

DAVID LUBIN AS MEDIATOR – HIS LETTERS, HIS LIBRARY

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ABSTRACT: The exceptional collections of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) David Lubin Memorial Library are based on an original core collection of almost 400,000 books in agriculture, fisheries, forestry, food and nutrition, rural development and related topics from the International Institute of Agriculture (IIA). This paper examines the evolution of the IIA, its collections, its founder David Lubin, mediator extraordinaire and David Lubin's correspondence with his contemporaries, including H.G. Wells.

The IIA was one of many ideas originating with David Lubin, a self-educated Polish-born American, who in the course of his career had worked as a jeweler, oil-lamp salesman, gold prospector, department store owner and manager and farmer. Finding that normal business practices resulted in financial losses from wheat and fruit farming in California, Lubin quickly realized the uncertainty was caused by the farmer's lack of access to current national and international agricultural information. The story of the evolution of the IIA is largely a record of David Lubin mediating continuously, in person, by letter and through newspaper articles. Lubin established information exchange agreements directly with ministers of government and worldwide farm organizations; at his own expense he distributed thousands of documents and worked without monetary recompense until his death in 1919. The leadership and energy of David Lubin were emulated by IIA staff until its dissolution in 1946. They leave the lasting tribute of a precious historic collection spanning over four centuries. When FAO was moved to Rome in 1952, the Government of Italy formally granted to FAO the custodianship of this great heritage.

Keywords: David Lubin, David Lubin Memorial Library, International Institute of Agriculture, IIA, FAO, International Agreements, International Organizations, History, Government.

Asher Hobson, American Representative on the Permanent Committee on the International Institute of Agriculture (IIA) remarked, "Some say Lubin was a genius.

Others say he was a visionary crank. None dispute that he was eccentric.”⁴ This very same person, genius or visionary crank, was almost single-handedly responsible for founding the IIA, an economic development organization well ahead of its time. Neither the public nor government circles before 1905 were demanding nor even interested in the establishment of a world clearinghouse for agricultural information, nor had they envisaged stabilizing agricultural prices through international action. The IIA, formed from David Lubin’s ideas, principles and actions became the cornerstone for the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) founded in 1945,⁵ following the Hot Springs Conference held in 1943 to consider post-war reconstruction. David Lubin’s unique role was recognized by the 1952 FAO Conference which named the FAO Library in honor of David Lubin, an ordinary man who achieved the extraordinary.

David Lubin was neither a politician nor a man of great wealth nor did he wield great influence. He did however succeed in building an international demand sufficiently widespread and vigorous to support an as yet un-envisaged international structure. His outstanding accomplishment was that of identifying and defining agricultural problems, identifying their causes, proposing solutions and implementing the solutions. What then was the formation and what were the predominant characteristics of this remarkable individual who made things happen? David Lubin’s activities won for him a reputation as a man of zeal, a visionary, and one who was persistent in the face of overwhelming opposition. He was said to have had an inquiring mind, a fertile imagination and exceptional powers of concentration which led to a number of inventions (which he patented and sold). Despite his peculiarities, which he was said to have possessed in goodly number, he had exceptional virtues, disarming frankness, evident sincerity, honesty of purpose and freedom from desire of material gain. His fellow countryman and contemporary, Asher Hobson, provided some additional insight. “All agree that he had a tenacity of purpose such as is exercised by few people. His enthusiasm for his idea approached religious fervor. Rebuff, refusal or defeat made no impression upon him. Tenacity, enthusiasm and sincerity gave force to his undertakings. These characteristics, together with an entire lack of personal ambition, went a long way in enforcing his efforts to establish an International Institute of Agriculture.”⁶

David Lubin, founder of the IIA was of humble origins, born at Klodowa near Cracow on 13 June 1849, the youngest of six children. His father died of cholera shortly afterwards and his mother, remarried to Solomon Weinstock, decided to emigrate to the United States. After spending two years in London, where his half-brother Harris was born, they arrived in New York in 1855 when David was about six years old. At 12 he left school to earn a living which he did in many adventuresome ways, as a jewel solderer and polisher,

⁴ Hobson, p. 16.

⁵ FAO. Conference. Proceedings. 1945. (The Proceedings of this and all succeeding FAO Conferences are in electronic form and may be viewed at <http://www.fao.org/library>.)

