This article is written by Jeroen Bos, journalist of the Dutch Financial Daily, het Financieele Dagblad, published on August 23rd in the weekend edition. Janou Pakter (headhunter) and Joost Elffers (artist, publisher) living in New York and Amsterdam, made the English translation of the article.

A Literary Travelogue

Connecting Europe's Bookshops

He is already in his eighties but remains undeterred in his mission. David de Goede aims to set up a European network of independent bookshops. And so, he travels all over the continent. "Bookshops are indispensable for a healthy society. Independent bookshops are an important part of civil society."

With an Interrail pass and some hand luggage, David travels through Europe. After a period of illness, his doctor urged him to take it easy: *'You are 84 years old, behave accordingly'*, the doctor wanted to say. But he has a mission that gives him so much pleasure that he finds it difficult to temper his enthusiasm.

After a successful career as a headhunter, he recruited directors and board members in both the business world and the public domain. Since 2023, David is travelling across Europe visiting independent bookshops. According to him, they are more important than ever as a counterweight to populism and fact-free politics. "There are more than three thousand independent bookshops in Europe," he says. "The media is paying too little attention to this vital part of the civil society. "The booksellers I meet during my travels are not in it for the big money, but because they believe that good bookshops are indispensable for a healthy society. They are well-read and socially engaged people, and their shops are more than just a place to buy books. It's also about meeting people, having conversations, and exchanging ideas."

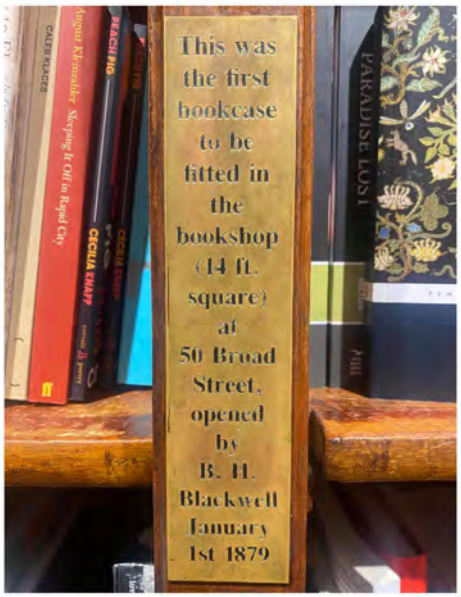
David has always been a lover of books and bookshops. Initially, he mapped out 40 independent bookshops in the Netherlands. After reading the Dutch translation of '*La libreria sulla collina'* by the Italian Alba Donati, David decided to travel all over Europe to meet booksellers like her. She had worked at the large publishing house Feltrinelli but quit her job to start a bookshop in Lucignana, a village in Tuscany where she was born. When her former boss heard that fewer than 200 people lived there, he declared her crazy. But Donati persevered, with success: the bookshop has become a true pilgrimage site for book lovers. David travelled to bookshop in the mountains to meet her. "Her story is so inspiring. It made me think about what I can do to support independent bookshops. How can I contribute?" After a lifetime as a professional matchmaker, the answer was obvious: "I wanted to create a network of booksellers, an online platform. Hopefully, this will lead to a forum where they can meet and exchange ideas."

Time machine

David has already visited about a hundred bookstores in more than twenty countries. He always travels by Interrail and local public transport. *"In stages,"* he says. In 2024, on his seventh stage, he visited Hamburg, Copenhagen, Stockholm, and Helsinki, where he took the ferry to Tallinn and the bus to Riga, Vilnius, Warsaw, Krakow, and Berlin. "The second part of that trip made a particular impression on me. In Finland, the Baltic states, and Poland, people are living with the new Iron Curtain. In Finland, they are ready for war, and in Warsaw, a café owner said to me: *'Your first drink is on me, but you must pay for the rest. Except for my Finnish guests, because they are defending Europe against Russia.'* These encounters gave me a good picture of the situation in northeastern Europe."

David never announces his visit to a bookstore but casually strikes up a conversation with the staff in the store. For instance, at Blackwell's in Oxford, where, among the five kilometres of books, he came across '*In Praise of Good Bookstores'* by American bookseller Jeff Deutsch. "When I paid, I told the guy behind the cash register about my project and the intention of my visit. He invited me to look behind the scenes of the store." David was taken to a room that is not accessible to the shopping public. "There was only an old bookcase. An inscription on a copper plate made it clear that the bookcase came from the original small store of Benjamin Henry Blackwell that opened in 1879." He was then allowed to enter another room. "It was as if I had stepped into a time machine. Suddenly I was standing in the office of the first owner, and it was still exactly furnished and decorated as it initially was."

David de Goede: 'I would like more people to hear the inspiring stories of booksellers.'



The copper plate on the old bookcase.

