

Protecting the Prohibited:  
An Analysis of the Czech Republic's Libri Prohibiti

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Two researchers stand at thick, wooden tables clustered at the center of a sunny, unremarkable third floor walk up in Prague. The room is spacious and lined with abstract paintings, modest display cases, and a few green plants. At the far end of the room is a wall crammed with reference books. In front of that sits a cluttered desk occupied by an attentive student worker. One researcher quietly slides a tiny oblong magnifying glass over a miniscule monograph. The other folds over the crinkled pages of a loosely bound manuscript and occasionally pauses to snap digital photographs. The atmosphere is quiet and welcoming, which is in stark contrast to the documents it contains.

The reading room at Senovážné náměstí 2 is the headquarters of the Libri Prohibiti, a private, independent research library that collects, processes and provides access to documents and other materials that were prohibited in the Czech Republic from 1948 to 1989. Under the direction of Jiří Gruntorád, who was a banned author during the time of Communist rule, the non-circulating library strives to “provide wider public access to the production of exile and samizdat publishers and thus to fill in one of the ‘blank spots’ of [the Czech Republic’s] recent history” (Gruntorád, 2009, p. 1). Since it opened on October 22, 1990, the library has amassed thousands of samizdat documents and reference materials in multiple languages that are available to the general public (Gruntorád, 2009, p. 2). As the guardian of a vital aspect of Czech history and culture, the Libri Prohibiti continues to collect and catalogue thousands of samizdat and other documents that were once concealed, obscured, and eventually disbursed around the globe. Unfortunately, the library lacks the essential funding and staff expertise necessary to ensure proper maintenance, digitization, and accessibility to these rare and delicate materials. Yet, despite these shortcomings, an analysis of this library in comparison to

similar repositories and recognized archival samizdat organizations, both within the Czech Republic and elsewhere, proves that the Libri Prohibiti can succeed in its endeavor to preserve the country's history and enhance the collective memory of its people.

### **HISTORY OF THE SAMIZDAT**

Samizdats are typewritten, self-published works of dissidence written and distributed by individuals in resistance to the totalitarian state of Slavic countries during the mid- to late-twentieth century. Following the Soviet Union's occupation of what was then Czechoslovakia after World War II, the resulting Communist government enforced strict regulations to suppress individual expression and limit the spread of information. One of the most crippling laws declared that all print documents must be examined and approved by the government prior to publication. To enforce this policy, radical authors—particularly those who supported democratization, including the Czech Republic's first president, Václav Havel—were censored and often arrested. Gruntorád, who was personally affected by these regulations and at one point imprisoned, remembers that books published before the law was enacted were removed from libraries and bookstores, leaving only a limited selection of government-approved books (J. Gruntorád, personal communication, May 26, 2010). Highly educated dissenters who spoke out against government policies were threatened, silenced, and jailed. In some cases, writers and orators succumbed to self-censorship for fear of punishment. As samizdat literature was deliberately excluded from the country's national heritage, the government-controlled state archives subsequently refused to ensure their long-term preservation (Zaslavskaya, 2008, p. 680). The preservation and cataloging of samizdat literature was in the hands of its creators.

Proliferation was essential to samizdat distribution, so exile authors often hired student typists or used carbon paper to create up to fifteen copies when typing manuscripts. Methods of copying during the Communist regime also included cyclostyle (wax sheets), spirit duplicating (spirit or “Ditto” sheets that could produce up to 500 copies), photo duplicating (books photocopied onto film), and electrostatic duplicating (photocopying, such as Xerox). All of these categories are included in the Libri Prohibiti collections (Libri Prohibiti, 2010, p. 5). While these various copies were fundamental to the success of dissident writers, the acidity and rapid deterioration of these documents creates significant preservation challenges for modern repositories.

This underground form of collaborative civil disobedience eventually overcame the government’s censorship of free expression. As a result, the government’s manipulation of published materials inevitably became a form of advertisement for samizdat writing and increased their recognition and significance. According to Gruntorád, it became easy to buy confiscated books due to the prevalent defiance of authors and publishers (J. Gruntorád, personal communication, May 26, 2010). Samizdat literature from the Eastern and Soviet Blocs were also smuggled abroad, where the words of banned and exiled authors could be collected and read freely (Zaslavskaya, 2008, p. 669).

