



Interviewing

In researching for my four WWII novels, I've interviewed veterans and Holocaust survivors--some of whom had NEVER talked about their experiences, even with their spouses. I conducted these first interviews in person at WWII reunions.

I first connected with the men after hearing about the experiences of a specific recon unit who liberated two concentration camps in Austria. I contacted them through letters, and soon received responses from six men from this unit willing to be interviewed. They invited me to their yearly reunion, and I jumped at the chance.

I was amazed by how open the men were to sharing their story. I think they were thrilled that someone cared about THEIR experiences. At the reunion I made appointments. A writer friend went with me, and we filled our schedule. It was my first experience with interviewing concerning sensitive issues, but I use the same procedure today for my novel or article research.

Tips:

- When it comes to the interviews, I set up my notebook computer to record them with Audio Grabber. After getting the recording started, I turned my full attention to the person. I don't jot notes or read questions. Instead, I maintain eye contact and ask questions.
- I start by asking easy stuff such as when they joined their military, about basic training, friendships, etc.
- I make sure I have a basic knowledge of their role in the war so I can ask knowledgeable questions. For example, "What type of emotions did you feel when your tank crossed the border into Germany?"
- After the person has covered the basics I ask, "What memories still replay in your mind even 60 years later?" This is the question that brings the most emotion. Many, many men have broken down sobbing. Some apologize and tell me that cannot share their memory. Others do so, but it takes a while for them to warm up.
- Which leads to the most important thing I do . . . sit and listen. I don't try to fill the silence with my words. Nine times out of ten, the men (or women) open up, and they share things with me that they've never shared before. And many tell me it's a sort of healing for them,

I've been privileged to talk with Holocaust survivors, too. Most of these men and women have told their stories many times--and it's easy for them to open up.

My most amazing interview was with a survivor who was in his early teens when he was in a number of concentration camps. He had not spoken to many people, and when we shared his experiences he literally jumped from his seat and started "acting" out how they marched, how they stood at attention, how the guards beat him, etc. I felt like I was there, and it greatly impacted me.

I've continued to interview other people for other situations, and being genuinely interested and caring is key. I offer tissue or hold hands for someone having a hard time. I don't rush. I also let the person know later how much their story impacted me.

The greatest thing has been the men's response when they read the final product—whether it is my novels or my monthly veteran's column. They're excited to know their experiences matter and their stories will live on.