

## The Story of a French Life-Writing Archive: "Association pour l'Autobiographie et le Patrimoine Autobiographique"

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**Key words:**

France; archive;  
qualitative data;  
reading; history;  
sociology

**Abstract:** In 1992 and in a small town, Ambérieu-en-Bugey (France), some friends and I founded a new sort of life-writing archive, accepting from unknown persons any autobiographical items (narratives, diaries, letters), reading and indexing them, and opening them to any interested reader or researcher (among them sociologists, but mainly historians). This data are described both in a biennial printed catalog, the Garde-mémoire, and on the Association pour l'Autobiographie (APA) website. Nearly 3000 texts have been so far collected, read and offered to any form of social science study.

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### 1. Introduction: Autobiographical stories

I am going to tell you a short autobiographical story explaining how I came to found the [Association pour l'Autobiographie et le Patrimoine Autobiographique](#) [Association for Autobiography and the Autobiographical Heritage] (APA). It is not at all a learned society, it has nothing to do with academia, we are not sociologists, we have no research program. It could be called a club, if the term didn't have an unpleasant connotation of elitism and exclusiveness. Let us simply say that it is an "Association loi 1901": in France, the 1901 law stipulates the requirements for the foundation of nonprofit societies and associations, and there are hundreds of thousands of such associations in France; they are the very basis of our democratic life. [1]

According to the terms of this law, it takes at least three people to found an association: a president, a secretary and a treasurer. Originally, however, there were only two of us, Chantal CHAVEYRIAT-DUMOULIN and myself. I got to know Chantal because she had sent me the diary of her great-grandmother, which I had fallen in love with (I mean the diary, not the lady). In November 1991,

the two of us and thirteen other people met in my flat and we took the plunge. Now, we are about seven hundred. To join us, the only thing you have to do is to pay a subscription of 50€ a year. For that price, you get the three yearly issues of our Journal, which is called *La Faute à Rousseau*. The title is a token of allegiance to our patron saint and founder ROUSSEAU, for it is indeed his fault since in his preamble to "Les Confessions" (1959 [1782]), immediately after having proclaimed that no one could possibly imitate him, he challenged his readers to do so. What he thus initiated is at the very root of the activities of our association: the circular connection between reading other people's autobiographies and writing one's own, the acceptance of a possible role reversal. [2]

The aim of our Association is extremely simple: we offer to read the life story of any person who has written one. The task is both simple and very difficult. In ordinary life, and even in academic life, you don't read indiscriminately. But with APA, we read absolutely everything that we are sent. Moreover, when you read a life story, you are not obliged to give your impression of it to the author, but we are. Why have we created that sort of new "public service"? Perhaps because French society is not welcoming to autobiographical writings, even though many can be seen in bookshops. This prejudice may well be a trait peculiar to Catholic countries, where displaying the self is frowned upon. [3]

The idea of founding an association first occurred to me in the early nineties, after a long drift from canonical texts. I gradually went from the study of masterpieces of the autobiographical genre to that of ordinary autobiographies, all forms of ordinary autobiography: oral history (I recorded the oral history of my own family by interviewing my parents and siblings), collaborative autobiography, and just ordinary autobiographies. I read scores, probably hundreds of those autobiographies published at their author's own expense, which are usually looked down upon, and found real treasures among them. Then I immersed myself into the autobiographies written by ordinary people in the nineteenth century. They had often been published by local printers and had had a small circulation, but they are available at the [Bibliothèque nationale de France](#). Then I widened my interest to nineteenth century unpublished autobiographies that had been deposited in the archives or kept in families. In the latter case, how could I get hold of them? Every single time I happened to speak on the radio or to be interviewed by a newspaper, I launched an appeal: "If by any chance you have nineteenth century life stories or diaries in your family papers, please write to me, I am interested." And that is how it all started. [4]

