



**A BRIEF LIFE
BIOGRAPHY OF A
“DISAPPEARED”, PERSONAL
ARCHIVES, AND ON BEING
EXHAUSTIVE**
Michèle Audin

The “brief life” is a literary form that may have been invented by John Aubrey (1626-1697). His *Brief Lives*, with their well-chosen anecdotes – like the one he wrote, for instance, on the mathematician Thomas Allen (1542-1632) – are still very much alive, more than three centuries after they were written.

I imagine “a” brief life “of”... with an indefinite article and a possessive. The indefinite article indicates the author’s awareness of his or her own subjectivity: brevity implies a choice – but other choices are, or were, possible. For his brief life of Thomas Allen, Aubrey chose to focus on a personal anecdote. I have

written myself a (very) brief life of a German-American mathematician, Max Dehn (1878-1952), composed of eight sentences, eight moments selected from his mathematical life and from the consequences that the arrival of the Nazis to power in Germany had on his life. Another biographer might have chosen to focus on his family life or his romantic life (which I know nothing about).

When I chose the title of *A Brief Life* for the biography of a man who died at the age of 25, I had all of this in mind. This title is a double entendre, which emphasizes the subjectivity of what is being said. Thus the indefinite article.

But what about the possessive? Whose brief life is it? Not just a name, but some “qualities” (what a mathematician would call “properties”): Maurice Audin was a mathematician, a member of the Algerian Communist Party during the Algerian war (the Communist Party was banned at the time), who was tortured and killed by the French army in 1957, and declared missing after an alleged escape. His death transformed a living young man into an “Affair” – one that is not finished because the truth about his death is still unknown. Yet he had not “asked for glory or for tears”. This book is neither about the glory of his name (there are streets that bear his name), nor about the tears (of his relatives). It is not a book about death: it is, as the title indicates, a book about life.

I am not naïve enough to believe that a biography can ever be “objective”. But in this case, subjectivity is embraced and becomes part of the project of writing itself. For trivial reasons first: first-born child of this young father, the author has put herself in her own book... and to say “I”. I am his daughter, a mathematician, like him, and also somewhat of a historian and a writer, too... a lot of positions to occupy. And I am convinced that the writing of this text will teach, others, and myself, something.

Subjectivity implies choices. The sources that I have used are banal, but they are also incomplete and fragmentary: they include family memories that were transmitted orally (which are often the memories that I have of memories that were told to me), some written recollections (written long after the facts, so it is too late to ask any questions). Personal archives, too: pictures, notebooks, letters, journals, administrative documents, books, personal belongings... but very few of them. And yet somewhere, between the daily repetitions – of the price of the pack of cigarettes, of bread, of bouquets of flowers or artichokes – and the text, discovering a young man who was funny and finding out a bit about his life.

I tried to be as exhaustive as possible: the traces were tenuous and I did not want to neglect any of them, but I had to make choices. First, I preferred not to risk making my own memories disappear (memories that were very tenuous as well, since I was not quite 3 ½ years old when my father disappeared) by fixing them in written sentences. The same was true of pictures, about which I have often been questioned: there are only a handful of them, so they are intimate and precious. Some have been used (for better or for worse) in the press and can be found on this or that website. In order to preserve them, I chose to describe them rather than reproduce them.

This brief life happened in a particular moment of history, and it clashed with history. In order to talk about it, it was necessary to describe the contexts in which it happened. Maurice Audin was a mathematician and it was necessary to include mathematics as one of those contexts. I have

also noted and mentioned some newsworthy facts: the invention of the potato-masher in 1932, the repression of the protests in Serif in 1945, or the invention of distributions in 1950.

The mention of the potato-masher obliges me to offer a clarification. One challenge I faced was to create enough complicity with the readers so that they would become familiar with a time and a place that no longer exist – without creating any nostalgia for French Algeria, which would have been a total misinterpretation – and to also make them understand the fate of a particular individual. The literary references (the search for disappeared relatives, the victims of wars) I had in mind belonged to the history of the great slaughter of World War 1 (Camus, Claude Simon), or to the history of Nazi extermination camps (Perec, Modiano...). Maurice Audin was Algerian, but he was also an academic; he was an activist in the anticolonialist cause, but he was not an armed combatant; he was tortured and murdered by the French Army, the very army that had partly trained him... Among the 3000 people who disappeared during the battle of Algiers, he is the only one in this particular situation. How could I make all of these singularities comprehensible to today's readers?

I chose to accumulate details, the "things" which mark "a history of the 1950s", or a "I remember Paris in 1956" (another reference to Perec), and to insert the elements I had found in personal archives into a "common fund" of memories. Beside the authors that I have mentioned, the line of descent from John Aubrey passes through Mr. Goodman (of which Aubrey was one of the masters) and Jacques Roubaud (the translator of the "biographical proses" of his friend Goodman) – Perec and Roubaud, and therefore the Oulipo – which is known for its list making and attempts at exhaustiveness.