On January 1, 1977, an assemblage of dissidents published Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia as a written declaration of criticism toward the Communist government’s suppression of citizens’ right to freedom of expression (Libri Prohibiti, 1977, p.1). Many banned authors signed the declaration and it was surreptitiously circulated along with other samizdat articles. Following the Velvet Revolution and the overthrow of the

authoritarian Communist regime in 1989, the Charter 77 Foundation was formed in 1990 to support oppressed citizens around the world. In 1992, the organization changed its name to the Foundation for a Civil Society and relocated its headquarters to New York City. According to its website, this non-profit organization strives to “foster free and pluralistic societies in countries emerging from a history of political authoritarianism, social oppression, and civil strife” (Foundation for a Civil Society, 2010). A digitized copy of the original Declaration of Charter 77 is available on the Libri Prohibiti’s website ([http://libpro.cts.cuni.cz/charta/docs/declaration\\_of\\_charter\\_77.pdf](http://libpro.cts.cuni.cz/charta/docs/declaration_of_charter_77.pdf)).

### **THE LIBRI PROHIBITI**

With financial help from the Charter 77 Foundation, the Libri Prohibiti opened its doors in 1990 with a collection totaling approximately 2,000 books, periodicals, and other documents (Gruntorád, 2009, p. 1). The collection began with copies of a samizdat composed by Jiří Gruntorád, titled *Edice Poelnice* (The Dustbin), and quickly grew to more than 29,200 library units and 2,560 periodicals by 2009 (Gruntorád, 2009, p. 2). Today, the library is open Monday through Friday from 1:00 to 5:00 p.m. and sees approximately 10 users daily. Visitors range from scholars, publishers, and journalists to high school students and the general public. Aside from Gruntorád, the Libri Prohibiti employs a part-time Video and Audio Archivist, a part-time Magazine Archivist, and several unpaid student workers. The employees assist users in-person and also offer reference services via written letter, email, and telephone.

The collections are divided into eleven distinct categories, including a multilingual reference library stocked with post-1999 historical and reference books, and an audiovisual section containing cassettes, CD-ROMs, gramophone records, films, and

DVDs. While all the materials are technically archived by the repository, there is a specific section titled Documentation and Archives, which is a “partially processed” collection of 1,500 unpublished records that includes written documents concerning human and civic rights. The library makes copies of borrowed, unique, and valuable documents and all materials are available for use in the reading room (Gruntorád, 2009, p. 3-4). Each employee is responsible for managing the EasyInt online catalogue system, which keeps a record of every unit in the collections. In addition, the inside front cover of each book is affixed with a label containing appropriate metadata. The library also frequently publishes bibliographies of samizdat literature to promote accessibility and outreach.

Aside from the documents gathered by Gruntorád, the library acquires additional materials through purchases, exchanges, permanent loans, and gifts. Though no official collection policy is established, the library actively seeks out new acquisitions and maintains an open-ended request for donations. The organization’s website includes a “Missing and wanted books” web page that lists samizdat, war exile, and post-war exile publications the library hopes to acquire<sup>1</sup> ([http://libpro.cts.cuni.cz/EN/index\\_en.html](http://libpro.cts.cuni.cz/EN/index_en.html)). Additionally, requests for “samizdat or exile books, newspapers, periodicals, phonograph records, recordings, films, brochures, flyers, newsletters, photographs of activities of Czechs living abroad, correspondence of personalities active in exile, etc” are advertised in the library’s published annual report (Gruntorád, 2009, p. 16).

As of the 2009 Annual Report, the Libri Prohibiti’s main goals are to “accumulate the most complete and highest quality collection of...materials which were created by the Czech and Slovak exile” and “completely catalog these collections by computer and to

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<sup>1</sup> The links to these web pages are broken and inaccessible as of September 2010.

make the results accessible for the purpose of further research, both in [its] computer network and in the form of book and periodical publications” (Gruntorád, 2009, p. 15). One hindrance to these goals is a chronic lack of funding, particularly during difficult economic times. A majority of the library’s 2009 income of 14,576,836 Czech Republic koruna (approximately 750,648 United States dollars) is acquired through government grants and individual sponsors (Gruntorád, 2009, p. 19). To aid in funding, the Libri Prohibiti constantly seeks grants from the Ministries of Culture and Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic. A project presented to the Ministry of Culture in 2010, titled “Collecting the Data in the Library of Libri Prohibiti, Processing It, and Making it Accessible,” hopes to obtain funding for cataloguing and digitization (Gruntorád, 2009, p. 15). Since government funding is limited, the library depends on the generosity of individual donors for much of its income.

Despite a limited budget, the library claims to have “the most extensive collection of the exile and samizdat press,” but “there still remain noticeable gaps in [its] collection which are necessary to fill” (Gruntorád, 2009, p. 16). For this reason, the library accepts any and all applicable documents offered by donors and seldom turns away donated materials. However, it is the opinion of Martin Machovec, a prominent Czech editor and literary critic, that “the most challenging of all the jobs concerning samizdat is that of archivists and librarians: what to keep and what not” (Machovec, 2009, p. 2).

