expect results, but an organisation with a competent secretariat and a management willing to find new ways may work miracles.

It was the summer 1979 – one year before UN International Year for people with disability, 1981, and I had an idea that this year could be used not only to give persons with disability a right to education, work and housing. I wanted to give them more. I wanted to give children, regardless of their handicap, the chance to meet with books, and the right for healthy children to get to know children with disability through books about their life. Telephone calls and letters to Knud-Eigil Hauberg Tychsen, IBBY President 1978-1982, gave results. Shortly after, he wrote to the Norwegian Institute for Special Education in Oslo where I was employed. Would it be possible for me to use part of my working hours for an international project under the auspices of IBBY? Edvard Befring, Principal of the Institute was ready to cooperate and I could send letters to all IBBY sections asking for relevant books. This led to an international exhibition of children's books, opened at the same time as the well-known Bologna Book Fair, April 1981. A catalogue: Books and Disabled Children was presented. UNESCO arranged a seminar in addition to the exhibition. In advance they had asked me for an article as a basis for the seminar: The Role of Children's Books in Integrating Handicapped Children into Everyday Life (No.1 in UNESCO's Studies on Books and Reading Series). The article was translated into French and Spanish, later into Finnish, Italian and Japanese.

After the Bologna Book Fair the IBBY Secretariat with leader Leena Maissen arranged an ambulatory exhibition: Vienna, Bratislava, Prague, Mexico, Australia, Finland, Sweden and other countries. Her enthusiasm was a condition for our progress. I could continue to work for the project.

The exhibition with its catalogue and seminar in Bologna had been a success, and IBBY planned further activities in cooperation with the Norwegian Institute for Special Education in Oslo. I continued my work with the project. We planned a new exhibition of picture books with a catalogue: Books for Language Retarded Children (No. 20 in UNESCO's Studies on Books and Reading Series.) This exhibition was opened in Bologna Book Fair 1985 and was presented at UNESCO's General Assembly in Sofia, in The Pompidou-centre in Paris, in Barcelona, at the International Reading Association's conference in Dublin, in Finland, Sweden, Norway and other countries.

This cooperation between IBBY and the Norwegian Institute for Special Education in arranging exhibitions and producing catalogues led to a new enquiry from IBBY: Would it be possible to establish a documentation centre at the Department of Special Education based on the books collected - to continue the work? And in October, 1985, IBBY Documentation Centre with books about and for children with disability was ceremoniously opened. In Scandinavia the Centre was called Documentation Service while the international name was Documentation Centre. At the time the Centre consisted of books from more than 30 countries and 42 language areas.

A skilled librarian, an expert in languages and a competent adviser was necessary to direct the centre. Lecturer in Special Educational Needs and librarian Nina Askvig (formerly Nina Askvig Reidarson) was appointed as a leader. She continued the cooperation with IBBY's Secretariat Leader Leena Maissen.

Nina Askvig was in charge of the next important exhibition and its catalogue: Books for Disabled Young People – An annotated bibliography. This exhibition opened in Bologna in 1991 and was sent to various IBBY sections. The catalogue was translated into Spanish, French and a number of languages. In addition to the most important books in various categories, suitable for children with disability, there were surveys of professional books, addresses to publishers of special literature and general information of the different types of books and how they could stimulate language- and reading retarded children, deaf and weak-sighted children and young people. The project was continued with corresponding exhibitions and catalogues in 1997, 1999, 2001 and with a jubilee exhibition in connection with IBBY's 50 years celebration and congress in Basel 2002.

In Basel, Nina Askvig was appointed Honorary Member of IBBY, as an appreciation for her efforts and contribution through many years. Earlier, in Bologna, she was awarded by the Jella Lepman Prize, a medal given to persons who especially have contributed to develop IBBY's working areas.

The Institute for Special Education was attached to the University of Oslo as Department of Special Needs Education in 1993. This reduced the activities of the Documentation Centre, including information and advisement. In addition, there were economical restrictions and lack of space. When Nina Askvig retired in 2003, the Centre moved to the library at Haug Municipal Resource Centre for Young People with Disabilities. Librarian Heidi Cortner Boiesen is now the leader. Placing the Documentation Centre here give possibility of testing the books on children and young people with disability. Heidi Cortner Boiesen attended the Basel Congress with Nina Askvig and was introduced to IBBY Secretariat and the national sections.

Why do we need an international documentation service concerning books for children with disability? Because it has not been taken for granted that disabled children have a right to have books, both for education and for artistic enjoyment. I am convinced that what is good for all children, for example good books, are even more important for the disabled. Books and cultural experiences may give strength and possibility for fellowship between children with disability and other children. Some of us must be taken care of, others must care for them. There is little to talk about if there are no common experiences. Cultural experiences can break down bounds and contribute to spirit of community. Every human being is more than her handicap, and our position must be that every human being is creative if there are possibilities for development.

The idea of integration, established in Scandinavian laws since 1970 must include culture and leisure. Children with disability may be lonelier than other children of the same age. Loneliness can be worse when they become teenagers. And therefore books are important. You learn about other people and their life and about yourself. Scandinavian children are better off than children in many other countries. It has been very interesting to register that USA and Japan have supported our projects.