At first I got normal answers, yes, my correspondents had texts from the last century and were willing to let me see them. But one day, I received a letter which ran more or less as follows: "Sir, I have read your appeal in ... [such or such newspapers]. I am writing you to tell you that I have no autobiographical writings in my family archives." I was all the more surprised as the rest of the letter was very long. After a few convoluted sentences, my correspondent came to the point: "But I have something that might interest you ... ," and it was his own autobiography. Then he became profusely apologetic: "I am sorry, I know I was

not born in the nineteenth century, but ... ." The first time I got such a letter, I was amused, I smiled. After getting a few more, I started meditating. And now I shall meditate in this article first on my correspondents' predicament, then on the predicament I was now in. [5]

## 2. A Story-Reading Group Solution for Ordinary Autobiographers

Why had my correspondents feigned to misunderstand my appeal? Because they were in a quandary. People who have kept or keep diaries or have written autobiographical texts, when they reach the second half of their lives, inevitably ask themselves what will become of their writings after their death. Moreover, especially when they have written a life story, they would like to share it while still alive with a few fellow human beings. [6]

Three solutions are available:

- The first would ideally be publishing: but this is almost impossible. It is an illusion to think that publishers will print a thousand copies of all life stories and find readers for them. Publishers turn the manuscripts down and the refusal is very painful for the often naive person who has sent it. These people are so desperate that they fall into the trap of those who publish at the author's expense. These common autobiographers pay, get their stories printed but nobody reads them. Or some others may be wiser and print themselves a few copies to give family and friends: a reasonable but rare reaction.
- A second solution could be the archives, but in France, unless you have witnessed something historically important, you don't stand a chance. If you turn up to the regional archives with your diary under your arm and offer it, they will think you are mad and will give you some useful advice: "Sir, or Madam, you are not following the right procedure. This is what you ought to do: first, die; then wait fifty years, then come back and see us." A personal archival piece is worthy of being accepted only if it has proved its ability to survive for fifty or a hundred years in a hostile environment.
- The third solution is to leave it up to your family. Families don't care much about autobiographies. They do worship official memories: In any family you will find someone—usually a woman—who collects souvenirs and memorabilia, sticks photos in albums. You will almost always find a genealogy buff. But this has nothing to do with autobiographies or diaries which offer a self-centered vision of the world, which is at variance with and sometimes contrary to that of the family group. You are likely to embarrass or shock them. No man is a prophet in his own country. God knows what will happen to your inheritance. A lot of things are thrown away in such cases; at best, things are kept carelessly, with a high risk of being destroyed.. Nobody will remember clearly who you were. It will be thought that "it can be of no interest for anyone." Consigned to the dustbin: such is the future of your writing. So you write to me ... So what am I to do? I am neither a publisher nor an archivist, nor a member of the family. I am just a human being, who seems to

have understood the problem. I am a life buoy to which to cling. But I can't be a life buoy on my own! [7]

Of course I always wrote back to say: "Yes, do send your text." I always read it and commented on it. But I was greatly embarrassed for two reasons:

- First, I have my own limitations too. I am not ready to like everybody. There are people I dislike, experiences that disgust me, opinions that I find revolting. I cannot identify with everyone or everything. I can understand experiences that differ from mine, but I do not wish to be forced to approve them. When I read a published book, or a text left in the Archives, I don't have to give my impressions to the author. I am answerable to no one, I am free. When I am sent a personal text, it is no longer the case. I am in direct contact with him (or her), he or she expects me to react. Somebody who tells the truth about his or her own life is seeking to be approved of, esteemed and loved. This is the minimal requirement. More often than not some admiration for the text and style is expected. In my answer I must show sympathy or admiration, it would be rude and disrespectful not to do so. But in the long run, it is untenable. The solution is for texts to be read by a group.
- The second reason for my embarrassment was the concern for the future of the texts I am sent. What can I do? Warn those who want to be published to be cautious; direct as best as I can and without illusions those who are trying to find welcoming archives. But I have no one to whom I can give the text to read. And the cupboards in my flat cannot provide a long term solution: they are overflowing with papers and, when I die, my own as well as any other papers will be thrown away. I had nothing to offer ... so far at least. [8]

