

THE AMERICAN LIBRARY IN PARIS

September 1939 - June 1941

As I write this resume of activities of our Library in Paris, it is hard for me to believe that I am not there. It is not easy to leave an institution under such circumstances as I did after you have been with it for 12 years. The Library is still open and performing an excellent service. It is serving humanity, for which all libraries are founded. It is helping the students. It is providing reading matter for the general public, reference material for those who need it, and a pastime for many who are at this moment in great need of diversion. It is sending books to prisoners in France and to the British interned in France. All-in-all, it is upholding that which it said it would do when war was declared-- "help to serve in the field of morale to the best of its ability". There was never a thought that we should close.

We knew our place even before war was declared, so the day the news was told to the world at large, the entire staff gathered at the building to decide the first step. It was to paste brown strips of paper on all our windows as a protection against falling glass in case of bombing. It took two full days to accomplish this. Monday, September 3, 1939 - the second day of war - we founded our Soldiers Service. Our aim was to supply French and English soldiers with the reading material they wanted. We gave large quantities to hospitals and canteens, but our pride was the personal service rendered to the individual.

From the beginning requests came to us from all parts of France, Algeria, Syria, and even from the British headquarters in London to take care of their men in France until they could organize and ship reading material to them. The British Military authorities called on us often. They were more

than happy to find us taking care of their men and often asked us for advice. Many of these men knew that our Library was founded out of the last war and of the wonderful service the A.L.A. did for the A.E.F. in France. Others, much younger, had used us in their student days and so our list grew into hundreds very rapidly. Once a name was placed on our list, a package of books and magazines was sent twice a month. It was curious to read the requests received. Some stated they needed to keep up their English so they could get a job when war was over. This not only applied to professors and students but to waiters, hotel clerks and small shop keepers. Many requested material needed to keep up their studies and others were just plain interested in what America was thinking and doing. These letters were often published and some were read over the radio in our broadcasts to America.

Each individual soldier had his own file. These files were divided into the following categories: English only, French only, English and French. Naturally a very careful check had to be made on the type of material sent. Nothing political for instance, even in the form of a novel. Certain authors were not considered good for the morale of the men and we had to turn each book upside down to shake it, to be sure no piece of propaganda had been placed between the pages. One French organization sending books out, found many such pamphlets had reached their destination due to negligence on the part of those checking the books in.

When the soldier finished reading his books and magazines, he passed them on to another or turned them in to the camp library or canteen. Everything we sent was an out-and-out gift. Newspapers in Paris, especially the Paris edition of the New York Herald Tribune, carried many articles and

photographs of the excellent work the Soldiers Service was doing. It was through the press, other organizations, friends and posters in our Library building that we made our appeal to the public to give us all the books and magazines they could for the men in uniform. Packages were also received from America and Canada and publishers of American magazines sent us many copies free. We collected the material as a gift - it had nothing to do with our regular Library collection. All packages were sent free of postage through the French railroad or by plane to the R. A. F. units. The French 2nd Bureau (F.B. I. and G. 2) became very interested in our work and were most anxious that we expand, even to the point of visits to the Maginot Line and other forbidden zones. For this purpose I was issued special passes. A well-known French General even sent trucks down from the Maginot Line to collect material from us for his men.

For canteens we would often send out a collection of one to two hundred books. They were packed in alphabetical order, catalogued and ready for circulation. All those on the receiving end had to do was place the books on shelves and their small but adequate library was ready for business.

The space to house this huge work was donated to us in the building next door to the Library. The heat, light and water were also donated. Equipment was furnished partly by the Library and partly by the volunteer workers.

I can truthfully say we had the best group of volunteer workers I have ever had the pleasure of working with, and I really believe they enjoyed every minute of the many hours of hard labor they put in. Our Honorary Committee for this service consisted of six high ranking army and air officers - two Americans, two French and two British.

After the occupation, this Service naturally stopped. What was left of the material we had collected was sent to prisoners, hospitals and

British Internment Camps. As of May 30, 1941, we still had on hand between 3000 to 5000 volumes packed and ready for distribution. As of Sept. 3, 1939 to date the Soldiers Service had distributed about 100,000 books and magazines. Most of the Soldiers Service files were burned before I left.

The Library continued to function as usual. In the beginning of the war, demands were heavy for light and amusing books, and to supply this demand we filled our display cases with American humor and amusing novels. Gradually this changed, the public went in more and more for historical and political works. We noticed that as Hitler attacked each country, the circulation of books we had on that country would increase. Maps, books giving the historical backgrounds and authors who delved into the political situation were asked for. In the reference field, the work was the same as usual with regard to student questions. Many calls came from the journalistic world asking for exact information regarding names, places and dates. It was also noticed that many files pertaining to the last war were referred to.

