

Fragments of Many Lives.

A Portrait of the "Collection of Women's Personal Writings" at the Department of History of the University of Vienna

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Establishing a historical archive for women's estates also means accepting chance occurrences: Of all the texts and text forms that women may have written and arranged in the course of their lives, what has been left and preserved by family, friends and associates? How can the places be found, outside the realm of the institutions of hegemonic cultural memory, the public archives, libraries and museums, where the testimonies of women have been passed on, despite the insignificance that was much too long attributed to them? And of these, what is finally released and passed on for historical analysis to gradually form a different, counter-hegemonic memory store – for women's and gender history, for instance, which still appears as urgent as ever.

The "Collection of Women's Personal Writings" initiated by Edith Saurer in 1989 at the Department of History of the University of Vienna pursues the goal of documenting private writings and photographs by women (or also by couples, children and relatives, other persons close to the women), to order them, systematically register them through exact indexes and make them accessible for academic use. At the same time, the histories of many of the documents that it has been possible to archive up to the present manifoldly reflect chance occurrences – as in the case of a miller woman from Lower Austria, who wrote several diaries over the course of three decades. This woman began her diary entries when her only son, who had been drafted into the Wehrmacht, was listed missing in Russia in 1941. The "meal and bran book" of that time was quickly taken into hand to be turned into a diary in this difficult situation, just like various household books and school notebooks later. After the owner went into a nursing home, she gave all of these to a Viennese writer, with whom she had a passing acquaintance, because he visited her in the home and was

interested in the abandoned old mill and her long life in it. She probably knew that these books would otherwise have no place after her death, and she obviously did not want that; for this reason, the diaries have been preserved in the "Collection of Women's Personal Writings". The same is true for an even more vivid example, another collection of estates that came here via a circuitous route. It consists of about three hundred letters and cards from the late 19th and early 20th centuries and initially landed in a paper recycling bin, where a journalist who happened to be passing by found them. The papers contain correspondence from two generations of a family of civil servants, including bridal letters and a number of letters that were exchanged between parents and children in war times and in times of peace.

Of course, references to these kinds of stories only address one kind of randomness that has accompanied the activities of the "Collection of Women's Personal Writings" from the beginning. This new institution publicized ongoing interest in the documentation and analysis of private writings by women with simultaneous announcements in newspapers and other media and has been contacted again and again by people seeking an institutionally rooted and publicly accessible place for these kinds of estates, either as descendants or as still actively writing women. As a result, the archive meanwhile comprises around seventy separate collections. Their volume ranges from a few writings to correspondence from different phases of life, all the way to extremely extensive collections of estates. In one case, the many diaries, letter exchanges, postcards, photographs, association material, various writings, etc. from one woman and her large family fill nearly a hundred archive boxes. The type of material preserved is therefore also quite diverse. In addition to personal testimonies in a narrower sense, there are also literary or political manuscripts, calendars with personal notes, and official documents, sometimes even objects such as a "Yellow Star" or wedding rings made of iron (from the campaign "I gave gold for iron" during World War I). The composition of the sources is also very different, illustrating, in its entirety, drastic contradictions of life: for example, the weekly exchange of letters between two teachers around 1900 was written on fine letter paper decorated with gold, whereas notes written by a Jewish woman imprisoned in the concentration camp Theresienstadt a few decades later had to be written on packing paper or the inside of envelopes. A letter from a young man to his parents and his sister who had fled to England had to be formulated just as quickly in those years, the last sign of life that he was able to communicate by roundabout ways shortly before he was deported. The sister was left with nothing else from him or other relatives that might have constituted a family memory in written form.