Something had to be invented. I first had an inkling of a possible solution when an Italian friend of mine told me about a strange thing: a national competition of autobiographies that was held every year in a small village near Arezzo. I boarded a train and went there to see for myself and was both dazzled and shocked. The founder, an Italian journalist, Saverio TUTINO, shared my concern: preventing the loss of thousands of ordinary autobiographies, collecting them and keeping them alive. In four years' time, he had already collected several hundred texts—at present there are more than four thousand of them carefully kept in the town hall palazzo of the village of Pieve Santo Stefano. So far, it was great. But he collected the texts by means of a competition. The reading committee was made up of people from the village and its neighborhood: each year, they shortlisted a dozen texts, which were then submitted to a national jury of writers and journalists. I attended the final ceremony and the prize giving and was deeply shocked: a competition of autobiographies calls up the unpleasant idea of the last judgment and it is even worse, since there is only one winner. [9]

I selected the features I liked about the experience: locating an association in a small place, making ordinary people read the texts, building up a collection and keeping it alive, although I definitively rejected the idea of the competition. And four years later, in 1992, thanks to my friend Chantal, I found a small town that

was ready to welcome us, Ambérieu-en-Bugey, near Lyons, and we started collecting texts without organizing a competition, just relying on word of mouth, which works just as well. [10]

### **3. Principles and Practice of APA's Reading and Archiving Activity**

Our association has two types of activities: first and foremost, reading the texts that are sent to us, which is the aspect I shall dwell on, but also cultural activities such as discussion groups, writing workshops, week-end meetings, exhibitions and public events. [11]

For our reading activity, we have two great principles:

- First, we don't want to deal with publishing: we never publish any of the texts we are entrusted with. Those who deposit them retain the intellectual rights and full property of their text. If they ask us for information or advice on the world of publishing, we answer them. But we never take it upon us to advise them to publish, as we know that 99% of the attempts fail. This attitude is consistent with our refusal to organize a competition. Our ambition is to establish a system of "micro-reading" (reading on a small scale). Our aim is not for 3 or 4 texts to be read each by a thousand people, but for a thousand texts to be read by 3 or 4 people. It's a challenge, but we manage to ensure that everything is read. I shall explain how in a moment.
- Our second great principle is that we make it our practice to read "in sympathy." It means that we try to give each text a chance, by stressing in our account its interesting or attractive aspects, while giving our future readers honest information on its contents and style. It's sometimes a balancing act, but what an isolated individual, such as myself could hardly achieve, becomes feasible for a group. [12]

How do the texts reach us? Through newspaper articles, public meeting and word of mouth, the help we offer gets to be known. At present, we get about 180 texts a year, some manuscripts or photocopied manuscripts, but most of the time typed texts. Slightly more women than men send texts. 75% of the texts are narratives, 20% diaries, 5% letters. We get few 19th century texts and few texts by young people. Most come from people born in the 1920s and 1930s. The size of the texts range from twenty pages to a series of 65 notebooks of 200 pages each, so it's difficult to give an average! We ask people if they want their texts to be read straight away, but there is also the option of postponing the reading till after their death or after a specified number of years. The texts are received in our secretary's office in Ambérieu, where they are immediately filed. Each month the texts are sent from Ambérieu by post to various parts of France to be read. We have five reading groups, each of which meets once a month. [13]

What happens during those meetings? First the leader of the group presents the new texts that have just arrived from Ambérieu. It's a bit of an "auction," if I can put it this way. The participants examine the texts, try to form an impression and

then share them according to the supposed affinities and the curiosity of each of them. When you take a text, you commit yourself to reading it for the next session: however if, unluckily, there is an incompatibility between the text and yourself, you can bring it back, explain why you feel unable to review it (this is always a most interesting moment) and someone else has to be found to read it. The texts we receive vary a lot and they are sometimes surprising or shocking. The members of the groups are varied, too. They have usually known each other for a long time, and therefore have a formed opinion of each other. Each session is something of a friendly psychodrama in a way. Restrained and moderate as our accounts of texts may be, the discussion in the groups is free and lively. There has never been a dull moment in those meetings—and I have seventeen years' experience! [14]

