Thomas G. Palaima  REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR, and Susan Trombley

Archives revive interest in forgotten life

Alice Kober's work was her life. What remains of that all-too-brief life (1906-50) is preserved in papers and notes and letters in the archives of the Program in Aegean Scripts and Prehistory (PASP) at the University of Texas at Austin. The magnitude of her painstaking and self-sacrificing work is still largely unacknowledged.

Attitudes about women in the period in which she lived conspired against her. Her brief life (1906-50) is preserved in papers and notes and letters in the archives of the Program in Aegean Scripts and Prehistory (PASP) at the University of Texas at Austin. The magnitude of her painstaking and self-sacrificing work is still largely unacknowledged.

If Kober were alive today, she would have little time for us. As a scientist, statistician, detective, linguist, teacher, author, calligrapher and finally editorial factotum, she was devoted to her research. She suffered no fools. She demanded precision of herself and others. She spoke and wrote in no-frills, spin-free English, direct and blunt, prickly and undiplomatic.

But the PASP archives reveal a gentler side to Alice Kober. She took extra care in cutting a greeting card used as a tabbed divider, perfectly centering a fawn lying in a bed of flowers. She lived with her mother and had a comfortable relationship with a brother who supported her efforts. Her human-ness is startlingly confirmed when an errant strand of her hair is found tucked into a Brooklyn College spiral notebook replete with tabulations.

It is heartbreaking to read her letters to Myres as she confronts her terminal illness. She is befuddled by her lack of energy, insistent that she is on the mend, and convinced that the "cure is worse than the cause." She held this belief up to her final letter to Myres written just days before her death.

Kober's story consists of a powerful mind, a gripping puzzle and a huge personal sacrifice. Her life lies buried, and is now slowly being revealed, in an archives.

Palaima is director of PASP in the College of Liberal Arts at UT Austin. Trombley is PASP archivist and information science specialist. This week is Archives Week at UT Austin: www.ischool.utexas.edu/~saa/archivesweek.