PIEVE SANTO STEFANO JOURNAL

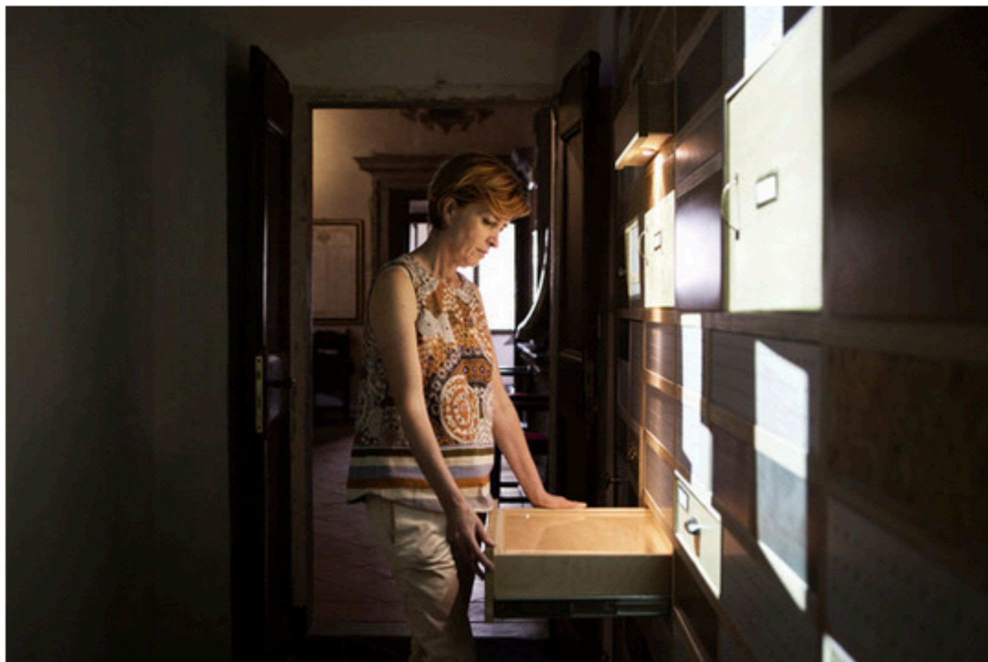
A Trove of Diaries Meant to Be Read by Others

The New York Times

A Trove of Diaries Meant to Be Read by Others

In Italy, the City of Diaries Honors Personal Memories

By ELISABETTA POVOLEDO AUG. 19, 2014



Natalia Cangi, the director of the National Diary Archive Foundation. More than 7,000 memoirs line the archive's shelves. Alessandro Penso for The New York Times

The New York Times | http://nyti.ms/1n7G0EA

EUROPE | PIEVE SANTO STEFANO JOURNAL

A Trove of Diaries Meant to Be Read by Others

In Italy, the City of Diaries Honors Personal Memories

By ELISABETTA POVOLEDO AUG. 19, 2014

PIEVE SANTO STEFANO, Italy — The rich and famous, the important and powerful, can always have their say. But what of the bulk of humanity who suffer the whims of history, whose everyday labors give it life? How will their voices be remembered?

The answer, at least in Italy, can be found here in this small Tuscan town, which has become Italy's repository of lives recounted.

Some of those lives are hastily scribbled on scraps of paper. Others fill leather-bound journals with lazy longhand. Still others come tidily typewritten. They are among the thousands of diaries, letters, autobiographies and punctilious notes that line the shelves of the National Diary Archive Foundation, providing firsthand accounts of the lives of common people and how they witnessed the grand events that shaped the nation.

Remembering, and celebrating, the lives of ordinary people who set down their experiences on paper is at the heart of what inspired Saverio Tutino, a foreign correspondent and devoted chronicler, to start the archive in 1984, that seemingly distant age before millions everywhere posted their every deed and opinion on Twitter.

Since then, more than 7,000 memoirs have made their way to Pieve Santo Stefano, now known as the City of Diaries, about 15 miles northeast of Arezzo.

Some were brought here by their authors, who range from frustrated homemakers to unrepentant bank robbers; others by heirs of the diarists. Yet others were found in attics or at flea markets, then

turned in because their story struck a chord with their readers. The earliest diaries date to the 18th century, but most are from the 20th century.

"Tutino believed that everyone is one of many, and together we become history," said Loretta Veri, the archive's former director who now raises funds to support it. Mr. Tutino, who died three years ago, "used to say that we are privileged to hear the rustle of others, that paper voices always made a sound," she added.

