

***Writing Out Our Past* by Sharon (Grenz) Chmielarz**

Writing Out Our Past was a hands-on workshop: We wrote stories and discussed them within the group. Below, however, is a brief sketch of some guidelines I laid out as presenter.

1. Getting Started

A. Decide for whom are you writing.

- a. for yourself? to remind yourself of your past?
- b. your family? so they don't forget their past?
- c. for publication?
- d. not sure?

B. What do you want your readers to take away from your story/ or book?

- a. a general outline? (a family tree could do this as well)
- b. a list of dates and facts (e.g. cause of death, places of origin)?
- c. stories from the past?

I advocate for stories from the past. Every one of us has at least one story within. Family stories make a family tree's outline come alive.

2. Writing It Down

A. Every story has a beginning, middle and end. And each is very flexible. A story doesn't have to begin with a birth.

B. Write precisely. Give exact names of streets, trees, cars, dogs, etc. Use your ears to pick up on phrases which are or were very familiar to you but would stand out to non-German Russians. They spice up the writing.

C. Don't worry about grammar, spelling, punctuation (the mechanics of writing) at this time. That comes in the last phase of the process.

D. Make this time of collecting things from your memory (and/or your family's) a very fluid period. Good if you use a computer, you can add things easily to files. Think of this as an ongoing project. Cut out time in the week to write on your project. Consider it an important and exciting date.

3. Use of Details

A. Because details can wake up a story, they deserve in a presentation special recognition.

B. Using details helps make what you write come alive: e.g., the rooms of a house, appliances, a day's schedule, how we acquired our music, the clothing we wore.

C. One caveat: Don't let details take over the story. Use one detail for every five you know.

4. A Writing Exercise

(At this point we did some writing and then shared it with each other. After each volunteer read her/his story, I pointed out the strong points in it. Writers tend to learn much faster from each other than from a textbook.)

5. Organizing What You Write

A. A computer is extremely useful over having sheets of paper lying helter-skelter throughout the house.

B. Titles help, too. Make your titles interesting (though this often comes in the last phase of organizing.) Titles lure readers into wanting to turn pages, e.g. the title "School" vs. a title like "A Fist on the Table." Having good titles is one way to keep your stories out of recycling and on the coffee table or book shelf.

C. When you're all finished, you can run off copies yourself or have a copying shop like Office Max or Kinkos bind it for you.