⁶ Hobson, p. 16 and following.

as a worker in a timber yard in Los Angeles, as an unsuccessful prospector in Arizona, and as a traveling salesman for a lamp factory. He lost everything except his clothes and violin in the Great Fire of Chicago. In 1874, he returned to California where he and his half-brother worked together in a clothing shop and after accumulating a capital sum of 600 dollars, they opened a new type of shop, the "D. Lubin One Price", at 100 K Street, Sacramento, California. Ten years later, D. Lubin headed the biggest department store and mail order house on the Pacific coast and he was able to fulfill the promise that one day, when he had enough money, he would take his mother to the Holy Land.

David Lubin was a very successful businessman. In the year 1884, he bought a farm and was astonished to find that his considerable business skills failed to earn him success as a farmer and fruit grower. Through personal experience, reading, study and discussion with a broad spectrum of society from farmer to learned economists, first in the United States and then in England, Russia, Germany, Austria, Hungary, Italy and France, David Lubin developed a deep conviction that the concentration of the knowledge of world crop conditions in the hands of a few dealers worked against success. He learned that the existing machinery for collecting price-influencing information was faulty and incomplete. The information itself was unreliable and its vital connection with the welfare of all mankind demanded that it be public property. It became obvious to him that the interests of agriculture required a central clearinghouse for information pertaining to the world's agricultural activities.

David Lubin gradually developed a vision of information as key to equalization and sharing of wealth and attempted to persuade world leaders to support his vision. He was convinced the farmers' isolation and their lack of information were the cause of their exploitation by industrial and trading companies, trusts and cartels. In August 1904, Lubin again set out for Europe ostensibly for a health cure but in fact with the intention to put his idea before the European governments. Received with skepticism more or less everywhere, rejected and with barriers between placed himself and those in positions of influence in England and France, David Lubin decided to go to Italy and present his ideas to King Victor Emmanuel III. He reached Rome on 4 October 1904 and secured an appointment with the Italian Minister of Agriculture through the American Embassy. Passed from Minister to aides, Lubin was unsuccessful with government officials but received practical assistance from a new acquaintance, a sports journalist who suggested they try through a mutual acquaintance to see the king at his hunting reserve at San Rossore near Pisa. They promptly traveled to Pisa and asked for an audience there. At 9 p.m. on Saturday, 22 October, Lubin received a summons for 9 a.m. on Sunday, the 23rd! Lubin had no time to buy the hat and gloves he had been told were indispensable for an audience with the king. Undaunted he set out for San Rossore at dawn and arrived long before the appointed time. The audience, scheduled for ten minutes, lasted three-quarters of an hour!

David Lubin's speech was not the kind one would imagine a sovereign normally hears: "I bring you the opportunity to perform a work of historic importance, which will entitle

you to more enduring fame than the Caesars; they earned fame by wars, you would earn it by working for peace, the peace of righteousness... You are, of course, a very important person here, but remember you are a small potato in the world, the monarch of a third-rate nation. Take up this work in earnest and at one leap Italy can head the nations in the general fight of our days: the fight for Justice in economic relations.”⁷ Amazingly, Victor Emmanuel III agreed to sponsor the project and he submitted it to the Italian Government on 24 January 1905:

My dear President,

A citizen of the United States of America, Mr. David Lubin, has explained to me, with all the warmth springing from sincere conviction, what appears to me a happy and good idea and I commend it to the attention of my Government.

The rural classes are generally the most numerous and have great influence on the conditions of nations everywhere but, scattered as they are, they cannot do what would be necessary to improve the various crops and distribute them in line with the requirements of consumption. Moreover, they cannot adequately defend their interests on the market which, for the most important produce of the soil, is widening more and more to embrace the whole world.

Therefore, it might be extremely useful to set up an International Institute which, without any political designs, would study the conditions of agriculture in the various countries of the world and would periodically issue information on the quantity and quality of crops...⁸

The proposal received support and the international founding conference was held in Rome in May 1905. It resulted in the signature of the Convention of 7 June 1905 by 40 states - 38 years before Hot Springs. The founding conference was however not a natural outcome of the assent of the King nor in any way a spontaneous occurrence. Its attendance and its successful outcome required Lubin’s constant efforts during the entire interval.

As soon as Lubin learned the date of the Conference was set, he sprang into action, concerned that he not place the King in the embarrassing situation of having sponsored a party at which many of the invited guests did not appear. Inspired by Lubin’s enthusiasm, a small group of ardent workers was formed to debate and develop the ideas. Although in poor health, Lubin worked with tireless energy. In middle of winter 1904

⁷ Agresti, pp.181, 182 and following.

