

## **THE AUTHORS SHOW – Historical Nonfiction**

### **Author: Katrina Shawver**

The road to published author, blogger, and public speaker began unexpectedly twenty years ago with a letter to the editor of The Arizona Republic in Phoenix Arizona. I penned a suggestion for a new column, and flippantly offered to write it. Imagine my surprise when they called me six months later and took me up on my offer. Prior to that invitation, my writing consisted of the requisite thank you notes my mother trained me on at a young age, school term papers, and later policy and procedure manuals at work. Being unexpectedly asked to write for the newspaper changed the direction of my life and gave me a permanent and empowering boost in self-confidence.

The newspaper gig lasted for eleven years until they downsized, but in writing hundreds of columns I became passionate about the power of the written word to convey information, provoke discussion, sway opinion, and tell a great story. Paul Schatt, my senior editor, became my great encourager. He regularly told me ""Katrina, you are an excellent writer. Never stop writing." I knew then that I am, and always will be, a writer. When he passed away suddenly, his words became my lasting writer's inheritance and still echo in my memory.

Several lessons still guide me today.

From being edited, I became a better writer.

From set deadlines, I learned writers block does not apply in journalism. You must produce the best, not perfect, copy you can in the time you have.

From perceptive readers, I learned the critical importance of verifying your facts, cross-checking your sources, and thoroughly proofreading even after an editor blesses the work. Never underestimate the intelligence of your audience, or the reality that for any error that gets missed, some reader will cheerfully point it out.

I learned that writing is primarily a one-way communication. It was hard to gauge how many people actually read my columns, or what they thought of them, unless they submitted a letter

to the editor or emailed me directly. Few ever did, despite a circulation nearing 100,000 in my print area. When reaction did come in for certain columns, I knew I had connected with readers. The newspaper became a vehicle to meet new people with the intent of writing about them. Few people turned me down, and to this day a few of those individuals are now lifelong friends. I am, at heart, a communicator.

Thanks to a random referral in 2002, I met an eighty-five-year-old Polish gentleman who had survived nearly three years in German concentration camps as a Catholic political prisoner during World War II. When we first met, Henry Zguda possessed an exceptional memory, a sense of humor, a knack for meeting the right people at the right time, and a cache of original photos. In that first interview, he revealed two small stories of Auschwitz I had never heard. Clearly, he had lived in a time and place few people still alive experienced or knew. Thoroughly intrigued after just one interview, I mused for the next few days. Who would he leave his story to? He and his wife Nancy never had children, and Henry had no siblings. With the same amount of forethought I had when I offered to write for the newspaper, I boldly reached out to Henry and suggested we collaborate on a book. Once again, an impulsive move changed the direction of my life. For reasons I still cannot explain, the story chose me unexpectedly, providentially, and, I believe, as the right person to carry it forward.

Fifteen years after that first chance meeting with Henry, I can proudly hold the final result in my hands. ""Henry: A Polish Swimmer's True Story of Friendship from Auschwitz to America"" is available worldwide in hardback, paperback, and eBook formats through a major distributor. The reviews have been incredibly positive and validating. I continue to blog regularly on my website [katrinashawver.com](http://katrinashawver.com), a practice begun four years and more than four hundred blog posts ago. Blogging comes easily to me, after years spent writing newspaper columns of 500-700 words.

Today I employ all of my newspaper lessons and more. Through beta readers and my critique group, my writing gets better. I have learned to set my own deadlines in the spirit that completion is far better than perfection. Just as other unseen newspaper staff polished my work with headlines and copy editing, I believe in the power of working with professionals to

put out the best possible book. I am a writer, and the story remains mine to tell, but I only have one chance to get it right in a very competitive industry. I have also learned that as a modern writer, I am responsible for encouraging reader engagement by utilizing social media to market and connect. Readers simply do not and cannot buy books from authors they have not heard of or cannot locate.

I remain a history geek, drawn to nonfiction and real people. I like reading stories that make me think. Real life events and people are far crazier and unique than any I could possibly invent. ""Henry"" reflects my reading style. It weaves historical research and original photos and documents into the story to establish context and authenticity. It is a provocative and important contribution to World War II history for many reasons. Yet, the heart of the story remains that of a strong young man, who survives by his wits, humor, friends, and a healthy dose of luck.

This writing journey continues to be one of unexpected doors opening at the right time. For my next project, I would love to do an anthology of more survivor stories, especially those from Poland and Europe, to build on the body of research I have. Most people who survived World War II are now in their 80s and 90s, so there is an urgency to capture their stories now. Based on my experience, I also envision writing a guide for others on how to best capture the stories of friends and family.

When I first penned that letter to the editor so many years ago, I had not yet learned two other realities in life. First, be careful what you ask for; you may get it. Conversely, unless you ask, things do not happen. Trust me, now when someone mentions they know an interesting person or story, I always knock on that door. The unknown possibilities are endless.