Considering the breadth of the library’s current holdings and the rarity of the documents sought, perhaps its current policy is advantageous. Nevertheless, due to resource, funding, and space limitations, the library might benefit from a comprehensive written collection policy with established parameters, including geographic and subject scopes

for acquisitions and guidelines for deaccessioning. Otherwise, preservation concerns and backlog will grow to unmanageable proportions.

As an archival repository, the Libri Prohibiti is responsible for ensuring the continued maintenance and integrity of all the records in its collection. In a popular book published by the Society of American Archivists, titled *Understanding Archives and Manuscripts*, well-known archivists James O’Toole and Richard Cox declare that archives are committed to “saving permanently valuable records of individuals and groups. . .organizing those records in a systematic and coherent way. . .and making those records and the information they contain available to users” (O’Toole, 2006, p. xiii). Thus, it is imperative that proper archival processes are employed to preserve, catalogue, and make collections accessible.

It is a regrettable but undeniable fact that, “in their everyday practice, [archivists] witness the ease with which documents can disappear because of an unprofessional practice or due to lack of time, storage space, finances, the appropriate means of preservation, or just archival ignorance” (Zaslavskaya, 2008, p. 675). For this reason, the Libri Prohibiti takes measures to ensure the proper preservation of its documents. The materials are arranged in archival storage boxes and acid-free paper packages that are housed in an air-conditioned storage facility, though the library admits that the air conditioning system requires improvement (Libri Prohibiti, 2010, p. 12). Temperature and humidity are stabilized to prevent the disintegration of fragile paper, which is particularly applicable to delicate samizdat copies. Although there are no finding aids for any of the library’s eleven major collections, information on each individual object is retrievable via the library’s extensive online catalogue. The library has also implemented

several security measures for the physical repository, such as security locks and bars, chip locks, and reinforced windows, to prevent theft and damage (Libri Prohibiti, 2010, p. 7).

According to the Libri Prohibiti, “some of the items are endangered because of the acidity of the paper or because they are frequently made accessible, and some of the media are endangered due to their age” (Libri Prohibiti, 2010, p. 7). The prevalence of carbon copies and other highly acidic paper documents is a challenge for the library. The problem is amplified by the Communist government’s exclusion of samizdat documents from archival status during much of the twentieth century. Essentially, the records were “not collected or preserved, the material is often deteriorating, the paper brittle and thin, the photographs decaying” (Zaslavskaya, 2008, p. 702). Moreover, some materials are irreplaceable and must be saved from permanent destruction (Gruntorád, 2009, p. 5). The library conducts ongoing inspections to assess the condition of its holdings and a definitive inventory list is scheduled for completion in 2011 (Libri Prohibiti, 2010, p. 10). In the future, the Libri Prohibiti plans to collaborate with other institutions “to use a special deacidification line to neutralize the acids within the paper of the most endangered prints” (Libri Prohibiti, 2010, p. 9). For now, at-risk documents receive the highest priority for digitization, which has become an admirable goal for the under-funded and under-staffed library.

In 1999, the library embarked on a prolonged digitization project with the transfer of three exile periodicals to electronic format. Since then, approximately ten percent of the collections have been digitized using in-house equipment, though that proportion is gradually increasing. All digitized materials are stored in multiple places and formats,

including CDs, DVDs, and external archival discs (Libri Prohibiti, 2010, p. 7-9). As more users expect remote electronic access to archival records, the library's long-term goal is to adapt to evolving user needs, digitize most of its documents, and expand access without compromising delicate originals.

Digitization is an effective form of outreach that can pique interest and entice viewers to use the archives more frequently, but it can also protect fragile or frequently accessed materials from rapid degradation. While many debate whether digitization equals preservation, it is nevertheless an important factor in reducing the physical use of fragile items because researchers can view them electronically. To fulfill this purpose, the digitized records require proper metadata and constant maintenance to enable future accessibility. Technological advances can quickly alter storage methods or make them obsolete, so proper metadata is necessary to extend the life of the digital surrogate or prepare for future upgrades. Much like the VHS tape or cassette tape—of which the Libri Prohibiti has collected 670 and 2,530 records, respectively—content stored on today's formats will eventually need to be transferred onto newer technologies (Gruntorád, 2009, p. 4). For example, some audio recordings of Czech language broadcasts for Radio Free Europe, an uncensored news outlet broadcast in countries where free press is banned by the government, are currently being digitized to avoid future degradation of the fragile audio files (Libri Prohibiti, 2010, p. 6).