⁸ The family of David Lubin donated the David Lubin Archives to the FAO David Lubin Memorial Library once they were informed of the decision to name the Library after David Lubin. Among many of these priceless artifacts was the King’s handwritten text of his letter to President Giolitti asking for his support for David Lubin’s proposal.

Lubin visited the capitals of Austria, Germany, France, Hungary and England meeting with Ambassadors and Ministers, meeting with lukewarm assent to full fledged support and even, in one instance, the claim to having been the originator of the idea. Lubin soldiered on despite disappointments and conflicts and opposition, particularly from his own country's Department of Agriculture, which viewed him as poaching on the Secretary of Agriculture's preserves. Such was Secretary Wilson's personal antagonism towards Lubin that, for the intervention of the President and the Secretary of State, the United States would not have sent a representative. More disappointing, Lubin, the originator of the idea and tireless worker for the cause was not able to be present at the 1905 Conference because he was not officially named a member of the United States delegation.

Undaunted, David Lubin took the signature of the Convention as a success although its scope was much less than he had envisaged. His biographer and long time interpreter says, "Disappointment and discouragement had no part in him. ... Lubin well knew that perfunctory diplomatic action would not secure support for an idea which had to overcome the indifference of many, the prejudice of the conservative, and the active but hidden opposition of "special interests". ... He worked night and day, elaborating his ideas in a series of letters, copies of which he would send to an ever-growing circle of correspondents. Lubin found writing real, hard work; he was not ready with his pen. ... How did Lubin proceed? "In the absence of official propoganda Lubin took the task on himself, and worked early and late on his correspondence. ... It was the force of personality in Lubin, his shrewdness and skill in handling men, and the infection of his own enthusiasm for a cause which carried the day. ... those who were inclined to dismiss him as an idealistic dreamer were the incompetents: the shallow politician, the decorative diplomat, and the superficial journalist. ... he never feared contact with the really competent, -- the real statesman, the shrewd hardheaded businessman, and the keen economist. He submitted his ideas to them time out of number and the result was always victory."⁹ Indeed even Secretary Wilson himself had to eventually confess that there was more in the proposal than he had seen at first.

Lubin wrote to any and all who would support the Institute. To the Queen of Romania, he wrote:

Your Majesty, you were good enough to express the wish that I should forward to Your Majesty some further literature on the subject of the International Institute of Agriculture. In compliance I have the honor to enclose herewith some documents, mainly correspondence, bearing on the subject...

⁹ Agresti, pp. 215-224. (That Lubin was not a natural writer is not evident from the quality and volume of his legacy (thirty-nine volumes of Lubin correspondence and four scrapbooks of newspaper clippings donated by the Lubin family to the David Lubin Memorial Library in recognition of the fact that it bears his name).

He carried his message to journalists, statesmen, politicians and authors. He carried on a lively correspondence with H.G. Wells on agricultural and philosophical subjects. His success was to be accompanied by many disappointments and difficulties and researchers at the David Lubin Memorial Library are astonished by his unflagging energy, his thousands of letters to politicians, statesmen¹⁰ and celebrities¹¹, his travels, meetings and his sheer persistence and tenacity.

Despite his enthusiasm, people distrusted “David Lubin’s ideal and somewhat nebulous concepts” and the “generous and humanitarian ideas contained in the letter of His Majesty the King of Italy”¹². Professionals involved in international trade did not like the simple dissemination of information. The magnate of the wheat trade, Louis Dreyfus, tried to argue the case for long studies - ten years, it seemed to him, were the minimum: “Remember that the world’s eyes are on the Institute and you must do nothing, give no advice and no information before you are absolutely certain about it”. An agent of the Union Stockyard in Chicago complained that the Bureau of Agricultural Economics of the US Department of Agriculture was issuing too much information: “A piece of information known to everybody is of no interest to me, but a piece of information that I have and the others have not can be turned into money!”¹³ Despite many obstacles, David Lubin did not lose hope and continued his work up until his death from Spanish influenza in 1919. By this time the IIA had developed a momentum and the Library continued to flourish.

As testimony to Lubin and his unflinching efforts, in June 1945, the IIA Library owned in total 360,992 works classified as monographs (books and pamphlets, monographic series), yearbooks, administrative reports, pamphlets comprising part of the reprint collections, maps and folios, volumes of periodicals and bulletins (most of them from experimental stations). In 1946 the Institute and its Library were placed in the custody of the newly created FAO which has honored Lubin¹⁴ and reiterated at its Councils and Conferences and in its reports, that it wanted to continue to build upon the work of the Institute according to the new requirements of a world just emerging from the War.

