

# Writing Tips from Ellen Cassedy

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## How Hirsh Leib Opened My Eyes

I do not know what to write; not because there is a dearth of daily events, but rather because I've so customized myself to the life in the small town, and I don't "see" much anymore. Everything appears so naturally in place.

In 1935, a man named Hirsh Leib left Philadelphia for a visit to Lithuania, the land he'd left 30 years before. He got off the boat and made his way by horse and wagon to the town of his birth. In the doorway of his old home he greeted his mother. They fell into each other's arms.

"I visited some of the poor homes here," he wrote home on his first day. town. "One can hardly believe that people can live under such conditions!"

Day by day, he penned a vivid account of the town and its people – the muddy streets and the wooden houses, the beards and the linen shirts, the blacksmith shop and the general store, the conversations around the dining table, the tasty Old World food.

But soon everything changed for Hirsh Leib.

“I do not know what to write,” he confessed after two months. “Not because there is a dearth of daily events, but rather because I’ve accustomed myself to the life in the small town. I don’t ‘see’ much anymore. Everything appears so naturally in place.”

That passage spoke directly to me as a writer. “I don’t ‘see’ much anymore. Everything appears so naturally in place.” Hirsh Leib’s words drove home the point that writing depends on taking notice. Ramping up our powers of observation. Keeping our eyesight as keen as can be.

To create compelling prose or poetry, we have to find ways to perceive things as wondrous, strange, noteworthy – worthy of being written down.

So how do we keep our eyes in working order? How do we see – and keep on seeing? How do we sharpen our eyes – and our ears, our nose, our taste buds?

Nearly 70 years after Hirsh Leib’s return visit, I myself traveled to Lithuania, the land of my Jewish ancestors. As I gathered material for my book, I kept a diary in which I scribbled down everything I could see, hear, and smell, everything I thought, everything I felt. In four weeks, I filled nine spiral notebooks. I also snapped nine rolls of film. (Remember rolls of film?)

By the time I was ready to return home, just like Hirsh Leib I’d grown accustomed to what had at first seemed new and different – the cobblestones under my feet, the dense black bread and the knobby cucumbers, the cottony expanse of the vast Baltic sky. All these had come to seem utterly natural to me. In a way, I no longer “saw” them.

But thanks to my notebooks and my camera, when I sat down to write, I had these fresh observations at my fingertips. I had access to my heightened perceptions of what had once seemed new and strange. And I could seek to share that sense of wonder with my readers.

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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](http://www.ellencassedy.com).