The current director, Natalia Cangi, said that Mr. Tutino's idea of democracy, inspired by left-leaning political beliefs, "was to give power to the ordinary people, to give their lives dignity."

Actually, from the start, it took a prize of 1,000 euros, or $1,332, and — more important — the promise of publication to persuade so many diarists to entrust their musings to complete strangers.

It was a shrewd strategy.

"Say the word 'prize,' and Italians go crazy," Mario Perrotta, an actor and author, wrote in a book about the archive. Italians, he said, "treasure thousands of prizes, and they all work."

Anyone can compete for the prize, which is awarded each September to the most compelling read. The dozens of entries are vetted by reading groups that consist of townspeople here as well as residents of neighboring cities. The winner — selected from a shortlist of eight — is published. The others become part of the archive.

Of course, not all diarists are interested in putting their life struggles into the public domain, and in some cases the stories come with caveats. One woman from Foligno insisted that her diary be accessible to all, save for two despised relatives; another diarist requested that the submission be sealed until 2072.

Often, archive officials say, transcribing diaries can be challenging: deciphering scribbles or making sense of writings in dialects, sometimes by people with little formal education.

Take Vincenzo Rabito's autobiography, which came by way of 1,027 densely typed pages, including 718,900 semicolons; a Sicilian road worker, he wrote from 1968 to 1975. The autobiography covers

decades and touches on the epochal moments of Italian 20th-century history using a lively narrative tone that belied Mr. Rabito's third-grade education.

"It's a wall of words, apparently impenetrable," Ms. Veri said, but so captivating in tone and in content that it won the prize in 2000 and was later republished, becoming a best seller.

"Diaries go on to have other lives," said Ms. Cangi, who has been the foundation's director since 2010, noting that over the years the archive has become a rich source for playwrights, directors and journalists.

The archive's undisputed star is Clelia Marchi, a barely educated peasant from Mantua who began to scribble her life story on a pristine white matrimonial bedsheet when she was 72.

Two years later, in 1986, she took the sheet to Pieve Santo Stefano, confident that her enterprise would be granted the respect it deserved. It begins, "Dear people, treasure this sheet, which has some of my life and of my husband." She told her story, she said, using her local dialect, with "ghanca una busia," not even one lie.

The bedsheet, which archive officials called "our lay shroud," has inspired both artists and playwrights.

As have the 39 scraps of paper scribbled in a Rome jail by 18-year-old Orlando Orlandi Posti during the last six weeks of his life. Arrested on Feb. 3, 1944, for warning his friends about an impending roundup by German soldiers, Mr. Orlandi Posti managed to smuggle his thoughts — mostly expressing his devotion to a girlfriend — out of prison, rolled up in the collar of shirts destined for the laundry. He became one of the 335 Italians who died on March 24, 1944, at the Ardeatine Caves in Rome in reprisal for the killing of 33 German policemen by Italian partisans.

His story has become a book and a play. And it is one centerpiece of the small Diary Archive Museum that opened last December in the Pieve Santo Stefano City Hall, one of the few buildings that remained standing when Germans mined the town in August 1944. The museum also houses Clelia Marchi's bedsheet.

The archive has become an important center for historical research. For his 2013 book, “Fascist Voices: An Intimate History of Mussolini’s Italy,” for example, the historian Christopher Duggan mined the archive for stories, reading about 200 of the 2,500 diaries there from that era.

“In an age when personal memories are so easy to neglect given the exceptional demands and facility of communication in the present, the establishment of further such centers dedicated to preserving records of how ordinary people acted, felt and thought in different times and contexts would be hugely welcome,” Mr. Duggan wrote in the book’s acknowledgments.

The journalist Luciana Capretti also sought “normal stories” while researching her novel, “Tevere,” about a woman who disappeared in Rome in 1975, still troubled by events that took place during World War II.

“I found explanations on how to feed your family when there’s no food to be had, but also stories of rape and violence, told very simply, and I took notes to help create the situation in my book” and describe life in Northern Italy during that era, Ms. Capretti said in a telephone interview.

The centenary of the Great War has provided another “occasion to promote the archive,” said Ms. Veri, through a multimedia project that the archive created this year with the publisher L’Espresso to recount World War I through a series of firsthand accounts from some of the archive’s 350 diaries that cover that period.

“It’s an occasion to enter into the lives of these boys, this generation of young men slaughtered for an absurdity,” Ms. Veri said.

A version of this article appears in print on August 20, 2014, on page A11 of the New York edition with the headline: A Trove of Diaries Meant to Be Read by Others.

© 2014 The New York Times Company