Libricide: Life Before, During and After the Destruction
Final Project
History of Libraries

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# Table of Contents

Backstory .......................................................................................................................... 3

Before the Fires .................................................................................................................. 3

  Letter, K. M. Chellappah to D. B. Jeyeraj (20 January, 1934) ....................................... 3
  Journal Entry, Justin James (Assistant to Father Long), 13 May, 1934 .......................... 4
  Minutes, Central Free Tamil Library Association (9 June, 1934) ................................. 4
  Journal Entry, Justin James (Assistant to Father Long), 1 August, 1934 ...................... 4

During the Chaos .............................................................................................................. 4

  Letter from Edward Jeffers to his mother in England (5 June 1981) ........................... 4
  Journal entry, Rubapathy Nadarajah, Librarian at Jaffna Public Library (10 June, 1981) ................................................................. 5
  Photo Journal, Selvaluxmi Navaratnam, Librarian at Jaffna Public Library (10 June, 1981) ................................................................. 5
  Note to the English Teacher, Student Vembadi Girls High School (1 July 1983) ....... 7
  Letter from Edward Jeffers to his mother in England (5 June 1983) ........................... 7

Rising Through the Flames .............................................................................................. 8

  Interview, Sabaratnam, The oldest patron of Jaffna Public Library (10 May, 2009) .... 8
  Travel Journal, Tourist (19 March 2015) ................................................................. 9
  Photo Journal, Selvaluxmi Navaratnam, Librarian at Jaffna Public Library (1 December, 2015) ................................................................. 9
  Recommendations, Jaffna Historical Society (26 April, 2016) .............................. 10

Work Cited ......................................................................................................................... 11
Backstory

Although historians noted the destruction of libraries around the world now referred to as libricide, the historical record of whether and especially how the library reformulated from the ashes remains dark and nebulous. If a definitive connection linked the library’s destruction to permanently lost artifacts, forgotten history, psychological devastation, and economic decline, a case could be proffered in the United Nations for reparations not only for loss of life, genocide, but for cultural genocide as well. As a result, I decided to explore the history of the Jaffna Library in Sri Lanka deliberately destroyed as an act of war between in 1981 and again damaged in 1983 in order to analyze what occurred post-libricide in the past 30 years. I reviewed pictures, a documentary, interviews, and newspapers as primary sources as well as journal articles and books as secondary sources. I did so in order to assess the library’s beginning’s, feel the sense of the devastation of the moment, and determine the lingering effect of the damage and its impact. The research also helped to develop a storyline as well as the different characters that I would use to give their interpretation of the events. The strength of this approach shows the level of devastation using the photographic evidence, focuses the research on a specific period of time, and determines if the devastation was permanent and long-lasting. Without being able to view the sites in person before, during and after the devastation and speak to key individuals personally, key pieces of information/data may be missing to fully paint the picture and assess the total impact of libricide. I decided to present the final project as a novella filled with primary resources. Each journal entry, letter, photo journal and note details the events through the eyes of different people (both real and imaginary) over time to answer the question, “What is the cost and impact of libricide?”

Before the Fires

Greetings and salutations!

I hope your family is well during these perilous times. I saw and read your document concerning a “Central Free Tamil Library in Jaffna” and would like to help in any way that I can. I have books that I can donate to the library and have talked with other individuals in the community regarding donating money, books, or time. I understand that you’re looking for a diverse collection of resources. I will see what I can gather from some of the retired teachers in the area. Will there be a group to organize the efforts? If so, please consider me if you think I could help in the cause.

Peace be with you . . . D. B.

Letter, K. M. Chellappah to D. B. Jeyeraj (20 January, 1934)
Salutations to you as well D. B.!

All is well here at the District Court and the family is doing as well as can be expected. I would appreciate having our knowledge and wealth of experience in the Central Free Tamil Library Association. This organization will be composed of individuals who would like to subscribe to the library as well as include other interested parties as members. My hope to open the library later in the year if possible. In my mind, 1 August would be an appropriate day. I’ve appealed to both individuals and groups within the community and surrounding areas for support and have garnered interest as I have written to the Tamils as well as the local English population. I think sharing my love of reading and books as well as sharing books from my collection was a start and having the District Judge Isaac Thambiah lead the efforts will ensure its success. However, I know that if Rev. Fr. Timothy M. F. Long is involved in the efforts, not only will the library come to fruition but it will flourish.

