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For Posterity's Sake

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By Bill Eichenberger, Dispatch Book Critic

The monks at the Hilandar Monastery in Greece hadn't seen anything like the father-and-son team of Mateja and Predrag Matejic.

The pair traveled to the monastery on Mount Athos in 1971 to photograph a massive collection of manuscripts for later storage on microfilm.

"Initially, the monks thought we'd be like everyone else who'd done research at the monastery," recalled the son, Predrag. "A monk would ask us which manuscript we'd like to see, and, 15 minutes later, we'd ask for another.

"He'd say, 'Yes, but what did you do with the first one?' After a couple days the monk would say, 'How many manuscripts do you think you'll need for the whole day?' And he'd bring us a stack this high."

Matejic demonstrated "this high" with his hand held several feet off the ground.

The manic photographing was conducted 12-14 hours a day, six and sometimes seven days a week, for several weeks.

"There was no electricity at the monastery, so we could only do daylight shooting," he said. "My father would turn the pages, and I would shoot them with a camera."

At 19, Matejic was an amateur photographer on the adventure of his life.

His father, a priest of the Serbian Orthodox Church and an assistant professor in the Slavic Department at Ohio State University, had been asked by the monastery to preserve the intellectual content of its manuscripts.

All 832 of the codices (bound volumes) and several hundred other documents (edicts, chrysobulls and so on) eventually formed the core collection of the Hilandar Research Library at OSU.

The library holds on microfilm more than 4,000 manuscripts and more than 1 million pages of text. It boasts manuscripts from 71 collections in 20 countries.

It has become, quite simply, one of the most significant research libraries of its kind in the world.

In honor of the monastery's 800th anniversary and the library's 20th, the OSU Main Library is hosting an exhibit of rare texts, photographs and biographical material through mid-September.

"It represents the sum total of what an entire major culture considered of value," Matejic said of the monastery and of the library. "In the Eastern Orthodox world, there were no universities such as you found in the West. The monasteries were the centers of learning."

Father Mitrofan, a Hilandar elder, in 1969 recruited the elder Matejic for the preservation project. In 1970, the professor and OSU photography student Walt Craig made the university's first voyage to Mount Athos. Each of the three OSU trips there was marked by a sense of urgency, said Leon I. Twarog, chairman of the Slavic Department when the Hilandar Research Library was conceived.

"You had to act as if you'd never have another chance, because in eastern Europe that was always a real possibility," he said. "You didn't make long-range plans. You just went and got as much done as possible."

The pressure to record as much as possible, as quickly as possible, was especially frustrating to his father, Matejic said.

"He would want to stop and read the texts, but we didn't have time."

The father-son team shot 3,312 rolls of film ("It's a number I'll never forget," the son said) and wore out two screws in the camera.

"On any one page, there might be something that changes our history and brightens our understanding or saddens us."

The exhibit features several books and dissertations made possible only because scholars had access to the library holdings.

"But more than the intellectual content of the manuscripts, I'm interested in the asides," Matejic said.

"The manuscripts were all handwritten, and the monks would often put personal notes in the margins about how cold they were, or how fat their fingers were and how hard it was to write, or how much they hated a particular superior who they were certain would end up in hell.

"If you read enough of that, you begin to see them as people not really all that different from us."

Such scholarly preservation has never been more important, said Mary-Allen Johnson, assistant curator.

A 1988 fire at the library of the National Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg, Russia, devoured 400,000 rare books. More recently, fighting in the Balkans has threatened manuscripts in Kosovo.

"I've become something of a preservation fanatic, and I wonder why everybody else isn't," Johnson said.

"The Kosovo Liberation Army took the Dechani monastery and wouldn't allow the monks to take any of the religious artifacts with them. . . .

"This is indicative of what's happened through the centuries during time of war. During World War II, the National Library at Belgrade (Yugoslavia) was bombed. Once those manuscripts are lost, they are lost forever."

The research library wouldn't have been possible, Matejic said, without the vision of Father Mitrofan, his father, professor Twarog or William J. Studer, OSU director of libraries.

"It's nice to have this exhibit, to give credit to people while they're still alive."

For his part, Matejic fondly remembers an intense few weeks in 1971 when a young man walked off a boat and into the 10th century.

“I can still hear the silence in the monastery,” he said. “I maintain that only poets can describe it. The monks are so used to recruiting young men for the brotherhood they had a hard time letting me go.”