After the new texts have been distributed, we proceed to the second phase of the meeting: each member gives an account of the texts he or she has taken at the previous session. When you take a text, you commit yourself to three things: writing an account of it, about one page, that will be published in our twice yearly volume *Le Garde-mémoire* (Memory-safe); writing a personal letter to the depositor; and filling out an index file. Although these are individual tasks, and although the review is signed, there is a collective responsibility of the APA and therefore everyone's work is examined closely. The review is read aloud, its contents or style are criticized, questions are asked, amendments suggested. The merits of the autobiographical text are thoroughly discussed and so are the existential problems it raises; the text is finally compared with other texts previously read. [15]

The wording of the account is a delicate matter: the reader of the *Garde-mémoire* must be accurately informed but the depositor must not be hurt. Indeed, the reader is sent the account before it is published and he or she may correct inaccuracies and make remarks. In nine cases out of ten, everything goes smoothly. In one case out of ten, there is some friction: the author wants to correct a few expressions, to add a few paragraphs and sometimes to rewrite it all again! What a blessing not to be on one's own when facing this trial! In the end the author may be told that since he or she is not satisfied, his or her opinion will be respected and the account won't be published in the *Garde-mémoire*. At this point the author usually gives in. [16]

The last part of the meeting, which is the most relaxed of all, is devoted to the second or third reading of texts that have already been reviewed. [17]

### **3.1 Learning from reading difficulties: An illustration**

Just to illustrate the difficulties we come across when reading, I am going to present a case that was discussed some years ago at a meeting of my group. One member, a 65 year old grand-mother, happened to read two recent years of a diary kept by a sexist and dirty-minded man, full of obscenity and scorn for women. The casting was all wrong, for this should have been read by a man—but there are two men only in my group as against eight women. So the woman

reads her review aloud: it was very well done, objective, distanced, it described the text with almost no trace of irony and kept aloof from vulgarity. She then adds that in her letter to the author she would try to persuade him not to send more of his diary. We protest and start an animated discussion. The autobiographical heritage must not lie on the Procrustean bed of our personal tastes or ideologies. We must accept, read and keep everything. Another of our difficulties is how to react to the autobiographical texts of those who have been wounded by life and for whom writing is an outlet rather than a way of overcoming unhappiness. What are we to do with texts full of despair, hatred, revenge, obsessions, mania? We don't get many, but enough to be concerned. Autobiography is no longer then a heritage but a hospital. Reading in "sympathy" and writing an account that will soothe the depositor by showing him or her that the complaints narrated have been listened to and that he or she is respected is a difficult exercise when combined with simultaneously giving the reader of the account a hint on the mental state of the author. [18]

### **3.2 Diaries' special difficulties**

In speaking of diaries, let us mention their specific difficulties. There are two types of diaries: the live and the dead ones. A dead diary is either the diary of a dead person, or the diary of a living person, who has turned away from it and sends us episodes extracted from it that read almost like narratives in their own right. A living diary is a diary that the authors still keep and send us in installments (we ask them not to send us updates every three months but only once a year). Then there are diaries that are the size of a book and the monster ones (a full trunk of handwritten notebooks). We decide for each case which type of reading is best suited. There are four solutions: 1. send the text to a reading group in the normal way; 2. give the text to a special reader who will become the correspondent of the diarist; 3. give the text to a special group for collective reading (each member reads part of it and then meetings are organized to pool opinions and synthesize them); 4. wait ... [19]

### **3.3 Other relational difficulties and collective solutions**

There is a last difficulty that should be mentioned and which arises with diaries as well as with narratives. We are sometimes appalled by the damage that could be done by a text if it was read by the family of the author, or at his work place. Names are mentioned (though we sometimes advise the author to use a pseudonym) and many unpleasant or indiscreet things are said. It is a surprise to us to discover that it did not occur to the author, or that he did not care. We must think for them ... [20]

