

Make Libraries from Armouries...

by DANA LOSTÁKOVÁ

INTRODUCTION

Social and political changes after the revolution in November 1989 helped to accomplish the old message - "Make libraries from armouries..." (J.A. Comenius) - which could thus be inscribed into the pavement of the courtyard of the one-time military armoury, and present-day Information Centre of the Palacký University in Olomouc. The armoury is located almost in the very centre of the town in the Bishop's Square, right in front of the facade of the Archbishop's palace and close to the seat of the Chancellor's office as well as the Faculty of Arts. The buildings of the church, the university, and the military met in one place. How did they ever get so close to one another? We must seek the answer in the history of the town of Olomouc. Church edifices were built in Olomouc from the very beginning of the town's existence. In 1063 the bishopric was renewed here as a continuation of the tradition of the Great Moravian Empire. The University was founded in Olomouc as early as 1573. In the 17th century a rapid growth of the army took place after Swedish armies occupied the town for eight years. This growth continued during the 18th century, especially during the rule of the empress Maria Theresa. It was during her rule that the construction of a military artillery armoury took place. As the building is so closely connected with the period of Maria Theresa's rule, it would be best to describe the construction within its historical context. After the peace treaty of 1742, according to which Maria Theresa lost the whole of South and North Silesia and the county of Kladsko (Kłodzko in Polish), Olomouc found itself on the edge of the monarchy and became almost a border town. To protect the borders of the monarchy against invasions of foreign armies, the empress decided to make a military fortress out of Olomouc. Brigadier Bechade de Rochepine, an army engineer, became the architect of this change. He used the old system of the town's fortifications and supplemented it with new parts so that the new whole would cope with progressive trends in fortification construction of the time. A large military artillery armoury became part of a large-scale fortress system. As military affairs were given priority in all respects, the armoury was built right next to the Bishop's palace in the square; some canonical houses there had to be demolished for this purpose. The foundation stone of the armoury was laid in 1768 and the whole building was completed in 1778. To compensate for the humiliation of having an armoury in its close neighbourhood, the Olomouc bishopric was promoted to an archbishopric in 1777. The armoury is a huge building, occupying a large part of the square. Four two-storied wings surrounding a spacious slightly trapezoidal courtyard form the building. The wings are of the same width on all floors. On the first floor, there are eight halls with double vaulting, two halls in each of the four wings. The building is a typical example of military architecture; there is strict axial symmetry, applied both to the exterior as well as the interior. The central axis runs from north to south and is highlighted by entrance porches on both sides and by a triangular tympanum with a relief on the main facade that represents a two-headed imperial eagle with war trophies on both sides. At the topmost point of the tympanum there is a monumental statue of Mars, the god of war. The armoury is a highly valuable building and it belongs among the most remarkable monuments of the Olomouc citadel. Up till 1989 it really served the army. Since 1946 the buildings built behind the armoury have belonged to the university. And this is how it happened that up to 1989 there were church, university and army buildings in very close proximity to one another in the centre of Olomouc.

THE ARMOURY AS INFORMATION CENTRE

After November 1989, however, big changes took place. The university could finally open to the world. The new university leadership was strongly aware of the lack of a university establishment that would provide all the services needed for the main function of the university, that is for learning, science and culture. It was decided that an information centre would be created for assembling, storing and providing information of different types and in different forms, with the usage of modern technology. If the information centre was to start complying with its role as a research establishment with all possible services at hand, its location was rather crucial. At that time, the town council decided that the armed forces would leave the historic part of the city, and so the university was offered the Theresian armoury for building an information centre. The armoury had been severely devastated by maltreatment and inappropriate building alterations, and as such the building could not serve as a fully functional information centre. In 1991 negotiations began which led to the development of a design for a large-scale reconstruction, the aim of which was to link the needs of a modern centre with

safeguarding all the features of the historically important, listed building. To convert the building to meet the objectives, it was necessary to solve a large number of problems, such as the amount of conversions, structural problems, the construction of lifts, the humidity of the building, the suitability of the place for study rooms and other sorts of workplaces, the location of computers, storerooms, wiring, lighting, cloakrooms and sanitary facilities, and many other problems that arose during the construction works. The construction works began in 1992. Along with the reconstruction, an archaeological exploration was taking place in the courtyard.

THE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

The university library was the first part of the information centre to open its facilities, in 1997, after the first phase of reconstruction works in the armoury was over. Actually, it was only half of the future library; the rest was still a building site. Library resources from the faculties were moved to the library. It was a beautiful period; something new and unprecedented was being built, and not even the brisk building bustle was able to overshadow that feeling. The refurbishment of the other half of the space allocated to the library was completed in 1999. In 2000, the opening ceremony took place and the whole building was put into service. All the parts of the Information Centre, that is, the computer centre, the publishing centre, the audio-visual centre and the centre for distance learning, moved to the newly refurbished armoury. And so the armoury finally received respectful treatment, with regard to its historic value. Cannons and other heavy weaponry were replaced by books, and the monumental architecture was resurrected by a demanding, yet very successful reconstruction. The armoury is not a real armoury any longer; however, replicas of cannon balls in the large courtyard evoke its history. The library forms the largest part of the Information Centre; it occupies almost half of the floor space of the building; out of 10,000 square metres it is 4,660 square metres. It is open to the public 66 hours a week and it serves 1,500 to 2,500 readers a day. The library is situated on all the floors of the armoury. The entrance to the library is safeguarded against the stealing of books by a safety device, and the cloakroom is equipped with 355 lockers. The Department of Bibliographical Information, the Interlibrary Loan Service and computer study rooms with 88 computers are also situated on the ground floor. The eight halls on the first floor of the armoury are designated as self-access study rooms. With their 441 study places they form the heart of the whole library. Each study place is equipped with a table lamp and a socket for a laptop. There are also 16 computers through which users can access the electronic catalogue, where they can look up all the documents stored in the library. In the first and last hall there are two large enquiry desks, where books are electronically lent out and users can reserve books; there is also an information service. Here it is also possible to order books from storerooms situated in the basement of the building. Books and journals located in the storerooms can be brought to the reader in the study room within one hour. In the audio-visual section of the study room users can find video and audio decks. Five self-service copiers are available to users (600 thousand copies are made every year). In the foyers of the library, which are equipped with small tables and chairs, library users can enjoy drinks purchased from vending machines. The library has been operating in its new premises in the armoury only since 1997, yet since that time there have been two large internal alterations within the library. The investors did not count with such large numbers of readers. After two years of operation the cloakroom had to be substantially enlarged because its original capacity was only 300 readers a day. The number of study places in computer classrooms has also risen markedly. All these alterations, which meant enlarging space and improving conditions for users, were carried out at the expense of the departments that represent the background of the library. The Library Stock Development Department and the Library Stock Protection Department were moved to the attic, which has been very suitably and effectively refurbished. Originally, there was enough space to accommodate even cloakrooms for the study-room employees and a kitchenette where refreshments for the library staff could be prepared. The kitchenette is still there; however, there is now also the Department of Automation and the Library Stock Development and Library Stock Protection Departments, as well as the headquarters of the library. Air-conditioning is being gradually installed in the attic.