Young people

In Riga, David visited the Janis Roze bookshop, founded in 1914 and still run as a family business. He spoke with Ainars Roze, who told him that he prefers to sell beautifully designed editions, but that economic necessity also requires the shop to display stacks of cheap paperbacks.

In the same city, he met Guna Zelmene, who quit her job at a museum to start a bookshop. She wanted to be her own boss and do something meaningful at the same time. “My favourite customers are people who are looking for knowledge,” says the owner of Guna’s Grāmatas. “That ranges from schoolchildren to professors.”

Many of the bookshops David visited have a considerable history, but there are also young people opening bookshops. “I find it very inspiring and encouraging.” He mentions Cosimo, in Antwerp, a small bookshop and coffee bar set up by Jochen De Vos and Robin Hagemans. “Wonderful people who talk lovingly about the books they sell.” What appeals to him is that Cosimo is about more than just selling books. Hagemans and De Vos organize lectures with writers and translators as well. The store is therefore also a place for meetings and conversations. “A fine example of how a bookstore is part of civil society. Being a bookseller is a specialism. Just like with crafts, it is something people are very attached to.”

In times of war

David is far from finished with his travels. He still wants to visit bookshops in the Balkans and hopes to go to Ukraine as well. At the annual congress of the European and International Booksellers Federation, he met Oleksii Erinchak, who founded the Sens Bookstore in Kiev in February 2024, the largest bookshop in Ukraine. Oleksii is also opening branches in Lviv and Odessa. During wartime, imagine that!

David is planning a forum and a documentary, *A Moveable Feast*. Fundraising is currently underway. “I would like more people to hear the inspiring stories of the booksellers I have met. They deserve a platform. I would like to quote the opening sentence of the speech given by the Latvian Minister of Culture *Agnese Lāce* at the congress: *‘It is a dream come true for me to be standing here, in front of an audience of three hundred booksellers from Europe and other parts of the world. A dream for me, a nightmare for dictators and autocrats.’*

Booksellers are advocates of free speech and democracy.

In consultation with Jeroen Bos, ten bookstores were selected for this article.

I. Libreria Coop Ambasciatori - Bologna, Italy

The location of the Libreria Coop Ambasciatori in Bologna has a long history. If you look closely, you can see architectural traces in the building that date back to the 14th century, when the church of San Matteo degli Accarisi stood there. In later centuries, the building housed a market and a cinema.

Since 2008, it has been home to a wide range of books, spread over three floors and more than 1,400 square meters. What's more, each floor offers delicious food and drinks, such as cakes and classic regional dish.

At Coop Ambasciatori in Bologna, you can enjoy delicious food and drinks on every floor.

2. Cosimo - Antwerp, Belgium

Cosimo is in a historic building on Scheldestraat in Antwerp. ‘Charming’ and ‘authentic’ are the keywords for this cozy literary bookstore, coffee bar, and meeting place. The shelves are mainly filled with Dutch and English literature, with an emphasis on classics from world literature. Cosimo, named after a character from Italian writer Italo Calvino, is in a former butcher's shop. The owners have preserved the original decorative tiles and floor.

“Jochen and Robin are exceptionally friendly,” De Goede says of them. “They have a love for beautiful stories. You can see that in their selection of books, but you also notice it in the way they talk about literature. It's very infectious.”

Cosimo, in Antwerp, is named after a character from Italo Calvino.

Cosimo is also a publisher of forgotten classics, including works by Klaus Mann, Natsume Soseki, and Iris Murdoch. The first edition is always published in a hand- numbered print run.

Hagemans and De Vos see a book as a total work of art, and this is reflected in the design: no text on the back cover, leaving plenty of room for a beautiful illustration.

3. Felix Jud Hamburg, Germany

'The book and art shop Felix Jud is my intellectual delicatessen. Without this shop, I would starve.' That's how the late Karl Lagerfeld, fashion designer and book lover, described the historic bookshop in the center of his hometown, Hamburg. It was 1923 when Felix Jud, then 24, opened his Hamburger Bücherstube. He had a clear plan for his shop. It had to be all about quality: beautiful and good books combined with a carefully curated selection of works of art.

More than a century later, that is still the case, discovered De Goede, who calls the shop a gem. "Very distinguished." In conversation with one of the employees – "a tall Norwegian" – he discovered that there is a training program for booksellers in Germany. "It is considered a real specialism there. Just like crafts, it is highly valued."

For couturier and book lover Karl Lagerfeld, Felix Jud was an 'intellectual delicatessen'.

4. Libreria Dedalus - Trieste, Italy

“When I visited this shop, I was initially drawn purely by the name,” says De Goede. “Dedalus was the title of a magazine from my youth.” The bookshop reminded him of Atheneum in Amsterdam, which he has loved visiting all his life.

“It is a very well-stocked general bookshop in a beautiful location. The old town of Trieste is magnificent. It is the city of Italo Svevo and James Joyce. I took a selfie with a statue of Joyce on an old bridge. I never take selfies, but I couldn't pass up the opportunity to have my picture taken with the maestro.”