¹⁰ David Lubin Archives Part 1., Vol. V, Sect. 9 Correspondence with Canada. (Contains correspondence from 1908-1918 with 1) Walter James Brown, Editor of “Globe” Toronto; 2) with the Canada Department of Agriculture (at that time situated in the West Block) Minister’s Office Delegates to the IIA: M. Burrell; T.K. Doherty; G. F. O’Halloran; S. Fisher; J.G. Rutherford; 3) Premiers of Saskatchewan, W. Scott and W.M Martins).

¹¹ David Lubin Archives Part 4, Vol. VII, Sect. 8 Correspondence with Englishmen. (Contains Lubin correspondence with H.G. Wells).

¹² David Lubin Archives Part 1, Vol.1, Sect. 1 (Contains correspondence from the King of Italy to President, G. Giolitti).

¹³ Rossetti Agresti, pp 250-252.

¹⁴ FAO. Interim Commission (1945), and FAO. Council. Verbatim. (1969)

The 32 incunabula owned by the Library of the IIA were donated by Marquis Cappelli, who once skeptically stated “there is nothing in your idea, nothing at all.”. He became the second President of the Institute. He also donated to the Library 185 antique and rare works, representing approximately 400 volumes. This precious collection comprised 20 incunabula of which there were 5 different editions of Virgil, 3 of Columella, 3 of Aristotle and so on. The rare works include, among others, 4 Aldine and 3 Bodoniane works and a work of a great value “Hortus Romanus” published in Rome in 1772, in 6 volumes in folio with hand-painted engravings of plants.

Among antiquities one must remember a gift of the President of the Chinese Republic: a descriptive album on agriculture and silk worm growing in China in ancient times, published in the rich style of Emperor K’ang Hai (1662-1723). The work considered a rarity is a masterpiece of Chinese typography, consisting of two large volumes as an album and is enclosed in an elegant embossed green silk case. The text of the work is from the twelfth century.

The Library received another important gift from Professor Giglioli, Professor of Chemistry at Pisa who for a certain period, was Chief of the Agricultural Information Office of the Institute. He donated to the Library his collection of approximately 10,000 pamphlets on agriculture and related fields and of his catalogue comprising approximately entries. This was a precious resource for the Library for it contained many publications published prior to the foundation of the Institute in 1905.

Another exceptional gift was that of all the publications of the Societa Agraria della Provincia di Bologna. This was a complete collection of all of the publications which this Society, founded in 1807, had offered to Benito Mussolini, who decided to give it to a Library interested in preserving and conserving these important publications.

The Library was enriched also by a good collection of United States Agricultural Experimental Stations Bulletins. This is a collection of almost two thousand pamphlets of which the majority are out of print.

Another large collection given to the Library was the large collection of pamphlets, reprints (extracts), bulletins and journals belonging to Arturo Marescalchi, who was Under-Secretary of State at the Italian Ministry of Agriculture. Marescalchi was one of the most illustrious Italian researchers on the problems of wine and wine culture. His collection was comprised of writings on enology, on viticulture, the economics of viniculture and viticulture and also the study of general and specialized agricultural economics.

In addition the Library preserved and managed in a separate collection that of the International Silviculture Institute (CIS) from Berlin formed from a rich forestry collection of approximately 11,000 volumes.

Today, after all this personal dedication and sacrifice, all the efforts and activities, the one thing which remains is the IIA Library. Gone are all the 'Permanent Committees' and other structures. In June 1952 FAO's David Lubin Library was inaugurated and in accordance with the terms of its founding statutes, the Quebec Declaration, inherited the rich collection of the Library of the IIA (approximately 400,000 volumes). The extensive book and journal collections assembled by the IIA served as a solid base for present collections which number well over one million volumes. The heavily used working collection consists of FAO documentation, books and serials in FAO subject fields¹⁵, a comprehensive reference collection and specialized Branch Library collections in Fisheries and Forestry. The IIA Institutional Memory and Rare Books collections contribute prestige and depth to the David Lubin Memorial Library collections and attract researchers from around the globe.

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¹⁵ Agriculture, Food and Nutrition, Rural Development, Plant Production and Protection, Animal Production and Health, Agricultural Machinery, Agro-industries, Agro-forestry, Forestry, Fisheries, Sustainable Development, Statistics, Agricultural Economics and other related subjects.