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125 Years of the Swiss National Library

2020 was a unique year: one in which the Swiss National Library (NL) celebrated its 125th birthday, while the coronavirus pandemic dominated everything. It was a year, then, in which little went entirely according to plan. Despite closures, cancellations and postponements, the NL still managed to celebrate its anniversary with an exhibition, an audio walk, a publication and a number of events, while making further enhancements to its digital offering.

In May 1895, two librarians began working on what was to become the *Swiss National Library* in an apartment in the centre of Bern. In 2020, the Swiss National Library (NL) celebrated 125 years since its creation. Today, it is an institution employing 180 people that looks after collections encompassing some 7 million documents. It runs the Swiss Literary Archives and holds a comprehensive collection in its Prints and Drawings Department. With the Centre Dürrenmatt Neuchâtel and the Swiss National Sound Archives, it also has bases in French- and Italian-speaking Switzerland. For more than 125 years, it has been providing access to Swiss texts, images and audio documents, and is thus one of the leading custodians of Switzerland's cultural heritage.



Marie-Christine Doffey,
Director

Anniversary Exhibition Sharing. On Libraries and Beyond

To mark the anniversary, the NL presented *Sharing. On Libraries and Beyond*. The premise of this exhibition was that libraries have always been involved in sharing. Taking its cue from new ways of doing so, the NL offered a glimpse behind the scenes at its own operations and revealed how it makes knowledge about Switzerland available to all. It asked what people like sharing – and what they do not – and highlighted the ways in which the growing “sharing economy” is transforming social interactions.

Leises Rumoren – an Audio Tour

Everyone assumes that library reading rooms are silent places. In 2020, though, the peace was broken as visitors equipped with headphones took an audio walk through the library's rooms to discover unfamiliar aspects of the NL. The audio tour complemented the anniversary exhibition by revealing other facets of the National Library.

Anniversary Publication 125 Years of the Swiss National Library

For those wishing to learn more about the history of the NL, its many and varied holdings and its wide-ranging tasks, an anniversary publication in four languages offered not just facts and milestones but also insights into the library's inner workings – in the form of texts, photographs and the cartoon strip *Im Palast der Schachteln*, drawn by Fanny Vaucher.

Anniversary Events Hit by the Coronavirus Pandemic

A range of anniversary activities were also planned for 2020, but the first year of the pandemic offered little scope for celebrations and encounters, with many events having to be postponed or even cancelled. Planned as a series about sharing food and ideas to accompany the anniversary exhibition, *A Shared Meal* ultimately took place just once. Instead, the NL developed the digital *Library Live* format, comprising live talks on Instagram in which the exhibition curator discussed sharing with experts such as Nick Schwery from the ETH Zurich, Lorenz König of wemakeit and Debora Lopomo from Wikimedia Switzerland, building on the topics covered by the exhibition.

Looking with Confidence to a New Year of Culture

The cultural sector has been thinking for some time about how cultural offerings can be mediated digitally. The coronavirus crisis of 2020 significantly accelerated the search for answers, as many events have been unable to take place at their intended location. The NL has therefore turned increasingly to digital channels for its cultural offerings, and not just as part of the anniversary. Although the pandemic remains undefeated for now, the NL is looking to the future with confidence thanks to the protective measures put in place around the world. In 2021, it will be offering its library services both on site and digitally, and organising a diverse cultural programme for both specialists and the general public, in the hope that digital exchange will go hand in hand with a greater number of inspiring, shared cultural experiences.

Marie-Christine Doffey
Director