Best Regards, K. M. Chellappah
Journal Entry, Justin James (Assistant to Father Long), 13 May, 1934
As a result of the Nazis burning books deemed “anti-German,” hope has come to Sri Lanka. Different individuals have rallied during this time of financial woes and unemployment around the idea of a central free Tamil library in Jaffna. Father Long sees this as a calling from God to increase literacy in the area. He decided to encourage the formation of the Jaffna Library Society and has been talking to Professor S. R. Ranganathan regarding the matter. My hope is to follow in Father Long’s footsteps in another location in Asia. I may be able to help in Father Long’s vision of a central library in Jaffna town and branches in other locations. I asked about remote areas and what would be needed to support those individuals. Father Long reflected on the perambulating library that started in Pembroke, England. I’m unsure of how such idea would work here. In noting the money and other donations to the cause from K. M. Chellappah’s discussions with key individuals in the community, I know that opening day will be soon. Where the library will initially be established is still under discussions. It appears that a building on Hospital Street is a leading contender. But, rather than being able to purchase the building, the initial thoughts were to rent it. I pray Lord that you continually strengthen us to do your will . . .

Minutes, Central Free Tamil Library Association (9 June, 1934)
Inaugural Meeting, Central Free Tamil Library Association

- District Judge Issac Thambiah was elected as President as well as K. M. Chellappah and C. Ponnambalam as Joint Secretaries.
- To date, 600 books and 20 magazines and newspapers have been collected. Additional people will be contacted for further donations and resources.
- Also, Rs. 734 was collected by Mr. Chellappah. To sustain the continued operations of the library, the initial membership fee for subscribers will be Rs. 3. The committee discussed renting a building on Hospital Street for the initial opening.
- Professor S. R. Ranganathan will consult on the formulation of the library. Currently, Professor Ranganathan works as the head of the library at Delhi University.
- The committee will meet once a month to guide the development of the Central Free Tamil Library.

Journal Entry, Justin James (Assistant to Father Long), 1 August, 1934
May God be praised! Today the Central Free Tamil Library was born. Through the committee’s efforts and K. M. Chellappah, 844 books and 30 magazines and newspapers graced the shelves of the library. The grand opening was celebrated through the town and I’m looking forward to seeing everyone young and old take advantage of the efforts. Since the library is open from 9 a.m. – 7:30 p.m. I foresee changes in the future now that the idea has moved from an abstract concept to a definitive reality. May the Lord be with everyone involved in these efforts . . .

During the Chaos

Letter from Edward Jeffers to his mother in England (5 June 1981)
Dearest Mum,
I’m writing to let you know that I’m okay and to keep you updated with what is going on. I heard that 3 Singhalese policemen were killed during a Tamil rally. Now, the conflict has reached Jaffna. The Tamil although a minority in Sri Lanka are a majority here in Jaffna. The looting and the burning even reached the Jaffna Public Library. The entire collection over 95,000 items was lost . . . Tamil texts written on palm-leaf parchment, miniature editions of the Ramayana epic, historical scrolls, a 15th century Spanish bible. Municipal Commissioner C. V. K. Sivaganum tried to investigate the matter. But, police stopped him and threatened his life. I don’t know if an investigation regarding the matter will ever be told. I’m afraid to stay. I feel like things are changing in ways we never knew. As an expatriate, I am a resident visitor welcome or tolerated but not invited. I am impacted by the ripples of this conflict. I don’t know if I can stay surrounded by remnants after seeing the burning flames, hearing the screams, and waiting to see if I too will be one of the victims.
Hopefully, I’ll see you soon . . .
Love,

Eddie

Journal entry, Rubapathy Nadarajah, Librarian at Jaffna Public Library (10 June, 1981)

