

## Librarians with Guns: Guadalajara's Military Public Library

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Canadians are not accustomed to seeing uniformed librarians with guns, but in Mexico there are four military public libraries. I toured one of these, the Biblioteca pública del ejército y fuerza aérea mexicanos (Public Library of the Mexican Army and Air Force), during the annual International Book Fair in Guadalajara, Mexico, in December 2003.<sup>1</sup> The American Library Association and its subgroup Reforma organized the visit.

It was a Monday morning and our library escort and guide was Captain Rodrigo Espinosa Rosales, the library's head librarian and archivist. Accompanying the captain were a few other uniformed librarians who followed us discreetly and recorded our visit with their cameras. Our small group of 20 public and academic librarians had mixed feelings. We were impressed by and very much interested in the library's beautiful Mexican architecture and impeccably organized contents. However, we felt uneasy with the strong military presence in an institution that has a mandate to promote access to information and the freedom to read.

The Biblioteca pública del ejército y fuerza aérea mexicanos, one of 42 public libraries in Guadalajara, opened its doors on

June 12, 1999. The 4,000-square-metre neo-classic building where the library is housed has witnessed a succession of proprietors and uses since its construction in 1821. Originally it belonged to the Catholic Church. A few years later it was seized by the government and transformed into a gunpowder factory, which led to an explosion inside the building. After many years of abandonment, the building next welcomed a convent; however, military purposes soon took over as it began housing soldiers and their families. Alternating between prison and government or military headquarters, the building found a new vocation as a library, while still remaining under military jurisdiction. Now another type of power occupies the building's open courtyards and surrounds its fountain: access to information and literacy.<sup>2</sup>

Here, all types of users, from adults to children, have access to information and benefit from training and recreation services that enhance their quality of life. The library has six types of collections: the general and children's collections, reference resources, periodicals, maps and videos.<sup>3</sup> The last two collections, referred to as the *mapoteca* and the *videoteca* respectively, stand apart from the rest of the collection as their documents are not classified

according to the Dewey Decimal Classification system. Access to the other four collections is through an intranet catalogue and a computer terminal. There are plans to make the library's records available eventually through the state of Jalisco's online public library catalogue.<sup>4</sup>

For the time being, the only centralized service is collection management, which occurs through the national public library system. However, local preferences are considered thanks to patron purchase requests, which require users to indicate their occupation and education. It is unclear whether a patron's social class, as indicated on the purchase request, makes a difference in which requests are accepted or rejected.

According to Captain Espinosa Rosales, Guadalajara's military public library's primary mission is to encourage reading. Even the walls praise the importance of reading and the eternalness of knowledge, entreating patrons to read. A quotation from Sir Francis Bacon stands out in red letters on the walls of the central reading room: "Reading maketh a full man." Furthermore, the library does not impose fines on late material and does not feel a need for such action.

Perhaps the guns that some of the librarians carry are a sufficient deterrent. Nonetheless, the 15 library staff members work to make reading accessible to all, especially through their services to the visually disabled. The library offers patrons a collection of Braille texts, a Kurzweil Reading Edge machine, a Braille computer printer, a Perkins Braille, and a volunteer-run books-on-tape service.<sup>5</sup>

First and foremost, the library is meant to be a community centre, which citizens are welcome to use as a meeting and learning place. In fact, there is a classroom and a typewriter room. Captain Espinosa Rosales explained that typewriters are offered because computers are not part of many of the library patrons' lives.<sup>6</sup> Given the library's dedication to serving special information needs,

perhaps it could become the place where patrons learn the modern technological skills that will improve their occupational prospects.

The tour of the Biblioteca pública del ejército y fuerza aérea mexicanos ended with a snack prepared for us by the library staff next to a sun-filled courtyard. Our discussions, like the library's resources, were safe in the company of an armed librarian. Although this public library obviously makes a significant difference in supporting access to information for its patrons, it would be interesting to find out whether the militaristic ideologies influence collection management. 

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Rodrigo Espinosa Rosales, Presentation and tour of the Biblioteca pública del ejército y fuerza aérea mexicanos de Guadalajara, December 1, 2003.
- <sup>2</sup> Secretaría de la defensa nacional, *Biblioteca Pública del Ejército y Fuerza Aérea Mexicanos de Guadalajara (Jalisco)*, [www.sedena.gob.mx/sdn/museos/bibl\\_gua.html](http://www.sedena.gob.mx/sdn/museos/bibl_gua.html) (accessed January 12, 2004); Pedro Blanco Hernández, *V Región Militar: Biblioteca Pública del Ejército y Fuerza Aérea Mexicanos* (Guadalajara: Biblioteca Pública del Ejército y Fuerza Aérea Mexicanos, [2003?]).
- <sup>3</sup> Blanco Hernández, *V Región Militar*.
- <sup>4</sup> Espinosa Rosales, Presentation.
- <sup>5</sup> Blanco Hernández, *V Región Militar*.
- <sup>6</sup> Espinosa Rosales, Presentation.

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