For the Libri Prohibiti, sufficient funding and staff is a major obstacle. Presently, “funds for the care of the library stock and for the digitization thereof are obtained from subsidies, grants and sponsorship gifts from both organizations and individuals. Jiří Gruntorád. . . is responsible for the care of the collection” (Libri Prohibiti, 2010, p. 13).

Digitization projects are elaborate and ongoing endeavors, so the Libri Prohibiti must secure sufficient resources and assemble a staff that is knowledgeable of current standards and techniques. These basic requirements are a proven obstacle for the small library and, as a result, digitization is thus far a piecemeal operation. A few documents have been digitized using in-house technology, though only the Declaration of Charter 77 is currently accessible via the library's website. According to a 2008 research project conducted by members of the Open Society Archives (OSA) Archivum, which is an archival organization at Central European University in Budapest, Hungary, "very little digitization of samizdat has thus far been attempted" (Zaslavskaya, 2008, p. 702). The Libri Prohibiti's long-term goal is to digitize all of samizdat documents, but additional funding and staff is necessary (Gruntorád, 2009, p. 12-13). Other Czech organizations, such as the Czechoslovak Documentation Centre, have also made digitization a top priority.

#### **ARCHIVAL ORGANIZATIONS, STANDARDS AND TECHNIQUES**

The number of repositories containing samizdat documents continues to grow as new records are discovered. These various international collections include samizdat materials "coming from the West (known as tamizdat); gray literature (pamphlets, brochures, and other ephemera like postcards and stamps); nonconformist art, photography, and recordings; and the informal press of the late 1980s" (Zaslavskaya, 2008, p.701). Several libraries around the world contain collections of samizdat papers, including the National Library of the Czech Republic, the British Library, the Library of Congress, the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, and Open Society Archives. There are also private libraries, such as Václav Havel's private library, and international

associations, such as International Samizdat [Research] Association (IS[R]A). Yet, according to a research article written by OSA Archivum staff members, including author Olga Zaslavskaya, there are four fundamental issues evident in samizdat collections worldwide:

- 1) No comprehensive source is established to consolidate information about repository locations and individual samizdat collections.
- 2) No standardized archival approach exists for processing samizdat documents. In addition, there are few, if any, online search aids or established online publishing practices relevant to samizdat collections.
- 3) No centralized information service exists to provide updates on conferences, exhibitions, projects, publications, and new acquisitions.
- 4) No single source organizes information about samizdat history research by scholars and organizations (Zaslavskaya, 2008, p. 702).

Zaslavskaya and her colleagues propose collaboration among institutions to organize samizdat literature among institutions, encourage proper preservation, and ensure efficient access for researchers.

To increase support and outreach, the Libri Prohibiti is a member of the International Samizdat [Research] Association (IS[R]A), which was established in 2004 “to encourage and support international research in samizdat, dissent and alternative culture by building a network of scholars and professionals; through coordination and collaboration; and with the intelligent use of information technologies and open standards for long-term preservation and broad access” (International Samizdat [Research] Association, 2009). Repositories around the world have collected samizdat papers as a

result of their dispersal during the strict Communist regime, so an international association is essential to facilitate complete documentation. Though the IS[R]A does not assemble a comprehensive catalog of all samizdat collections in one place, it does offer an informal network that encourages collaboration among individuals and organizations around the world and provides a platform for dialogue about samizdat preservation and research. As a member of this association, the Libri Prohibiti is able to share ideas with similar archives, provide outreach for its collection, and help ensure adequate retention of samizdat records worldwide. Though the IS[R]A is the closest to a centralized information service proposed by Zaslavskaya and her colleagues, it falls short of compiling a comprehensive collection of samizdat records. An all-encompassing database is a lofty goal, but further collaboration facilitated by organizations such as IS[R]A will help make these vast collections accessible to researchers.

The founding member of IS[R]A is the Czechoslovak Documentation Centre, which is a non-profit organization established in 1994 to promote samizdat research and preservation in collaboration with the National Museum, Prague. In May 2010, Vilém Prečan, the organization's chairman, issued an appeal to the greater community in support of the digitization of samizdat documents and the creation of a "pan-European database of samizdat on the Web" in a three-year project titled DIDEROT (Dissidents' Documents – European Repository Online) (Czechoslovak Documentation Centre, 2010). A glance at the centre's website reveals that the Libri Prohibiti is not officially partnered with this organization, so it is unclear whether any relationship exists between them. Considering the Libri Prohibiti's insufficient staff and funding, it may be beneficial to collaborate on the DIDEROT project to accelerate the ongoing digitization project.

