

HELLA JEAN BARTOLO

An Appreciation

Charles J. Farrugia writes from Malta



The news that Hella Jean Bartolo passed away reached me on Sunday 6th June 2004. I cannot say I was shocked, as I knew she was passing through difficult times and the end was near. However, the more I think about the sad news, the more difficult I find it to believe that the person whose fighting spirit was second to none is no longer with us.

I first met Hella in 1998, soon after I took over charge of the National Archives. I had called her hoping to establish contact with one of the few archivists on the island with whom I hoped to share some of the frustrations of the job, and learn some of the tricks of the trade. She was expecting the call, and the next day there she was at the archives. From then onwards, her support towards the archives was a never ending story.

The connection of Hella with archives developed quite late in her lifetime. She was employed at the Central Bank of Malta where the need of converting the registry into a records management services unit was implemented in 1988. Hella was sent on a short course in Records Management in the United States from where she came back charged with initiative to introduce the concept of records management in Malta.

In 1994, Hella was awarded a Masters Degree in Records and Archives Management from the School of Library and Information Studies at University College London. Her thesis 'A Records Management programme for the Central Bank of Malta' was implemented by the Central Bank, Hella's employer at the time, and sponsor of the course.

On her return to Malta, Hella worked at her previous post at the Central Bank and established the records management programme of the Bank. She lectured at University as part of the Diploma in Librarianship and Information Studies. She was the first Maltese to become member of the Society of Archivists of UK and of the American Archivists and Records Managers of the US (ARMA). She was also the only foreign archivist to be approved as Director of one of the Chapters of ARMA.

On the local scene, Hella has served for a number of years as member on the Council of the Library Association (Ghaqda Bibliotekarji), now re-named MaLIA. She also served on various committees appointed by the Government to propose reforms in Archives. In 1996 she was appointed on an Action Committee on Libraries and Archives appointed by the then Minister of Education. After the change in Government, the current Minister of Education appointed Ms Hella Jean Bartolo as Deputy Chairperson of the National Archives Advisory Committee.

Hella used her contacts abroad to put Malta's archival heritage on the international scene. Four main initiatives deserve a mention. Some years back, through her contacts with the World Bank where she used to work for a short period, she managed to get an approval for \$10,000 for the Maltese Government to build a records centre. Unfortunately such an opportunity was not exploited by the local authorities. In 1997, she also managed to get funding for a study of the records management system at the Ministry of Education. This survey was conducted by experts from the International Records Management Trust.

Once again, in this case, the end result was an excellent report which ended on the shelves of a few conscientious individuals who cared to preserve it. In August 2001, Hella convinced Mr Geoff Mowlam from the Genealogical Society of Utah to come over to Malta and negotiate sponsorship for a microfilming project. Luckily enough in this case we managed to build a long standing relation which is most beneficial to the National Archives.

What was most striking in Hella's character was her determination, personal initiative, and stubbornness not to give way in front of bureaucratic behaviour. Her utter dislike of officials who hide after studies in order to play for time and avoid change, was evident and pronounced on more than one public occasion. She complemented her words with action. On more than one occasion she represented Malta in international archives conferences, paying herself for most of the expenses, but saving the face of the country, by not divulging abroad that our absence was merely the result of 'lack of funds' to participate.

In July 2000 Ms Hella Jean Bartolo was one of the founding members and first President of the Friends of the National Archives of Malta. This voluntary organisation is helping the National Archives accomplish its mission and has proved indispensable at a time when the National Archives is suffering from severe shortages in human and financial resources. Concurrently with this, Hella established her own company which is the first locally managed company dealing with records management in Malta.

Apart from her commitment towards the archival scene in Malta, Hella Jean Bartolo was an active member in the committee of the Friends of St Vincent de Paul, and a member of the Maltese National Commission for UNESCO.

Notwithstanding our friendship for the last years, I still do not feel I know enough about

the character of this great lady. It was only lately that I came to know of her singing talents in her youth, and the publication of a least two novels. In all our discussions, she was never eager to tell about her past, but rather full of plans for the future. Even in the last months, she remained a forward looking person. Her registration as speaker during the forthcoming Archives Congress in Austria is just one proof of this optimistic and forward looking spirit. Just two weeks ago she arranged for an extensive collection of books to be donated to the National Archives. I must admit, that sorting out the collection last week was the most emotional and moving experience in my career.

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