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.

She was undeniably the top scholar in her field of research. Still, in her final three years, while critically ill, she chose to do editorial and secretarial work for an aging British scholar, Sir John Myres. She put aside her work and any thoughts of personal glory, because she saw what was needed to correct past mistakes in her field.

Kober's situation was not unique. A recent publication gives long overdue credit to Rosalind Franklin for her role in the discovery of the double helical structure of DNA in 1953.

In July 1952, British architect Michael Ventris announced that he had deciphered the complex prehistoric writing system known as Linear B (1600-1200 BCE). The formal publication of his findings coincided with Sir Edmund Hillary's conquest of Mount Everest and the analysis of DNA by Francis Crick and James Watson. Ventris was honored with an Order of the British Empire award.

But there is good reason now to view Kober's contribution to Linear B studies as even more vital — and more unsung — than that of Franklin's to DNA research. In the past year, for the first time ever, Kober's assorted study materials have been professionally archived, and a pilot-test for scanning and digitizing her material is under way. Classics graduate students Amanda Krauss and David Hill have finished editing an unsurpassed technical linguistic monograph that Kober left in typescript stage when she began assisting Myres. Stephie Nikoloudis of Classics, Uri Kolodney and Aaron Choate of the Digital Library Services Division, and Mark McFarland, Assistant Director of the General Libraries, have put together the design to bring Kober's materials into the electronic age.

Kober had no computers, so she invented the equivalent, using her mind and her note cards to compile meticulous and beautifully presented statistics. She manipulated these entirely in the scant spare time she had away from her duties as a poorly paid, low-ranking professor at Brooklyn College.

Kober painstakingly cut more than 186,000 2" x 3" note cards from salvaged exam books, greeting cards, envelopes, church flyers and any other scrap of paper she could find, recycling paper which World War II rationing made scarce. Each card is packed with technical information about the occurrences of the 90 phonetic characters in the undeciphered Linear B script. We can imagine her cogitating on the data in her cards as she crouched over her dining room table, scissors in hand, a cigarette burning in a nearby ashtray. Cigarettes played a big role in Kober's life. Whiffs of smoke still exude from the cartons that became her ersatz file drawers. She cut the note cards to fit neatly into Lucky Strike and Fleetwood cartons. Cigarettes almost certainly contributed to her death of cancer at age 43.

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 showed great concern for her colleagues in England during World War II, sending them care packages and inquiring after their well-being. 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.

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