Similar institutions have also developed their own archival projects. Open Society Archives (OSA) in Budapest, Hungary, while actively collecting and preserving documents, conducts extensive research to “developing innovative tools to explore, represent, or bridge traditional archival collections in a digital environment,” according to the organization’s website (<http://www.osaarchivum.org/>). In 1999, OSA published a book that describes the organization in detail and serves as a practical guide to the archives. Included is a report of the archives’ samizdat collection, which encompasses several countries in Eastern Europe, including Czechoslovakia. Like the Libri Prohibiti, the OSA collection includes mostly typewritten and some audiovisual records (Pudowski, 1999). As of 2008, the OSA has included 20 full-time employees, four part-time employees, and three externally funded contract employees, many of which are trained archivists and librarians (Open Society Archives, 2008, p. 8). This, in addition to a significantly larger budget, gives the OSA an advantage over the Libri Prohibiti and allows it to accomplish more objectives. While the Libri Prohibiti is not associated with this organization, it can certainly use it as a paradigm for archival techniques and policies.

The OSA website outlines the archives’ acquisitions policy, retention plan, exclusions, research guidelines, and also lists all finding aids for analog and digital collections. In addition, the Annual Reports, which are available for 1995 to 2008 in electronic format, list information about processing, cataloguing, and archival acquisitions, among various other activities and initiatives. Of interest in the 2008 Annual Report is the analysis of on-site and online research. According to this report, “The number of electronic images requested on-site increased from 22,300 in 2007 to 58,000

in 2008. Against this a 36 per cent drop in the number of requested documents was registered” (Open Society Archives, 2008, p. 12). Regarding online visits and requests, “The estimated number of on-line requests reached about 65 requests per month, an increase of 18 per cent as compared to last year’s [2007] figures” (Open Society Archives, 2008, p. 13). These statistics illustrate a trend in user expectations toward electronic access to documents. Though digitization is a top priority for the Libri Prohibiti, it is unable to meet this level of user needs. Statistics such as these may serve as an impetus for the library, as well as the Ministry of Culture and individual donors, to support increased digitization to reach an evolving user community.

Aside from their own individual policies, repositories in the Czech Republic generally adopt established international guidelines as their national standards. For example, the Czech Republic is one of 17 actively participating members in the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) Subcommittee 10 (SC10), which has published several international standards for preserving paper documents in libraries and archives. Some of these international standards apply directly to the Libri Prohibiti, including ISO 9706:1994 Information and documentation—Paper for documents—Requirements for permanence and ISO/DIS 11799: Document storage requirements. The former is the basis for national standards for paper preservation in the Czech Republic (Hoel, 1998).

In addition to guidelines for paper material, the IFLA Core Activity on Preservation and Conservation (PAC) was created in 1984 “to focus efforts on issues of preservation and initiate worldwide cooperation for the preservation of library materials” (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, 2009). This

organization hosts conferences and events and publishes guidelines, such as *Safeguarding our Documentary Heritage*, to promote preservation of various types of archival materials. These standards are significant to the survival of archival materials because, “to become accessible to scholars, the documents must have been acquired, processed, and described in accordance with archival standards” (Zaslavskaya, 2008, p. 676). Organizations like IFLA can help the Libri Prohibiti by providing strategies and techniques for effective and efficient preservation and accessibility.

## CONCLUSION

According to Zaslavskaya, “The particular case of samizdat as an archival document reveals how the integrity of written memory can be destroyed” (Zaslavskaya, 2008, p. 704). Yet, if these organizations are any indication, interest in samizdat preservation and research has grown exponentially in the past two decades. In modern Czech Republic, books and periodicals are freely published under a democratic government and the once dispersed samizdat articles are congregating in user-friendly collections. The Libri Prohibiti holds a substantial collection of samizdat history, and “its loss would mean a loss of a concentrated source of information on the history of the Communist totality period of the 20th century” (Libri Prohibiti, 2010, p. 5).

Following the guidelines and models set forth by organizations such as IFLA, IS[R]A, and the Czechoslovak Documentation Centre, the library can collaborate with similar institutions and work to preserve these rare and fragile documents. In the words of Gruntorád, the Libri Prohibiti established “in the Czech lands a truly unique and irreplaceable library, which until then had been lacking” (Gruntorád, 2009, p. 1). The library has a lofty mission to preserve and share an uncensored version of Czech history

with the world and, when interested researchers leaf through thirty-year-old samizdat documents in the spacious reading room of the Libri Prohibiti, it's clear that the integrity of this written memory remains.

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