

*Lady Jadranka Beresford-Peirse
is Founder and Trustee of The
International Trust for Croatian
Monuments*
www.croatianmonuments.org



THE FRANCISCAN FRIARY OF ST LAWRENCE IN ŠIBENIK **BY JADRANKA BERESFORD-PEIRSE**

It was a pleasure and a reward to receive recently several photographs of the new display of books in the Library of St Lawrence Friary in Šibenik. They were taken and sent to me by a young priest, Fra Jerko Kolovrat, who entered priesthood just three months ago. I first visited this Library in September 2014 when, quite by chance, a group of conservators from the National and University Library in Zagreb were also there, working hard for two solid weeks, trying to save what could be saved and arrest further damage. This was part of the programme entitled “Preventive Care of Historic Collections”, initiated by the National and University Library in 2014. In my 2015 progress report I had included a photograph of one of their books, showing clearly the precarious state that the Library was in.

The team of conservators from the National and University Library worked systematically and with great expertise. The collection was disinfected and many books carefully cleaned by hand, dried and moved to a secure position. During





New shelving in 2016

this great labour of love to save these books, the custodian of the friary, Fra Mate Topić, and Fra Petar Josip Djukić and a volunteer, Mrs Jasna Kokot, and later her husband, Zvonimir Kokot, were more than willing to learn how to continue this work themselves, to store the books properly to prevent further deterioration and eventually to catalogue them. This they have done with great fervour and as the photographs from Fra Jerko show the books are now stored on new shelving, in rooms that have been restored and under much better conditions. The visit of the National and University Library conservators was followed by a precise and lengthy report, but it is the people in this friary who have done this important work and should be commended. Happy news indeed!

I am very glad that we, The International Trust for Croatian Monuments, have been able to help them too. A couple of years ago we bought for them with the support of the Headley Trust, a metal conservation chest for storing prints and drawings and a metal cupboard, with a key, for their important books and incunabula. Then, when in 2016 Šibenik suffered from an unexpected flooding and the Šibenik Town Library approached us and asked if we could buy for them a dehumidifier, to help them dry some of their damaged holdings, Fra Mate asked us





Conservation chest for safe keeping of prints and drawings

also for a de-humidifier. We were glad to be able to do so, with a donation from a friend which covered precisely its cost. They have now asked us for a second de-humidifier, and, as we know, winters can be cold on the Dalmatian coast, we were again delighted to be able to do so, and thus help preserve the holdings of this Library. All of this, our financial help to acquire this essential equipment, does not amount to large sums of money.

There are two Franciscan friaries in Šibenik. The friary of St Lawrence is situated just above the main square and the City Hall, within the complex known as Palazzo Foscoli, built during the second half of the 15th century. In the palace there are several late Gothic reliefs by Juraj Dalmatinac, 1410 – 1473, one of the builders of the cathedral of St James in Šibenik. The church of St Lawrence was built in 1677 – 1697. The friary holds 13 incunabula and about 30,000 books and periodicals. About 1,000 books have been lost, beyond repair, during this latter period. They also hold a considerable number of paintings, among them, “Madonna and Child”, reputedly by Juraj Ćulinović, Giorgio Schiavone, 1436 – 1504, maybe the only painting by Giorgio Schiavone held in Croatia, albeit the attribution is uncertain. As a point of interest, the National Gallery in London holds a lovely polyptych by this





artist. The painting “Madonna and Child” is not on view in the friary of St Lawrence in Šibenik, it is held in the collection of this Franciscan Province on the island of Visovac, in the beautiful Krka National Park. It is certainly one of the places that one should visit if possible. As Fra Mate Topić tells me, they have now transferred all their incunabula and a portrait of Emperor Napoleon I to their friary on Visovac, for safe keeping.

Sadly, as Fra Mate also tells me, the Foscoli Palace is in a very bad state of repair. One, even the smallest earthquake, would raise it to the ground. It is the devoted work of Fra Mate Topić and Fra Petar Djukić and Mr Zvonimir and Mrs Jasna Kokot, who are holding things together, both by hard labour and financially. Everybody who comes to the friary admires how clean and tidy everything is, in spite of the structure itself being in such a disrepair.

However, regarding books, all the work is not finished yet, more remains to be done, still more books waiting to be cleaned and properly stored.

As a footnote and a reminder and as mentioned earlier, there is another Franciscan friary in Šibenik, the friary of St Francis of the Franciscans Conventuals. It is situated in the south-east of the town and has a very important Library indeed, containing





over 140 incunabula. Among these, there is one, “*Ars bene moriendi*”, printed in Paris in 1492 by Johannes Higman, which is very rare and of which there may not be a copy either in the British Library or anywhere in the USA. This is where we, the Trust, also helped their library collection. As reported in my Progress Report of 2005, Professor Nicholas Pickwood, bookbindings and conservation expert, and Robert Child, head of conservation at National Museum Wales, visited this Library and, upon their investigations and a report, a group of conservators from the National and University Library in Zagreb came and moved the whole collection to a temporary place while the library room was given a complete restoration treatment. When all this work was done, the books were returned to their original places. Alas, during the renovation process, the aesthetic aspect of the room was lost, the original blue, striking colour of the Library walls was replaced by another, not so pleasing to the eye.

I always remember Anthony Hobson, 1921 – 2014, bibliophile, friend and a great supporter of our Trust, telling me how lucky Croatia was with her monastic library collections. In spite of the turmoil of centuries, Croatia did not have Henry VIII nor the French Revolution. We should be grateful and take proper care of our heritage.

