

# MEM Awards

**Remarks by the Recipient of the 2022 MEM Lifetime Achievement Award  
Given at the Annual Meeting of Middle East Medievalists  
(Denver, Colorado on 1 December 2022)**

ANDRÁS RIEDLMAYER

*Fine Arts Library Collection at Harvard University*

I would like to begin by expressing my thanks to the president and the board of the Middle East Medievalists, and to its members, for presenting me with MEM's Lifetime Achievement Award. I know and admire many of the past recipients, and I feel humbled and greatly honored to find myself in such distinguished company.

It is particularly gratifying to know that I am the first librarian and archivist to be recognized with this award. The texts, images, and other items that librarians and archivists collect, organize and preserve are the repositories of human history and memory. They're what makes it possible for us to study and understand people and the changes in their societies, ideas, and cultures.

Let me start by explaining how I got to be a librarian. As I suspect is the case for many of us, I came to the field and to the profession that became my life's work by a somewhat circuitous route. But there were signs along the way. My childhood was spent in Hungary, during the first decade after the end of World War II. We were living in Budapest, in a home full of books. My father was an architect in the state Institute for the Protection of Monuments. On a few memorable occasions he took me along to a site he was working on, an old house in the historic castle district of Buda that had been damaged in the war. I was allowed to help, holding one end of the measuring tape, as my father directed the workers carefully chipping away at the wall inside the vaulted entryway to the courtyard building. I watched in amazement as an ornate stone niche, like a Gothic window frame, emerged from beneath layers of plaster. As it turned out, this was but one of a row of niches in the entryway, not windows but places for servants to sit while awaiting orders from the owner of the house. My father was pleased that his research had led to the discovery of a hidden feature, evidence of how the building had been used in medieval times. I was excited and full of questions, wanting to know more about the people who had built that house centuries ago, and how they lived.

---

© 2023 András Riedlmayer. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License, which allows users to copy and distribute the material in any medium or format in unadapted form only, for noncommercial purposes only, and only so long as attribution is given to the original authors and source.

A few years later, we had fled Hungary and were refugees living in West Germany. I had to learn German, studied Latin, Greek, and French in school, and imagined I would one day become a classicist... or perhaps an explorer.

The only documents we had at the time were refugee IDs, issued by UNHCR, and crossing borders was complicated. But we found ways to travel. When I was twelve, the summer before our family emigrated to the United States, our parents took us on a tour of France, our last trip before we left Europe. We drove south to the Mediterranean coast, near the Spanish border. I still vividly recall from that trip a visit to a medieval fortress near Narbonne, which in the eighth century CE was the seat of a Muslim emirate.

The uniformed guard at the fortress gate who took our tickets was a Muslim from Senegal. He had his young son with him and was teaching the boy how to read and recite the Qur'an. I watched and was captivated by the sound of the language and by the Arabic script on the pages of the book. A decade would pass before I could read the script, let alone make sense of the text, but it left a lasting impression.

In the US, I attended high school in Chicago, learned English (it was my sixth language), read voraciously and, impressed by the books of Rachel Carson, for a while I thought I might become a marine biologist. The last hour of most days at my high school was study hall, from which I played hooky as often as I could. I would sneak out and escape downtown to the magnificent Chicago Public Library, where I had the run of the open stacks and could read whatever I wanted. On a few occasions I lost track of the time and didn't get home until after dark. My parents were not pleased.

All the same, I was a good enough student to get a scholarship at the University of Chicago and, once there, soon discovered that I liked history much better than biochemistry. I learned how to do research, how to use the library, and how to write academic papers. In my freshman year, I took an elective course in Hellenistic history, and it reawakened my fascination with antiquity and with the Mediterranean world. At the time, the university had on its faculty two great Byzantinists, Speros Vryonis and Walter Kaegi, and I decided to major in Byzantine history.

But at the end of my sophomore year my plans fell apart. Speros Vryonis left to join the history faculty at UCLA, while Walter Kaegi went on medical leave. Suddenly, there was nobody at Chicago to teach Byzantine history. I went across the hall to the Center for Middle Eastern Studies, where Reuben Smith, editor of the late Marshall Hodgson's *The Venture of Islam*, and the Ottomanist Richard Chambers kindly welcomed me and helped me to make another move forward in time, within the same region—from studying the Byzantines to the study of Ottoman history and culture. Fifty-odd years later, I am still an Ottomanist and still learning.

For graduate school, I went on to Princeton, where I was fortunate to be a student of Martin Dickson, who shared with his students his passion for Persian language and culture and taught us how to think. I studied Ottoman history with Norman Itzkowitz, who brought Talât Sait Halman and Geoffrey Lewis to Princeton to teach us Turkish. After passing my general exams, I got a Fulbright fellowship for dissertation research in Turkey. I ended up staying on in Istanbul for more than three years, happily spending my days in the Ottoman archives and reading in Islamic manuscript libraries.

When I returned to the US in the late 1970s it was a difficult time to find employment in the field. Area studies centers at American universities, most of them set up just a couple of decades earlier, had faculty who were still far from retirement. There were few new openings. I moved from Chicago to Massachusetts in 1980, got married that summer, and got by with short-term teaching jobs at local colleges. But I was also fortunate enough to be invited by the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute, at the time directed by the eminent Turkologist Omeljan Pritsak, to take part in a project to research and translate Ottoman sources on the history of Ukraine and the Black Sea region. It was not a paid position, but it was fascinating work and it got me access to the university's amazing library.

