

[Entrepreneurship](#)

Have a Story to Tell? Your Personal Memoirist Is Here

By ALINA TUGENDAUG. 31, 2016



Kitty Axelson-Berry, center, with her client Sonia Ehrlich, a Holocaust survivor, and Ms. Ehrlich's great-grandchildren, Jacob, 9; Ayden, 14; and Zachary, 12. At top left is Ms. Ehrlich's granddaughter, Jordan Levine. Credit Damon Winter/The New York Times

Isaac Ehrlich, 74, wanted his children and future generations to know the story of his mother, Sonia. Her life story is woven through the tragedies of the 20th century. She lost 40 relatives in the Holocaust. She was shipped to Siberia from Poland. She eventually found her way to Riverdale, in the Bronx, where she still lives.

But to truly capture what her more than nine decades have meant, he hired Kitty Axelson-Berry, who has a long history as a memoir writer.

Ms. Axelson-Berry's company, [Modern Memoirs](#), based in Amherst, Mass., consists of a three-person staff and 10 subcontractors who transcribe, edit, post on social media and do bookkeeping.

Mr. Ehrlich declined to say what the book, which includes photos, family trees and recipes, cost him. But he said the service was well worth the money. "It's my mother," he said. "The cost doesn't mean anything."

Even in an era when it seems every life is displayed on social media for the world to see, a whole generation is getting older, and its stories, if not written or otherwise recorded, will be lost. Serving that market is becoming a small-business enterprise.

Although no statistics are kept on the number of people who run such companies, [the Association of Personal Historians](#) — which has the motto "Saving Lives One Story at a Time" — has almost 600 members. And many people who work in the field are not part of the group.

"We've had our ups and downs, but we're trending upwards," said Bill Horne, president of the association, who runs [Launceston Services](#), a freelance writing and editing company in Ottawa, Canada. The association has members from 13 countries, and the membership is expanding from being largely white, female and middle-aged, he said. "No one is going to be a millionaire doing this, but some people do make a comfortable living."

Ms. Axelson-Berry founded the association when she was starting out in 1995. She was a newspaper editor, and while writing her mother's memoirs she decided that other people would also want memoirs of their parents and that she was the one to create them.

"I went down a lot of false paths and went into credit card debt," she said. Her break occurred in 1998, when she and a few other personal historians were featured in *The Wall Street Journal*. A flurry of other articles in national newspapers followed. A few years later, she had a self-sustaining business.

Ms. Axelson-Berry publishes about 12 hardcover books annually, averaging 300 pages. She charges a minimum of \$5,000 for an assisted memoir, in which the client writes the draft and Ms. Axelson-Berry pulls it together. Her rate is a minimum of \$35,000 for a commissioned memoir, in which she or a member of her team does the whole job. That fee includes traveling, usually at least twice, to wherever the customer lives and spending a few days conducting interviews.

Kit Dwyer, 59, was a project manager in the digital mapping industry when she saw the opportunity to enter the market.

“Our parents’ lives aren’t on the internet,” Ms. Dwyer said. “We can’t find out about them if we don’t speak to them. And it’s slipping away.”

Ms. Dwyer, who lives in Denver, has spent the last six months setting up her business. She hopes to concentrate on audio memoirs, combining them with digitized photos and memorabilia. She is exploring producing slide shows with voice-over narration by the client.

As part of her preparation, a few months ago Ms. Dwyer hired Dhyan Atkinson, a personal strategy coach who specializes in training people to be personal historians.

Ms. Atkinson, who lives in Boulder, Colo., started MemorySaving.com, three years ago after working as a business coach with a member of the Association of Personal Historians for more than a decade.

She said interest in her services is growing, especially among “enclave entrepreneurs,” former journalists, social workers and therapists who have retired or been laid off and are looking for a second career.

“Most personal historians up to now have not been very business-savvy,” Ms. Atkinson said.

She offers a variety of classes in business skills, and personal consulting, such as a one-hour session for \$50 to \$85. A six-month package of 12 one-hour sessions costs \$2,500. Many novices embrace the idea of talking to people and writing about their lives, but are not aware of the minutiae and marketing strategies involved. For example, transcribing interviews is very time-consuming, a minimum of four hours for a “perfect” interview, Mr. Horne said, with time added if the interview is disjointed or if the subject has a heavy accent.

When talking to a prospective client, Ms. Atkinson advised, discuss the emotional reasons for a memoir and its potential impact before mentioning price. Ms. Axelson-Berry researches every potential client, looking for red flags, such as if he or she has sued many people or has been sued. She has also turned away people who she said were “proudly unethical.”

One prospective client talked about how he cheated his business partner, she said, adding that she did not want to preserve his memories. Experienced memoir writers say a signed contract that details the expectations of the clients and the company is mandatory. That includes the number of revisions covered under the initial price quote (the usual is one to three) and a schedule of costs for additional work. Without such stipulations, a writer could be asked to produce draft after draft by a client who is impossible to please.

Memoirists must learn not just interview techniques, but also how to comfortably conduct the sessions. “You’re not just making a transcribed interview,” said Mary O’Brien Tyrrell, who ran a memoir-writing business for more than 20 years before retiring in 2008.

“You’re intensively listening,” she said. She forbids others from being in the room during an interview because she had seen well-meaning relatives inject their own version of events. Ms. Tyrrell, who lives in Orleans on Cape Cod, Mass., now writes, speaks and teaches classes. In 2012, she published “Become a Memoirist for Elders: Create a Successful Home Business.” At the height of her business, her annual profit was \$100,000, she said.

And since personal histories are, well, so personal, it is easy for clients and their relatives to mistakenly view a professional interviewer as a best friend. “A daughter will say, ‘Mother so enjoyed working with you. Can you stop by once a week?’” Ms. Tyrrell said. “And I said ‘No.’ I had to earn a living.”

And writers must learn to be ruthless when editing a life story. “A client can go on for half an hour about how powerful his car was in 1920, and that’s going to be one sentence,” Mr. Horne said. “You have to be diplomatic.”

But the upside of the business — the gratitude of clients and their families — more than makes up for the difficulties.

While a memoir might be primarily for future generations, it also provides a rare opportunity to reflect.

Ms. Tyrrell mentioned her first client, a woman who was dying of cancer at 52. She was too ill to read her finished memoir, so Ms. Tyrrell read it to her. At the end, “she turned to me,” Ms. Tyrrell said, “and told me, ‘Now I realize I had a very wonderful life.’”