We had no trouble with mail. Purchases of books and magazines from America and England were received regularly. Only one shipment was lost, that of May, 1940 - the Germans got to Paris first. It was duly sent from New York but where it is now, no one knows. Packing cases of American reprint books purchased with funds given by The Books for Europe project got as far as Marseilles. They arrived just after the occupation and so had to be stored in the Marseilles Public Library. These books will be of great value to France with the restoration of peace. Her Libraries and Universities will have need of them. Magazines purchased out of this fund which arrived before the occupation, were distributed throughout France, many on requests from French and British soldiers.

Subscriptions held up very well all during the war. Our 1939 and

first five-months of 1940 records show a steady and very good average. In fact, we were both pleased and surprised, as we issued free cards to all in uniform. This card was white with a red, white and blue stripe at the top.

Many essential supplies were purchased in large quantities during this period which cannot be got today, such as coal, library cards, stationary, wrapping paper, string, wax, soap, cotton, certain canned foods and bottled water.

Nine rue de Teheran was not only a Library in those days, it was a rendezvous - for all doing charitable work, for friends to meet and discuss the prevailing situation, and for others to tell you of their loved ones far from home. It was in fact, a meeting place of good will, good humor and understanding.

Plans were made for the staff to leave Paris in case of need. Instructions were issued to each member of the staff. These included where to meet, where to go, what to bring - such as one suitcase only, one blanket, one pair of heavy walking shoes (on the feet), pack only warm clothing, gas masks, medicine, food for three days and flashlights - all were included. Instructions also were issued about air raids. Pasted on all floors was the street and address of our shelter. Each member of the staff was responsible for a certain duty the minute the alarm was given. One stood at the main door. Others cleared the reading rooms. Each head of department carried flashlights and was responsible for her rooms. Pages carried bottled drinking water. Naturally we had to clear the building before leaving ourselves, they were our public and we were responsible. The concierge was in charge of gas, electricity and water - which must all be turned off. Also she must telephone civilian defense in case of bombing or fire. Sand bags, in case of fire, were placed in

each room on the top floor. For a library our supply of sand was most inadequate, but the rule was so much sand to a floor regardless of what the floor contained.

When war was declared many of our subscribers left Paris and with them went many of our books. The same thing happened just before the occupation. This loss we hope to recoup some day, as we have received many messages stating that they are taking good care of the books they have which belong to the Library, and will return them as soon as possible. The American Embassy ordered the wives and families of its personnel out of Paris, and the Library took pleasure in keeping them supplied with books sent down by Embassy trucks. These were free of charge, no subscriptions were asked.

Three broadcasts were made direct from the Library building to America in the early part of 1940. One on the Soldiers Service, with myself, the volunteer personnel and several soldiers all speaking. The other two on the Library with myself asking questions of the personnel and readers in the building. We fear the hour of reception in America was not very good and so many of our interested friends did not hear our message. About this time the propaganda press and censorship bureau, housed at the Hotel Continental, called me in for consultation. What, they wanted to know, would be good for America? I worked on a plan that I as an American thought my own people would understand and respond to. It was about to go into effect in June 1940. As you know we got the Germans instead.

With the month of June, 1940 came the big question for each member of the staff to decide. How, after all, could the Germans be about to enter Paris? No, it was unbelievable and we, like everyone else, did our share of wishful thinking. Yet advice must be given, decisions made and I, as Directrice, must shoulder the responsibility. Would they stay and face

German occupation or leave, and try to be useful in some work, with those headed for what was then thought to be free France and holding strong. I felt strongly that the choice should be theirs. They decided to do what the great majority did - try to follow the French Government and be of service to France. At first, I thought my place was to go with them, to try to guide, protect and help them. I discussed this with several of the Trustees and to my great satisfaction, it was decided the thing for me to do was stay, look after the building and through whatever channels possible, keep in contact with America and the Trustees there. So the decision was made. The staff, with letters from Dr. Gros, our President, were to head for Angouleme where they were to report to the Unit of the American Hospital in Paris, and offer their services free, to do whatever was needed. It was also understood they would have sleeping quarters. The Librarian and her daughter, who were Canadian, left in a private car, for which the Library paid half, early in the morning. They were British subjects and we were much concerned about them. To our great relief, they made Angouleme and there sought council of one of our Trustees who gave them excellent advice. "Head for England" - which they did and I am happy to report arrived safely and are doing their bit today for a cause which we are proud to support.