Those relational difficulties can turn us into amateur psycho- or sociotherapists and may unsettle the balance of our own personality. Moreover, writing accounts "in sympathy" is a delicate undertaking, from an intellectual as well as literary point of view. To overcome these difficulties collectively, we organized internal seminars twice, in 2000 and 2007, bringing together the members of the five reading groups. Those two weekends, dedicated to reflection and training were of

great help to us and were followed up by a *Cahier de l'APA* in 2000 (entitled *The reading of lives*) and a report in *La Faute à Rousseau (Reading other people's lives)*, as well as a special issue of the Belgian review *Degrés* devoted to *Receiving texts in the archives of the autobiographical heritage*, with contributors from Germany, Belgium and France. [21]

### **3.4 Autobiography, its archival and analytical challenge: Re-reading groups and openness for future researchers**

But I fear I have dwelt too long on difficulties. We face them as a group, and our meetings are friendly and full of fun. We are happy readers and not for the reasons some may imagine. We are often asked compassionately: "Do you ever come across anything worthwhile, across texts that could be published?" It is very difficult to make the questioner understand that this is a meaningless question. All sorts of things are published that I find very mediocre. Our aim is not to publish. Our first pleasure is being surprised: contrary to the unhappy people who read only books (that is to say works chosen by others), we are totally free, nobody dictates what we should read, we know nothing about it in advance and each text is a discovery. With autobiography, quality is not a problem as it may be with poetry or fiction. The aim of a novel is to be a good novel; therefore it can be judged as a bad one. The aim of an autobiography is not to be good but to be true, which it rarely fails to be. [22]

Besides, each text we read calls up memories of many other texts: in our minds there builds up a *Comédie humaine à la BALZAC*, or an unanimist novel à la Jules ROMAINS. [23]

What is the future of these texts once they have been read by us? What we wish to create is archives that stay alive and do not get forgotten and dusty. Our texts must get a chance of being read by others than us. First and foremost this depends on careful cataloging and indexing. Up to now, we have published our *Garde-mémoire*, every other year, with accounts of the texts and detailed indexes. From now on, they are all available (only for us, of course) on our data base which can be consulted with any single word. A large part of them are also available, for the public, on line, on our website. Putting our accounts on line posed a lot of problems. We had to ask the depositors' permission and devise a system to protect them from curiosity. What we wanted to avoid is that anyone, by just typing a name on Google, could discover the existence of texts that had been entrusted to us precisely because their depositors thought Amberieu-en-Bugey was an obscure and discreet place. [24]

But as far as we are concerned, re-reading is a necessity. The more our collection grows, the more difficult it becomes for a single person to have an overall view of it all. The only ones who do are our secretary, who receives, registers and circulates the texts and, at the other end, the *Garde-mémoire* group which collects the work of the five reading groups. Therefore we deemed it necessary to set up re-reading activities. It started on a modest scale, on the occasion of the thematic report of our journal *La Faute à Rousseau*: for each



theme, we tried to find the relevant texts in our collection. In 2003, it occurred to us to establish a re-reading group focusing on the texts that dealt with World War Two. There were ten of us, and we shared the texts according to our interests. I had always been fascinated by the stories of prisoners of war who had escaped and I had come across three or four of these stories in my reading group; when I investigated our collection systematically I found another twenty or so, enough to draw up a typology of the genre. In the same way, the members of the group explored the French exodus of 1940, the battles of May and June 1940, prisoners of war's accounts, the stories of the "Malgré Nous" (Alsatisans forcibly enrolled in the German army), the French Résistance, concentration camps, etc. The work of the World War Two group has been the subject of a *Cahier de l'APA* published in 2006: it includes a short synthesis and two or three extracts for each of the different themes and a complete list of the relevant texts. This *Cahier* is meant to be a guide for future researchers, but can also be read for itself. Since then, another group has explored "L'amour dans tous ses états" ["All kinds of love"] and another one the texts dealing with the Maghreb. [25]

Every time a researcher comes to consult our collection we have to carry out similar investigations. Indeed, we are not content with merely giving information on opening times and referring our visitor to the catalog. Each visit is a new adventure for us as we deal with each visitor personally. According to our visitors' subject of research, we draw up a list of texts which they might be interested in. Once they are on the spot at Ambérieu, in our beautiful reading room, we narrow down the selection with them. [26]

