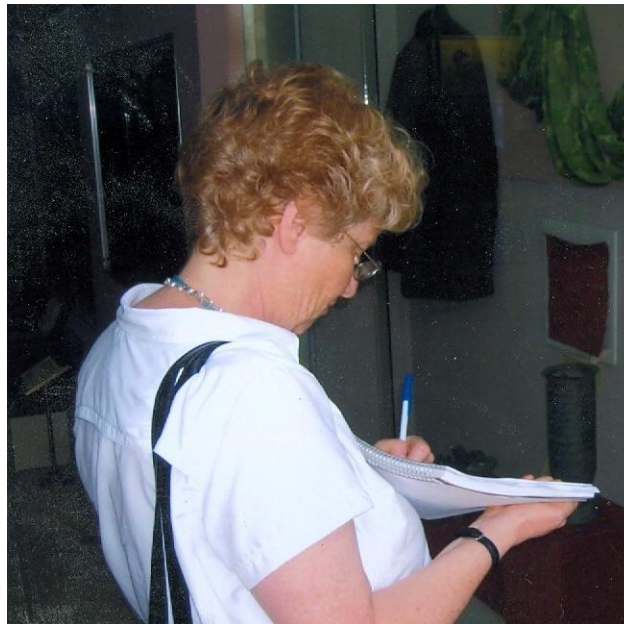


Writing Tips from Ellen Cassedy

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Interviewing: Let Go of the Reins



As a former columnist for the *Philadelphia Daily News*, and as a freelance reporter, I used to take a journalist's approach to interviewing for a story.

I read voraciously beforehand. I printed out my list of questions on a single sheet of paper. I never relied on a tape recorder. I mastered the knack of speed-writing while maintaining eye contact with my interviewee. And as I proceeded through my list of questions, I knew how to push for the answers. And push. And push some more.

But when I went to Lithuania to do research for *We Are Here*, my family-story-turned-wider-exploration, I ended up abandoning this journalistic style in favor of

something different. Something softer. Something more in keeping, perhaps, with the genre of memoir and of complex historical truths.

Time and again in Lithuania, I found myself laying aside my list of questions. I let people talk, and I listened.

Early on in my visit to the land of my Jewish forebears, I sat down at a café with a woman I'd never met before. I had my list of questions for Violeta. I wanted to know the facts about Holocaust education in Lithuania after World War II.

But Violeta had a story of her own that she wanted to tell. Within moments after we ordered glasses of wine, she let loose with a wail of pain about her tumultuous marriage.

For a while I fidgeted, worrying that we'd never get around to *my* agenda. I was afraid the interview would be a waste of time.

In fact, though, by *not* trying to steer the conversation in the direction I thought it should go, I wound up getting closer to the truths I was after.

Eventually we did get to my questions – some of them. But what I learned from Violeta's heartfelt expression was worth at least as much as her answers to the questions I'd thought up ahead of time.

I came to see my encounter with this woman as a kind of metaphor for what is happening in present-day Lithuania – a cauldron boiling and bubbling with radically disparate worldviews and historical perspectives. I had my view of the trauma Lithuanians should be confronting. Violeta had another.

What happened across that checkered tablecloth taught me a great deal. Had I barreled ahead with my prepared questions, I would have missed something important.

No less than its tougher journalistic cousin, I learned, the “soft” interview requires a certain skill set, one that gets better with practice.

You still have to research your subject ahead of time. Your ability to show an *informed* interest is vitally important.

You still have to be able to speed-write while keeping your eyes on your interviewee.

You still have to care passionately about getting to the bottom of things.

And of course you won't be well-served if you forget all about what you came to find out in the first place.

That said, I found that letting go of the reins while interviewing can reap rich rewards. Give it a try.

Ellen Cassedy is the author of *We Are Here: Memories of the Lithuanian Holocaust* (Univ. of Nebraska Press, 2012). To see all of her Writing Tips, visit her website at www.ellencassedy.com.