I look around me and I don’t know what I’m going to do. The entire library is simply four walls surrounding ruins. Everything is gone. The books, the microfilm, the newspapers, the encyclopedias, the journals, the palm-leaf parchment, the shelves, the library catalogue, the funds . . . all burnt and simply ashes. Where will the children go when they need to study? Where will the elders go to read the latest newspapers? Where will the reader’s club meet and what will they read? S.S. Sabaratnam decided to leave after walking through the doors and seeing the destruction in fear for his life. “If they can burn books, then they can burn us.” I don’t know where that saying came from. I only know that those were the last words that I heard him say when he left. I heard from J. James now back in England. He had kept in touch with Rev. Fr. Long and stated that Fr. Long had a heart attack and died after learning about what happened. The statue commemorated in his honor stands headless as a grim marker foretelling his end.

How many dreams will be ashes after this heinous crime? How many others will suffer? Where will we work now that the library is a fragmented memory and an unredeemable loss beyond words?

So much work went into building the first reading room in 1934 and turning it into a library supported by the government in 1935. This building is only 21 years old and opened on October 11, 1959. I remember coming to the library as a child to read. I felt honored when I was hired as a librarian knowing the extensive history of the library. I felt as if Jaffna was an intellectual capital with one of the largest libraries in Asia. I saw the city as a cornerstone culture center for Tamil and the library as evidence of how people can come together to make learning happen. I’m disheartened now and have hope for tomorrow. Hopefully, Selvaluxmi, J. Arulanandam, and I can work together in efforts to help rebuild the library.

Photo Journal, Selvaluxmi Navaratnam, Librarian at Jaffna Public Library (10 June, 1981)

I tried to capture the devastation of the library in a couple of pictures. Hopefully, these will be memories of yesterday versus permanent evidence of the looting and burning.

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<thead>
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<td><img src="image1.png" alt="Photo" /></td>
<td>The palm-leaf papyrus scrolls . . . these are remnants from the entire collection. Whether or not they are still viable/readable is questionable.</td>
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<td><img src="image2.png" alt="Looking into the library from the outside, it appears to be an empty building. The scorch marks from the flames are visible on the exterior walls." /></td>
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Note to the English Teacher, Student Vembadi Girls High School (1 July 1983)
My apologies for the incomplete book report. I based my research on books that I was reading in the Jaffna Public Library that I no longer have access to. I tried to find the books in the school library and other libraries in Jaffna and even traveled to Colombo but was unable to locate all of the resources that I was using initially. I can only apologize again. This is not my best work but I truly tried to honor my family and friends by presenting the best work possible under the circumstances.

Letter from Edward Jeffers to his mother in England (5 June 1983)
Dearest Mum,
I thought that staying past the looting and the burnings would be okay. However, I’m packing my bags now and will be home soon. The Jaffna Public Library that I told you about a couple of years ago was being rebuilt and almost finished when war commenced yet again this very month 2 years after the initial destruction. The shells and bullet holes are the least of the damage when added to the bombing. I took pictures. The decapitation of Rev. Fr. Long’s statue and the damage to the exterior of the building of the entrance let me know that I’m not a cat and I may not have 9 lives. I and others will be leaving the area. I’ll most definitely be seeing you soon and staying this time.
Love,
Eddie
Rising Through the Flames

Interview, Sabaratnam, The oldest patron of Jaffna Public Library (10 May, 2009)
I took notes from Amos Roberts interview of Sabaratnam at the Jaffna Public Library. I’m astounded at what we saw in touring the library and speaking with different individuals. Sabaratnam received his library card in 1951 and visited the library weekly to read the latest magazines and books.