What kind of books can the Documentation Centre offer? First: All the books that have been presented in the great exhibitions in Bologna 1981, 1985, 1991, 1999, 2001, 2005 and the jubilee exhibition in Basel 2002. In addition, publishers from various countries have sent books that may be helpful. This means ordinary picture books especially fit for children and young people with a language handicap, or simple easy-to-read books in different languages, rhymes and jingles, and books produced especially for various groups of children with disability. I quote Nina Askvig (from her article Literature – a Meeting Place for Everybody in Homage to Barbro Sætersdal, Abundance and Teamwork, 1999): “Examples of book are tactile picture books (books with raised illustrations that you can read with your fingers), books printed in braille, books with BLISS or pictograms (non-verbal communication systems where words and terms are expressed by pictures, symbols or icons), books printed with large types, picture books and specially designed easy-to-read books for people with mental (intellectual) disability, tape recorded books produced with slow reading and a simple language, videos with a simple story and slow progression, videos with sign language.”

IBBY's Documentation Centre has been represented every year at the Bologna Book Fair and has shown books from various countries. The Documentation Centre can thus give inspiration to writers, publishers, illustrators and graphic artists. Educators, nursery school staff, parents and visitors with disability can find books for their special demands. At the Bologna Book Fair in 2005 Heidi Cortner Boiesen presented the Documentation Service with a new exhibition: Outstanding Books for Young People with Disability, and a catalogue with beautiful illustrations.

Here in Norway, Nina Askvig and special educator Sissel Hofgaard Swensen produced *Book for Everybody*, a catalogue of adapted and easy-read literature. This was on the instruction of the Arts Council Norway and the Norwegian Directorate for Public Libraries. The two have been advisers for publishers and have given lectures on subjects related to IBBY Documentation Centre.

The establishment of the project Reader Seeks Book is indirectly a result of the work in IBBY Documentation Centre. The first step was taken by author and illustrator Liv Lykkenborg, Sissel Hofgaard Swensen and Nina Askvig. They wrote to Norwegian Non-Fiction Writers and Translators Association, and Norwegian Writers for Children and GRAFILL; Norwegian association for Visual Communication joined them. The result was a document of strategy and a report on Reader Seeks Book and an illustrated catalogue: *Book for Everybody* in 2005. This organisation, directed by Anne Marit Godal, takes care of the national aspect. There is close contact between Reader Seeks Book and IBBY Documentation Centre. Sissel Hofgaard Swensen attended the Bologna Fair as an assistant for Heidi Cortner Boiesen and she assisted in the work with the catalogue.

An author with a scholarship from Reader Seeks Book visited the Documentation Centre to study short stories for young people with disability. The result was the beautiful short story collection *Lovers* (Vonheim/Düzakin, 2003).

IBBY Documentation Centre has always had many visitors from all over the world. After the moving to Haug Resource Centre the number of visitors has decreased even if all visitors get a guided tour through the collection and information about the work. In the spring 2003 they had a visitor from Argentina/New Zealand, an author who has Asperger syndrome and have written a number of easy reader-books and a story about an autistic girl. When the Nordic IBBY sections had their annual meeting in Norway in 2005, they met on Haug Resource

Centre on the international Book Day in April. They were guided through the premises and studied the latest exhibition; Outstanding Books for Young People with Disability.

On the IBBY Conference in Cape Town in 2004, Heidi Cortner Boiesen delivered a lecture on the Documentation Centre and the work with books for children with disability: Can Books make a Difference? After the conference, she received a letter from the leader of school libraries in Nairobi, Margaret Wangoma, who wanted to visit the Centre. The visit was planned to take place during the IFLA conference in Oslo, August 2005. Heidi Cortner Boiesen arranged a ten days' visit in Oslo. Her guest visited different institutions engaged in library services for children and young people with disability. During the IFLA conference the Centre also had a Japanese librarian as a visitor who in return wanted to arrange visits to libraries and institutions in Tokyo that offer library services to children with disability.

Here in Oslo Heidi Cortner Boiesen was invited to a reception arranged by the Japanese Embassy in Oslo Town Hall for the Japanese Emperor and Empress. The Empress had received the new catalogue Outstanding Books for Young People with Disability from her friend and member of IBBY's Executive Committee, Chieko Suemoni. Heidi Cortner Boiesen got the chance to greet the Empress and thank her for her interest and cooperation with IBBY Japan. Since 1981 this section has been very active. Before the reception Heidi Cortner Boiesen was interviewed by the important Japanese paper Asahi Shimbun.

Heidi Cortner Boiesen, like Nina Askvig in her leadership and myself in the same position, have had various inquiries concerning lectures and assistance in reading conferences in Norway and abroad. But we have been compelled to refuse, partly by economy and lack of resources. First there were reductions in our income when the Norwegian Institute for Special Education was moved to the Department of Special Needs Education at the University of Oslo. After a promising new start at Haug Resource Centre, there were soon further reductions from local authorities in Bærum County. Obviously, it was easier to work in such a centre in the eighties than in the new century. In 2005, Heidi Cortner Boiesen lost her extra working hours she had for taking care of the Documentation Centre. She can no longer expect economical support to go to Bologna. This may make it impossible to take part in international exhibitions and catalogue work, which has been a tradition since 1981.

Looking back on a long life working with books, I am convinced that no one needs good children's books more than children with disability. In this area, Norway could contribute in an important issue in a new millennium.