The rest of the staff left for Angouleme in the afternoon in cars of the American Radiator Company, for which we were most grateful. All who left that day had been paid two months salary in advance. I also gave my secretary Frs. 10,000 to cover any necessary expenses that might occur to lodge, feed or transport any member of our staff. They carried with them the provisions we had planned in case such a time should arrive. As they pulled out of the Library front court yard that day in June 1940, their

hearts and mine were about as heavy and sad as any in all France. As said before, they headed for the American Hospital Unit in Angouleme. They arrived safely but the plan did not take place. In fact the Germans also went to Angouleme, so in the end, some of the staff went directly to America, others to England and four returned to Paris and the Library.

The concierge and myself remained in Paris and were at the Library every day. I wonder if I could ever give you a true picture of our life and emotions during that first month of occupation. Words, I am afraid, would not describe such a picture. Was it really Paris whose streets I walked through the 11th, 12th and 13th of June 1940? I do not think so. It was a dead city. Everything was closed, locked and deserted. Even the fall of a pin could be heard. A few last cars making their way out of town with families looking for refuge. The stations were packed with those who had sat up all night waiting for a train, which never left. Seven thousand women, children, soldiers and aged I saw waiting in the rain in front of the closed gates of the Gare Montparnesse, the afternoon of June 13.

I had offered my services to the American Embassy as a volunteer if they should ever have need of me. So after I said good-bye to my staff I walked to the Embassy. (There was no means of transportation). They informed me there was much I could do. So I pasted U. S. seals on U. S. and British property, helped take over the British Consul General's office and tried to console those left stranded. Ten-thirty the morning of June 14, the Embassy asked me to be their representative at the Hotel Bristol, which they had taken to house all Americans as an emergency step. The Germans,



as they arrived, took over all hotels and clients living there were given very short notice to leave. The story of the Hotel Bristol and those it housed, including Embassy, American Red Cross, Rockefeller Foundation, Anne Morgan, U. S. Ambulance Units and many, many others is not for this report. My job was to check to see that only American passports were admitted and to inform all others they could not live there. So, as of June 11, 1940 until December 1, 1940, when the Embassy gave up the Hotel Bristol, I lived there. This in no way interrupted or interfered in my work at the Library.

Naturally very few came those first two weeks in June, but if they did, all they had to do was ring the bell, come in, and change their books. No cash transactions took place in the Library until the beginning of September. All we had to offer they could have and we were only too pleased to serve. Books were carried to the Hotel so that our people might have something to read. Many were elderly and could not walk to the Library. Remember too, we had no transportation and our curfew was at nine o'clock in the beginning of the occupation.

By this time four members of the staff had returned - I shall never forget how glad I was to see them. Soon, the Library was busy sending books to prisoners and internment camps in France. A great many of these were not far from Paris. But as we had no means of transportation, how could we get books to them? Who would give us permission, who could transport? The story is short. The American Red Cross, Y. M. C. A., Quakers and many others who secured permits were only too happy to take any books to the unfortunate. We declined, even upon invitation from the Germans, to visit

hospitals, prison or internment camps. What good would it do? From our viewpoint only harm. The main thing was to get books in and if we contacted personally it might cause suspicion and stop our aim. This was proven many times by those we knew doing good work who were questioned and some detained. The least cause for suspicion and you were called upon to explain just what you were doing at such and such a place on such and such a day. We therefore shall be ever thankful to those organizations that took in our books through their permission of entrance. I should like to state now that many grateful messages were received from those enclosed in four walls.

The French prisoners in Germany sent us cards (printed forms) requesting books. We took this question up with the German authorities in Paris but never succeeded in gaining permission to send material. It is a funny point that the Germans would allow requests of this kind to come through but would not allow us to fulfill them.

Just what were our relations with the Germans. We had several visits from those in charge of libraries and education. Most of these men were librarians or teachers; all, however, were in uniform and had their offices at the Hotel Majestic, General German Headquarters. They asked many questions about our Library. How it was financed, etc. As usual, they would look very surprised when told we were not receiving any books, magazines or mail from the States--a typical German attitude. Conversation took place in French, as I do not speak German, and they prefer not to speak English.

One visit we received had to do with the first list of banned books. The list was in French so when pointed out to them that our books were all in English they did not know what to do. We had about ten of the books and, in the end, were allowed to keep them as long as they remained in my private office and not on open shelf.

In October, 1940, it was thought advisable to look into the possibility of turning over our Library to the French University or Biblioteque Nationale (National Library) as a loan for safe protection until peace. It was discussed with Bernard Fay, Director of the Biblioteque Nationale. He thought it would be a good agreement and was willing it should be done on our terms. He did, however, feel it necessary to say something about the transaction to the Germans in charge. They replied to him that the deal was all right if it took place within twenty-four hours and included all our material and resources. Naturally, my answer was no. The original idea was that the transfer would only take place when and if I should leave or in case of American entry into war. It was to be placed back in our hands the day peace was declared. In this way we thought our books would be protected and the French students still have use of them. Correspondence proving all that was said on this subject is on file in the Library in the minute books.