Each year, about twelve researchers visit us on average. Most of them are historians. In the last two years, out of 24 researchers, 17 were historians, three were specialists in educational research, one in literature, one was a mixed media artist, and there were only two sociologists, one working on political militancy, the other on a rather historical subject, the movie shows during the Occupation period. Why do so few sociologists visit us? Probably because they prefer to collect their own quantitative data through surveys conducted according to their own hypotheses and methods. They are not patient enough to go through our heterogeneous sources or to deconstruct the strategies of texts that were not written for them. Historians, who are better trained in the criticism of documents, are also probably more aware of how revealing the strategies themselves are for the history of mentalities and representation. Many of them however, use our texts as classic primary sources to study the history of railways, for instance, or rural life at the beginning of the 20th century, or Alsace under German rule during World War Two. But when it comes to more delicate themes, such as the history of flirtation, of menstruation, or the autobiographical expression of amorous relationships, our texts prove to be irreplaceable qualitative sources, in which the discourse itself, far from being a protective screen, becomes the very object of history. Three years ago, many members of the APA were present when Anne-Claire REBREYEND defended her thesis on amorous relationships from 1920 to 1975, based on a corpus of 247 texts from our collection (REBREYEND, 2008). [27]

We are therefore a real paradise for historians, but sociologists ignore us, and yet our texts are very similar to those collected by BOURDIEU (1993) in "La Misère du monde." As for the specialists in literature, they keep away from us, much to my regret. Our 2500 texts could enable them to study the evolution of the strategies of the autobiographical discourse and narrative over more than a century, not to speak of the evolution of language. But when you can study PROUST or MALRAUX, why bother with a host of unknown lesser beings? While sociology could benefit by becoming more qualitative, literary studies could benefit, not by becoming more quantitative, but by simply becoming occasionally more democratic. [28]

But let not these temporary misunderstandings dampen our spirits; it is only a matter of time. We are building up our archives for the future generations. At present, our main concern is a material one: how to store them, as we are getting short of shelf space, another concern is the computerization of the *Garde-mémoire*. As for the rest, we can wait. With time, our collection, thanks to regular accretions, will become more and more valuable: indeed it is meant to be read in series and our series are bound to grow in number and variety. The quality of our collection increases with its quantity. Its other strength lies in its origin: as I said, we have no specific research project; people simply give us to keep what *they* want to save. The constitution of our collection is not biased by an underlying theory. It is just an empirical fact, which varies with time and can be analyzed. It offers a multifarious field of study, in which researchers in the social sciences may construct new objects of study in the future. Of course, we know we are ourselves (both people in the association, and depositors of texts) a possible matter of study for sociologists or other social researchers. A study may be necessary from the point of view these scholars, before any scientific use of our corpus of texts. No problem: we are ready and waiting for all kinds of social scientists. [29]

## Appendix

Readers may find useful this reading list on the main APA publications.

APA (2001). Lecteurs de vies. Séminaire des groupes de lecture. La Pellonnière, 13 -15 octobre 2000. *Cahier de l'APA*, 21.

APA (2006). 1939-1945. Lectures du fonds APA. *Cahiers de l'APA*, 33.

APA (2009). L'amour dans tous ses états. *Cahiers de l'APA*, 41.

APA (2010). Maghreb et autobiographie. *Cahiers de l'APA*, 47.

APA (2008). Lire la vie des autres. *La Faute à Rousseau*, 48.

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Meurice, Francine (2008-2009). La réception des textes dans les Archives du patrimoine autobiographique. *Degrés*, 136-137.

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Rebreyend, Anne-Claire (2008). *Intimités amoureuses. France 1920-1975*. Toulouse: Presses universitaires du Mirail.

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques (1959 [1782]). *Les Confessions*. In Bernard Gagnebin & Marcel Raymond (Eds.), *Oeuvres complètes* (Vol. I, pp.1-656). Paris: Gallimard (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade).

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## Citation

Lejeune, Philippe (2011). The Story of a French Life-Writing Archive: "Association pour l'Autobiographie et le Patrimoine Autobiographique" [29 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 12(3), Art. 7, <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs110371>.