What is documented in the "Collection of Women's Personal Writings" are thus the very different, more or less randomly chosen, possible and impossible or even forbidden sites and media of private writing. As the collection is constantly growing, it is increasingly turning into a panopticon of historical situations and occasions of writing, which were able to motivate even women from lower social classes or milieus with little recourse to education to write much earlier than had long been assumed. The "Collection of Women's Personal Writings" meanwhile impressively shows that writing also became for these women a social practice that was exercised almost daily, partly already in the 19th century, but at the latest during the two World Wars of the 20th century. Taken as a whole the collection already demonstrates today the asynchronous development of private writing cultures along central differences such as class, gender or age, as well as the close tie between women's worlds of life and their chosen text forms in the context of everyday life, war and crises. New genres arose again and again, created especially for females and appropriated and quickly popularized for educational purposes or for gender politics in general, such as the girls' diary, originally motivated by religion, and the poetry album, the birth and infant diary or the household book. Whereas keeping these kinds of books was more strongly regimented than writing a "good letter" or a family chronicle in honor of one's predecessors, for example, the history of girls' and women's private writing is simultaneously characterized by many transgressions and resistance against normative attributions, both in terms of content and of form. This becomes evident, for instance, where a previously meticulously kept household book became a reproachful war diary, or when the girls' diary received for confirmation turned into a hidden place for articulating secret wishes and for imagined, effusively described gender identity/identities contrary to the ideal image of a "good woman". In another case, the diary of a young married woman written in late 1918 served as a repository for drafts of letters filled with longing to her lover – a French officer; for his sake she wanted to get a divorce and give up everything to start a new life in the former "enemy country".

Altogether, that which is presented and imagined in writing as "life" in all these heterogeneous documents, whether it is affirmed or critically illuminated from a distance to attempt to change it, is closely tied to the moment of writing and thus situatively conditioned. This applies uniformly, despite the hope expressed in some cases of a lasting value through later publication, which may even have reinforced the generally given, often obvious attempts to meet normative specifications or writing conventions. This includes, not

least of all, the powerfully hegemonic concept of the linear biography, which is undermined by the writings included in the "Collection of Women's Personal Writings". A similar statement could be made for the given polyvocality and disparity of the self-conceptions in the individual texts and genres, which also document the complex interweaving of the aforementioned, divergent auto/biographical principles of arrangement in between norm and practice, overriding comprehensive models of a life course. In general, it can be said that the personal testimonies archived in the "Collection of Women's Personal Writings" from so-called "unknown" women are strongly linked to the rhythm of a constraining everyday life, yet this is repeatedly expanded or broken down by the person writing – specifically in the form of a continuous rebellion as well as in the singular situation of an individual crisis sparking more intensive self-reflection and generating inherently contradictory self-images. Also in the context of political persecution, war and exile, when everything is turned upside down and existential insecurity, need and fear guide the writing, there is a strong fluctuation in the self-conceptions of the women now writing more frequently – or a reduction, since there is much that must no longer be mentioned. This is the case all the way to complete silence about one's own Jewish origins or those of someone close in the diaries from the period of World War II, as shown by two items in the "Collection of Women's Personal Writings". This can only be made clear to us today on the basis of possibly existing additional personal testimonies written earlier or later, or through official documents and other sources.

What if these additional sources are missing, though, if only a few texts written by the woman herself exist, or even only external impressions of her written by someone else? This is especially often the case in the "Collection of Women's Personal Writings" for the many military post items that are archived, since many times it is only letters and cards from the soldiers writing or only a fraction of the correspondence at the time that has been preserved, due to the destructions of war, flight or death. Yet other correspondences are marked, like the diaries, by interruptions, omissions, breaks and contradictions, which shows again that gaps in what is passed on and not knowing about all the phases of life in which apparently nothing was written influence the collection and the later evaluation of these kinds of testimonies as much as the existing texts themselves. An additional variable is the understandable decision of some descendants to make certain documents available, but not (yet) others. In other words, all of these conditions, this incompleteness that can never be filled in even the most extensive personal memoir collections, are part of the constitution of all the auto/biographical research that is to be facilitated through the "Collection of Women's Personal Writings". Despite all the fragmentariness, the collection already provides an

impressive range of unpublished source material for women's and gender history, with manifold possibilities for assessment, from the analysis of individual items to the linkage of several memoir collections or parts of them under specific queries. The archive is available to academic researchers on request, however its financial basis is not yet assured, which limits capacity. More detailed information and a list of all the research projects and publications conducted on the basis of the "Collection of Women's Personal Writings" so far can be found at <http://www.univie.ac.at/geschichte/sfn>

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