During this period our schedule of work was divided into two parts. Mornings the Library was closed to the public and the staff took care of routine work which they were not able to do when serving the public. We also prepared the packages for the prisoners, hospitals and internment camps. In the afternoons we were open to the general public. All ordering, cataloging, binding, etc. naturally stopped as of June 14, 1940.

There was no means of purchase nor correspondence with American and British firms. F. W. Faxon was asked to renew our list of periodicals for 1941 and hold them in America for us. Several times we were approached by agents of German firms who claimed they could order through Berlin for us but that delivery would be slow. Considering all points and especially the type of material we desired, this was not even considered.

I visited the Biblioteque Nationale quite often and saw the Germans working there. I was told they were mostly interested in manuscripts that Napoleon might have taken. The fact is that most of those had been returned long ago. What I think the French feared more was that the Italians would come in and take a look around, for most of that material was not returned.

Most of the Libraries in Paris were open and functioning in September and October. In November when the students had some trouble, the University and its libraries were again closed. They opened after the first of the year.

When I left - the end of May 1941 - we had six working on the staff. This was adequate for the work we were doing -- general circulation and reference. As stated before, the library is closed to the public in the mornings. It is then the gift books are gone over and packed for the prisoners. The Library is open to the public in the afternoons. How many are now on the staff I do not know, as I have heard rumors that several have left. Boris, who has been with us for sixteen years, is Russian and may now be in prison. The last of my American staff were sent home last February, as it was considered the wise and just thing to do. I did not feel honest in allowing them to stay under the conditions we had. They did not

want to go, but I insisted. It is not easy to live when you have to stand in line for your food before going to work; when everything is extremely hard to get, including food, clothing, shoes, medical supplies, soap, etc; no heat and no hot water; and everything very, very expensive; and when you have no news of the outside world -- not even from your own family; when rules and regulations are not to your liking; and when most of your friends are gone and some of those left in jail.

The cares and work of the Library was one thing, but physical hardships seem small when compared to mental ones and those of the heart. We at the Library had our share like all others, but somehow it touches more closely when it takes place in your own building among your own staff. First to leave us was our auditing firm. It was British and so our books have not been audited for 1939 and 1940. The auditor who came to us, I learned, was taken prisoner. We should like to send him books to read but we cannot. After all, he worked with us three weeks every year and his firm audited our books free of charge as a donation to the Library. Our fire insurance was with a British firm. It is now with one in America. Our bookkeeper, an English woman, had been connected with the Library about eighteen years. She is now in a concentration camp having been taken with the rest of the British women (5000) last November. Many hard tales were heard of this camp at Besancon. We did what we could and sent 2000 books. Later the women were all moved to Vitel and housed in better quarters. The hardest pain however, is the case of my French secretary, beloved by each member of the staff and without whom I could never have hurdled the obstacles. Her sister was taken to the military prison last September. She worked with an English woman who was in the translating business. She was accused of British Intelligence service - a ridiculous charge. She had copied some propaganda for the Free French given to the office by an old client.

At her trial she was condemned to death on the grounds of treason. Through a great friend of the Library, the sentence was commuted to life in a prison in Germany. This is confidential and should not be discussed as it may cause more trouble. We have seen this happen. With all this my secretary has been most courageous, attending her work, smiling, giving help to others and trying to cope with living conditions. Our parting was not cheerful and I only hope she will be with me again some day.

With her I left many instructions in agreement with our 1st vice-president who is now in charge of the Library and who has been such a devoted friend to us over a period of many years.

Material in the safe, for example, such as minute books, auditor's statements, year books, certain photographs and files are to be taken out should the Library no longer remain in protecting and friendly hands. Certain pieces of war documentation were also destroyed to protect the Library. These were mostly in the form of propaganda pamphlets which the Germans considered treason to have about. Some of our best French friends in the library world are now in prison because of holding such material.

I have spoken of many things in this report other than Library work only to let you know that although working in the American Library in Paris during a war and occupation was a privilege and an honor, it was not easy.

If ever a Director had a devoted staff I had one. The finest tribute words can pay would not begin to tell of my devotion, deep appreciation and high regard for each and every one of them. It was they who kept the Library open and going. I salute their courage and untiring efforts.

And we, the staff and I, thank our President, Mr. Edward A. Sumner, and Board of Trustees for making it possible for us to remain; for supporting us so wholeheartedly; and for the excellent work they have done and are doing in America for what I believe to be one of the finest institutions in the world - "The American Library in Paris."

DOROTHY M. REEDER, Directrice

AMERICAN LIBRARY IN PARIS

Date of my arrival in America: July 19, 1941