Meanwhile, my wife completed her doctorate in mathematics and got her first teaching job at Simmons College, which had a graduate school of library science. As a faculty spouse, I was eligible to take some library school courses free of charge, and I started to think seriously about becoming a librarian. Not much later, a position was advertised at Harvard, as bibliographer in Islamic art and architecture. I applied and was hired, and it became the job that I held for the rest of my career as a librarian.

As a research librarian specializing in Islamic art, I felt I had the best of both sides of the academic world. I helped faculty and generations of students find answers to complex research questions, read and commented on their papers and theses, sat in on courses, gave workshops and lectures, and had a budget to buy books and photographs to add to the library's world-class collections. I could also do my own research and writing on the side. What brought me the most satisfaction was sharing knowledge, especially the times when I could connect a rare or unusual item that I had just acquired for the library with someone who would be excited to see it and would use it for their research. I had the opportunity to work with brilliant colleagues and library patrons, and every day I went home having learned something new and interesting. It was an exciting time in the profession and in the field of Middle Eastern studies, with advances in automation and digitization and the changes these brought to libraries and to the humanities.

But early in my career as a librarian, war intervened. When the first Gulf war broke out in 1990–91, I began getting questions from people concerned about the cultural heritage of Iraq and how it could be preserved from destruction in the war. I began compiling a bibliography on national and international laws on the protection of cultural heritage in a time of armed conflict, and even started compiling material for a sourcebook on the subject, with a focus on the Middle East.

In 1991 war broke out once again, this time in the former Yugoslavia. One could watch on television in real time as the historic port city of Dubrovnik, a UNESCO World Heritage site, was enveloped in smoke and flames, bombarded from the land and the sea by the Serb-led Yugoslav army. By the following spring the conflict had spread to Bosnia, where historic buildings and bridges, mosques, churches, and libraries and archives were being systematically destroyed as part of ethnic cleansing. Not just individuals but entire communities were targeted for persecution, exile, and death, “punished” for the cultural and religious choices of their ancestors. The war against people included a campaign to remove any evidence that they were ever there to begin with, and to give them no reason to come back.

In May 1992, the Oriental Institute in Sarajevo was targeted with incendiary munitions, its 5,300 Islamic manuscripts and 200,000 Ottoman documents turned to ashes. Just three months later, in August 1992, Bosnia's National Library was also shelled. The library burned for days, more than ninety percent of its collection of two million books, journals, and manuscripts were destroyed.

As a scholar and librarian, I felt signing petitions and appeals was not enough. I had to do something. One thing that I could do, as an art documentation specialist, was to document what happened and raise public awareness of the issue. I gave talks and conference papers about the destruction of Bosnia's cultural heritage, wrote articles, testified before Congressional committees and in international forums, and took part in projects to assist our colleagues in Sarajevo and to help restore libraries and their collections after the war in Bosnia ended in 1995.

But as a Turkish saying reminds us, *Şeytan uyumaz* (Satan does not sleep), and in 1998 once again armed conflict broke out in the Balkans, this time in Kosovo. Once again, hundreds of thousands of people were driven from their homes and forced across the borders, while their schools, libraries, and houses of worship went up in flames.

When a cease-fire ended the Kosovo war in June 1999 and Serbian forces were forced to withdraw, the United Nations was given the task of administering the territory. A call to UNESCO headquarters in Paris, to ask whether they had any plans to conduct a survey of what had happened to cultural heritage in Kosovo during the war, brought a disappointing response. UNESCO would only undertake such projects at the request of member states, and they had no current plans to do so. As a librarian, that made me angry.

I got in touch with the Office of the Prosecutor of the International War Crimes Tribunal in The Hague, to ask if they would be interested in the results of such a survey. They said they would be. I got a grant to support the survey from the Packard Humanities Institute and spent the summer in Harvard's library, doing preparatory research and planning. Four months after the end of the war, I headed to The Hague for a briefing with prosecutors and then to the Balkans, together with an architect colleague, and we spent the month of October 1999 in Kosovo, recording the destruction of cultural monuments, libraries, and archives.

Two and a half years later, I came face-to-face in a Hague courtroom with former Yugoslav president Slobodan Milošević, on trial for war crimes and genocide. Being cross-examined by the dictator was surreal, but I was armed with a database of images and eyewitness accounts from the people Milošević's troops had victimized.

This is how I became an expert witness at the Hague war crimes tribunal, testifying against those responsible for crimes against cultural heritage in Kosovo and Bosnia. Over the next ten years, I was asked by the UN court to compile additional expert reports on cultural destruction in the Balkans. I ultimately testified in nine trials, against fourteen Serbian and Bosnian Serb officials accused of war crimes. Though Milošević died of a heart attack before the court could deliver a verdict in his case, eleven of the other defendants were convicted and sent to prison.

This is certainly not something I thought I'd be doing in my work as an academic librarian. But if you really want to make a librarian mad, burn down a library.