

Interview with Liz Page

-Mrs. Page, we have prepared some questions for you.

-Yes, ok. I'll try to answer whatever you ask me. But first, tell me. Are you all readers? Do you all read for pleasure, not just what's at school?

-Yes!

-So, what things do you like to read?

-Literature.

-What do you like: science fiction, fantasy or romance?

-Mystery and science fiction.

-Is it easier to read books in your own language?

-Yes, but we also read books in English.

-Great! Well, anyone who has a question could start first.

-Maybe you could tell us some things about IBBY? A description of what IBBY does?

-OK, but it is not small. It is not small at all. IBBY, the International Board on Books for Young People, was started shortly after the close of World War II by a German Jew called Jella Lepman. She strongly believed that the hope should be placed into the hands of the children and the best medium to achieve this was through books. So after the War she went back to Germany and started a programme to help children there get their lives back. I guess she always had this dream that books could build bridges of understanding and peace between people. The children needed to know that you are not alone, others have experiences, feelings and needs just like you do and there is a whole world there you know nothing about. Her work was mainly focused on the promotion of children's and youth's literature and being able to teach them open-mindedness and tolerance. She also held the first international exhibition in Munich after the War and brought together authors like Erich Kästner and Astrid Lindgren, illustrators, publishers and specialists in reading research. As a result a committee was appointed to set up IBBY.

-And that was a long time ago in Europe!

-You're right! Now IBBY is a very big organisation: there are 76 National IBBY Sections around the world and we are going to have two more in January, one in Zimbabwe and one in Jordan. IBBY Greece is one of the older ones of course.

-We know that the official IBBY office is in Basel, Switzerland. How do all members get together?

-Every two years a different National Section hosts an IBBY congress. The aim is to bring together all IBBY members and other people involved in children's books and reading development from all over the world. During the congress we present the Hans Christian Andersen award to a living author and illustrator whose complete works have made a lasting contribution to children's literature

and we announce the IBBY Honour List, which is a selection of the best books around the world. IBBY Greece always nominates books and these are always outstanding books.

-Mrs Page, I can't stop thinking that all this sounds great when it comes to children in rich developed countries. But, why would any kid who doesn't have a shelter over his head or food or anything choose a book instead?

-Children need balance. They need food, clean water, medicine, a shelter but they also need somebody who will take them on their lap and read a story to them. Sometimes I'd say this is what they need the most.

-Is there any place in the world that IBBY wants to expand to or to help, but still hasn't?

-Well, there is still a lot to be done in Africa and also in places like Myanmar. We don't have a section in Iraq and ... we can't ask other people to go into dangerous places. Just think around, you know, Iraq, Syria, all these places, Africa, Sudan, there are children everywhere.

-I would never believe that there are members of IBBY in Africa. How do they manage? I mean they are so poor.

-Well, we do stuff to help. And yes, we have sections in Rwanda, Uganda, Ghana, and Zambia and shortly in Zimbabwe. There is always a way if people are determined enough. There is also twinning - bigger sections will help the others. Everybody has the same aim and they will try to help when they can.

- In some of these countries, children may not be educated enough to read a book. How can you then go and build a library when the kids can't even read a book?

- This is their opportunity. Very often the level of reading is low because there is nothing to read. But if you have a library, then you can start collecting books and you can ask the schools to bring the teachers to help. That's the plan. Everyone should have the opportunity to read. That's the way to the future. I think there are about 14 million people in the world who can't read at all. Mainly women. Women are not allowed to go to school and learn to read. In Afghanistan the children are not allowed to read. It's so important that's why you have to try everything.

- Is it easy to find a librarian or a teacher willing to help in, let's say, Gaza?

- Yes, actually, there are many.

- In Iran, for example?

- Oh, that's a very intelligent country. They have a lot of teachers and librarians and academics and they have a culture, a wonderful one. It is full of teachers, librarians, academics. There are not so many places where you won't find one. Human beings are curious, they want to know so they will learn.

-What books would you choose to be sent to Gaza? Are there any specifications or any factors?

-I think hopeful books mainly. We went there last year and asked the children in the library and their favourite book was "Cinderella". If you think about it, why not? It is a book of hope. It's got to be optimistic books, so while reading them children can see a way out of their problems. After the floods in Venezuela, children read "Bridge to Terabithia". One of the characters in the book drowns but the children loved the book although many of their friends and family had drowned in the flooding. However, they found some hope in that book, that life goes on. Reading a book that reflects what they've been through so they know they are not alone, gives some hope in the end. You can't say exactly this book is for this and that's it. It depends on the country, on the situation, on so many things. Experts can do this - choose and use the right book. That's called 'bibliotherapy'.

-Do you believe that through reading books some problems will cease to exist?

-No, but they can ease them. They can open people's eyes.

-Many governments try to brainwash their people so they'd rather keep them uneducated. Has any government ever prevented you from building a library somewhere?

-They don't make it very easy. Well, years ago in Cambodia they took the books and made people go back to the fields. They burnt the books; they closed the libraries down and didn't publish a book for the last twenty years. But now a library is being rebuilt! In Iran, the IBBY section works "under the radar" so everything they publish has to go through the government, but they manage to do the work.

- Have the kids ever been ungrateful for what IBBY does?

-Yes, many times, but after all, they are children! A young child can take a book, or bury a book or tear it. Most like it but I'm sure, some children say: "I don't want to do this, I don't want to read this". It's human nature.

-Which country owns the biggest library that IBBY has established?

-Probably, Brazil, I think, and Mexico. IBBY Mexico has a very nice, big children's library and they do a lot of work. They also have machines to write Braille for children who can't see. In Basel, we don't have a library because we don't have enough space. Our office is about as this room, splitting into two different areas. We have to get rid of books so we send the books to institutes every year or every two years.

-Do you know how many libraries have been built for IBBY?

-No, I don't! IBBY India and Mexico are building libraries all the time. In Mongolia they have mobile libraries.

-What's a mobile library?

It's a van with books. But camels can also carry books. In Mongolia that was fascinating! In Bogota, Colombia, they build special cases for books at the bus stops.

-Have there ever been incidents where libraries were destroyed or bombarded?

-Well just now. In Gaza. They were destroyed. And in World War II books were burned, and libraries were destroyed. I think that we all need to understand that if you want to control a country, then destroy their literature, and ban its books.