

The Guardian

Experience: I've been writing to my pen pal for 81 years

Renée was 11 and lived near Lyon. I'd never been to France - this was before the war, and it seemed as unlikely as going to Mars



Alan Mutter: 'When I met Renée at a train station in 1949, we hit it off straight away.' Photograph: Fabio de Paola for the Guardian

Alan Mutter

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It was more than 80 years ago that I wrote my first letter to Paul and Renée. I was about 13, at Washington secondary school in County Durham. Paul was the same age as me, his sister Renée was two years younger, and they lived in Vienne, south of Lyon in France. I liked learning languages, so I was pleased when my French teacher assigned us pen pals. I wrote my letter in French and told them my age and that I liked football. I'd never been to France; this was before the war, and it seemed as unlikely as going to Mars.

It was quite a thing to get a letter from a foreign country, so I looked forward to receiving their reply. Paul was not a sporty type, so we didn't have much in common, but they did go skiing, which was new and exciting for us in England. He wasn't

particularly good at English, so after six months or so we were both writing in French.

We kept writing to each other every month, even when the war started in 1939; but when France capitulated in 1940, the letters stopped coming for a time. I didn't worry too much. I'd started work by then, later becoming a chemist in a steelworks, which is why I wasn't called up, and I was also busy with evening classes and helping to run a youth club.

Not long after France was invaded by the Allies in 1944, the letters resumed and we picked up where we had left off, not discussing the war very much. I decided to go to France on holiday in 1949 to meet them, but Paul was called up into the French army and sent to Vietnam, or what was then known as Indochina. Renée was away skiing. The family treated me splendidly, and I visited for three years running, and several times in the years that followed. That's when I met Renée. She picked me up from the station at 5am, and we hit it off straight away. On one occasion, I was near Lyon for work, and I thought it was a good opportunity to visit. When I knocked on the door, their mother, Mme Berger, welcomed me, saying, "I've been expecting you." She'd been on holiday in the countryside and read in her horoscope that a stranger from abroad would visit. She said, "That's Alan," and came home especially.

I never got to meet Paul. After leaving the army, he married, and Renée wrote to me to tell me that he had died by electrocution while changing a lightbulb. Renée and I continued writing to each other, and our friendship became deeper. We talked about our families: who was getting married, who had died, where we went on holiday. I moved to South Africa for a while, married, had children and grandchildren, was widowed, and later married again. And throughout this, we kept writing our letters.

Renée never married, and worked as a nurse. I continued to visit, and got to know the whole family, including aunts and uncles and distant cousins all over south-east France. I was welcomed into their home life, so I never felt like a tourist. Mme Berger treated me like a son. She was a dressmaker, and when I stayed she would ask me to deliver dresses to her clients. Back home, she used to ring me up and we would have long talks, until she died about 30 years ago.

I'm 93 now, a full-time carer for my wife, Joan, and a grandfather of three, and I still write to Renée. She doesn't like writing, so she phones me to reply. Most people don't seem to have the time for letters any more, but it gives me great pleasure writing in another language, even though some words escape me now.

I have had other pen pals; I had a correspondence in German with people I met on holiday for about 20 years, and until recently I also wrote to some Ukrainians I met through work in the mid-90s; but since all the trouble in their country I haven't heard from them. These correspondences, especially with Renée, have given me a wider view of what's happening outside the UK. We're all part of a larger world, but I think most of us tend to be a bit insular; if you speak someone else's language, you have a closer rapport with them.

I lost touch decades ago with schoolfriends because I moved around a lot, but moving doesn't affect your relationship with a pen pal. Plus, there's something about writing to one another that is very special: that slow pace, looking forward to receiving the next letter and knowing that someone is looking forward to your response. My friendship

with Renée is the longest I have ever had.

As told to Moya Sarnier.

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