When I asked him what he experienced after the repeated damage of the library in the early 1980’s, he replied, “I was filled with sadness and burned by sorrow. Reading was more than a simple pastime. It was a lifestyle. How could I learn about what was going on in the world? Where was I going to get my news? Where would I find books to read? Going to the library and reading for free helped me to be able to get my hands on so many different resources. I felt like I had lost my best friend.”
Sabaratnam shared the feelings of so many others of the cultural genocide that occurred here at Jaffna Public Library. The incident cannot be seen as simply burning books. The direct employees of the library were impacted and indirect employees from the custodial staff to the book vendors all lost wages and revenue from the library being inaccessible and unavailable. Therefore, a simple act of book burning also scorched the finances of individuals and families. When you’re in a car accident, you can sue for the physical damage, emotional scars, and lost wages. However, in the case of libricide, not much has been done in the past. The incident was not researched. No one was implicated in masterminding nor perpetuating the crime against the Tamil people or the citizens of Jaffna. Although international organizations and the government helped to rebuild the building, who will repair the damage to the hearts, minds, and pockets of every single child and adult that encountered despair, continually remember the damage and devastation, and financially suffered from the loss of the Jaffna Public Library?

Travel Journal, Tourist (19 March 2015)

Jaffna is the capital of the northern part of Sri Lanka. I decided to travel on the Jaffna Queen train from Colombo and immediately rented a bike to get around the city. I tried to visit the Jaffna Public Library today. I was told that it was a historic building that I simply had to include according to my niece. My attempt yesterday was stymied as the library is open to visitors only between 4:30 and 7 p.m. I don’t know if it was the result of a previous incident in 2010 where visitors rioted in the library and caused damage. At any rate, I was ready today and as I walked in I saw the pictures of the library after the looting and burning in 1981 above the doorway of the reception area. An exhibit outside illustrated 60 years of Sri Lankan history. Although a good percentage of the library isn’t open to visitors, I peeked through doors during the tour to see as much as I could. I dodged a couple of inexperienced drivers taking their driving test outside.

Life and times . . .

Photo Journal, Selvaluxmi Navaratnam, Librarian at Jaffna Public Library (1 December, 2015)

It’s been 34 years since the initial devastation of the library. I’m still here in Jaffna at the public library. Just as I did a photo journal in 1981 of the original devastation, I decided to take a picture of the surrounding area and one of the library to tell the difference between then and now. Of the 4 of us that were at the library in 1981, only 2 of us remain and three others have joined the ranks over the years. It has been a journey and that journey was filled with ups and downs, left and right turns, as well as ambiguity. I am still alive and the library rose like a phoenix and has been reborn. There are resources that were lost in the flames that can never be replaced. Although we have books in the shelves, historical documents kept in the library
from its inception in 1934 as well as records of the Tamil community given by the elders died in the fire and can never be rebuilt.

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<td><img src="image2.jpg" alt="Jaffna Public Library was finally restored in 2002. Although the external damage has been repaired, it’s difficult to whitewash the memories, the hurt and the pain." /></td>
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**Recommendations, Jaffna Historical Society (26 April, 2016)**

The question was raised during yesterday’s meeting, “How can we avoid the destruction of Jaffna Public Library in the future?” The answer was “As long as civil and cultural wars exist, we cannot avoid another looting, bombing, or burning. However, we can minimize the cost of recovery.” Decisions were made to do the following:
1. Review digitization projects around the world to digitize “one of a kind” and historical documents. Efforts at Saint Catherine’s Monastery by the Library of Congress in the 1950’s and the current palimpsest project will be reviewed. All efforts will be made to electronically capture and preserve existing historical resources.

2. Install computers and security cameras in the library and ensure that a digital catalogue of the library’s offerings are located onsite as well as offsite in a secure location. Companies around the world have established emergency protocols from maintaining offsite data centers to minimize a loss of service. We need to ensure that if libricide occurs again, we can detail what we had as well as record/capture who caused the damage to pursue reparations.

3. Establish relocation plans for “one of a kind” and historical resources. We need to keep an eye on any insurgent activity so that if war is imminent, an evacuation plan exists and can quickly be executed to pack and ship irreplaceable documents to a location offsite and possibly even an international site. If it is financially feasible to build a bomb shelter or storage unit for historical resources, that can be considered as well.

The permanent losses that we suffered from past events impacted the library as well as the community. Although we hope for the best outcome for tomorrow, we can plan based on the worst outcome that we’ve experienced yesterday.

Work Cited