Statue of James Joyce in the city center of Trieste.

5. Janis Roze - Riga, Latvia

“In Baltic Souls, Jan Brokken writes about a dynasty of publishers and booksellers. They are the Rozes. I followed in Brokken's footsteps to Riga to meet the current generation,” says David. The family's first store opened just after World War I. There are now several branches of this thriving family business, but it has had a turbulent history.

“These people have been through so much,” sighs David. “They had just started when the Russian Revolution broke out and members of the family were exiled to Siberia. Then came the Nazi occupation, and then the Soviets returned. They nationalized the Rozes' store. With the current Russian threat, they must be resilient again.” Massolit exudes the atmosphere of European coffee houses from the 19th and 20th centuries.

More than 1300 sq m, very wide choice of books in Latvian, Russian and English books, the widest selection of coffee table and art books in Latvia.

6. Massolit Books & Café - Krakow, Poland

Massolit Books & Café, just outside the old center of Krakow, brings together two cultural phenomena: the atmosphere of European coffee houses from the 19th and 20th centuries and English-language literature. And all this was conceived by three Americans who love the Polish city. Karen Underhill, David Miller, and Matthew Roy founded Massolit in 2001. The approximately 20,000 titles on the shelves are mainly second-hand books from the United States and new books that are significantly discounted. You will find classic and contemporary literature, as well as academic books. Plus, all kinds of homemade American delicacies.

“The founders of this bookstore are such interesting people, and they know how to attract a lot of young people to their business,” says David. “If I had to choose one of all the bookstores I've visited to live and work in, it would be Massolit.”

Massolit exudes the atmosphere of European coffee houses from the 19th and 20th centuries.

7. Blackwell's - Oxford, United Kingdom

“You might wonder whether Blackwell's can still be called an independent bookstore since it was taken over by Waterstones, an international chain,” says David. ‘But the store is still just as special and unique.’ Until 2022, the bookstore in Oxford was part of a family business. Benjamin Henry Blackwell opened its doors in 1879, and later generations expanded the business into a book paradise of epic proportions. Literally: the Norrington Room is the largest space in the world dedicated solely to the sale of books.

More than 160,000 books are displayed on 5 kilometers of shelves. You can browse to your heart's content, because ever since its founding, customers have been encouraged to ‘pick up and study the books on the shelves without being obliged to buy’. “Blackwell's is huge, but it doesn't feel like a big department store. The atmosphere is intimate, with leather armchairs everywhere where you can sit and read.”

At Blackwell's in Oxford, there are more than 16,000 books on 5 kilometers of shelves. The great thing is anyone can browse.

8. Livraria Ler Devagar - Lisbon, Portugal

“In terms of the building, this is by far the most spectacular bookshop I have visited,” says David. Ler Devagar is located on the former LX Factory industrial site. There you will now find numerous trendy eateries and shops, including Ler Devagar, which is on many lists of the most beautiful bookshops. The store, which is better described as a cultural center, is in a former printing house. Some of the printing presses are still there.

“It all looks fantastic, with books stacked up to the high ceiling. Of course, you can't reach them, but they're like wallpaper. The entire bookstore is like a huge obstacle course that you can walk through.”

Ler Devagar has books up to the ceiling.

9. Libreria Sopra la Penna - Lucignana, Italy

This is the small bookstore in the beautiful village of Lucignana, in Tuscany, which is the subject of the book *'Bookstore in the Mountains'*. "When I read it, I wanted to go there.", David says. The founder of the shop and author of the book, Alba Donati, was initially considered crazy. Who starts a bookshop in a tiny village? But with the help of friends and her fellow villagers, she has made it a success.

David met her and was impressed. "She has a very limited selection in her shop, but people come from far and wide. Not only for the shop, but also for the readings by writers and poets that she organizes in the village church."

Alba Donati, founder of Libreria Sopra la Penna, was considered crazy for opening a bookshop in a hamlet

10. Librairie Grangier - Dijon, France

“I love the story behind this shop,” says David. The bookshop is in a former porn cinema measuring 1,300 square meters and was in danger of closing when owner Daniel Hisler died unexpectedly. His wife, Simone Hisler, was completely unprepared to take over the business, but she did so anyway, while also having to care for her five children.

Her adventure in books turned out to be a great success. David: "She breathed new life into the store and advertised in the city with the slogan *‘Livresse: the blissful feeling caused by prolonged reading’*. The shop has grown to become the largest bookshop in Burgundy, and Hisler has opened other branches in Metz, Thionville, and Strasbourg. Her work promoting books as *‘Objects of pleasure and desire’* has not gone unnoticed. In 2015, she was awarded the Légion d'honneur, France's highest honor.”

More than a bookshop, it is a living space that opens on 4 floors and more than 1,000 m², making the Grangier bookshop the largest bookshop in Burgundy.