



# **A GUIDE TO WRITING YOUR MEMOIR OR CONDUCTING AN ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW**

The National Hellenic Museum is committed to serving as a repository for the unique stories of Greeks in America. Our archive continues to grow through the participation of people like you, those interested in preserving their story through our Oral History Project. To get you started, here are some simple guidelines to help you write your memoir or record an interview and submit it to the museum for inclusion in our archival collection.

## **MEMOIRS**

### **1. GETTING STARTED**

Please begin by filling out the Biographical Data Form (pages 7-8). This will provide NHM some basic information about you and will help jog your memory. It can also help to look at photo albums and artifacts that are significant to you and your family. Think about why you're choosing to write a memoir. What information is important for you to convey? What aspects of your life do you think make for interesting stories? Talk with family members, your spouse, childhood friends and anyone else who can help remind you of elements you'll want to include.

On pages 10-11 of this guide you'll see a list of questions you can use to spark ideas. You can even use them to interview yourself – writing down your answers and using those as the basis for your memoir.

### **2. CREATE A LIST OF TOPICS**

You may find it helpful to write down the topics you'd like to cover in your memoir. These could include family history, immigration stories, your experiences growing up, schooling, professional life, life events (births, deaths, weddings) as well as anything that feels significant to you. We know that some memories may be painful, but including those may make the story most valuable for telling and preserving. Don't feel like you need to be limited to topics of obvious significance. Sometimes relatively mundane experiences can feel the most profound – and those should be included! Small details are as important as big events.

You could also create a timeline of your life, starting with your birth and continuing to the present. Working by year or timeframe (every 5 or 10 years), write down events that were significant to you or your family. You can also extend this timeline to start before you were born, to include important events and stories from your family history.

### **3. START WRITING**

Choose a quiet and comfortable place to write. Try to be disciplined and commit yourself to writing a page or two, or more, each day.

Ten pages of text is a good start, but we'd love to have more. There is no maximum length, though most memoirs average 30-40 pages. Typewritten, double-spaced text is the easiest to read, and what we prefer to archive.

## 4. CREATE A TABLE OF CONTENTS

Please include a simple Table of Contents with your memoir. It will greatly enhance the value of your submission and help researchers locate the important material you've included.

## **RECORDED INTERVIEWS**

### 1. CREATE A LIST OF QUESTIONS

Before the interview, ask the subject to fill out the Biographical Data Form (pages 7-8). This will help you formulate questions and get an understanding of the person's experience. Keep in mind that interviews generally last from 30 to 90 minutes, and you probably won't get a chance to ask all your questions. Approach your question list as a guide to help steer the interview.

The secret to a good interview is to ask open questions – ones that can't be answered with "yes" or "no" but require an explanation. Questions that begin with "how," "when," or "why" will help keep the conversation going. Some suggestions are on pages 10-11 of this guide.

### 2. LOCATE RECORDING EQUIPMENT

Please use the best video or audio recorder available to you. We prefer video, but if you're recording to audiotape, standard cassettes are preferable to mini or micro cassettes. For better sound quality with both video and audio interviews, we **HIGHLY** recommend the use of an external microphone rather than relying on the one built into your recorder or camera. If possible, use a lapel microphone (see *photos*) or one on a stand placed in front of the interviewee.



If you're filming, you'll want to use a tripod to set up the camera.

### 3. PICK A LOCATION FOR THE INTERVIEW

Choose a quiet and comfortable room. Avoid kitchens, which have a lot of noisy appliances. Remember to turn any TVs or radios and silence all cell phones. Try to record away from air conditioners or heating vents, or temporarily turn them off. Living rooms and dining rooms are generally quiet, and attractive, locations within peoples' homes.

### 4. SET UP AND TEST EQUIPMENT

Setting up and testing your equipment before the interview begins will allow you to focus on your interviewee and not the recording device. Once you've set up, ask a few throwaway questions (What did you have for breakfast? How was your weekend?) After your interviewee answers, rewind and make sure you're recording clear audio and that your picture – if you're filming the interview – has good framing and is recording video. If there are background noises (fans, air conditioning, clocks, etc.), or other problems with the recording, this will be the moment to address these issues.

If you choose to make a video, place the camera at eye level and focus on the upper body of the interviewee.



Keep the camera on the person being interviewed and try not to use the zoom feature. It's best to film any relevant pictures and artifacts at the end of the interview.

Seat your subject in a comfortable chair that doesn't squeak.

In general, try to find or create direct and even lighting. When shooting in a room with large windows, use this to your advantage. Don't place the interviewee so they are sitting in front of the window. This will make their face look dark and the background too bright. Instead, place the camera by the window and use the light from the sun to shine on the subject's face.

## **5. GETTING STARTED**

Begin the interview by stating your name, the date and the location of the interview. Ask the interviewee to do the same, and spell any names or locations that may be difficult to understand.

An easy way to get the interview underway is to begin with biographical questions – these could include parents' names, where they were born and where your subject was born and grew up. From there it's easy to go in several different directions with the interview. You can ask what it was like to grow up in their birth city, what their childhood was like, or focus on their parents and ask about their lives, immigration experience, etc.

## **6. INTERVIEWING TIPS**

It's best to have only you and the interviewee in the room, talking one-on-one.

Think of the questions you prepared in advance as suggestions. It's important to be a good listener and trust your instincts and ask questions that feel right, even if they aren't on your list. Be encouraging, asking your subject, "Tell me more." Avoid saying "uh huh" or interrupting, instead showing that you're listening by nodding your head and making eye contact.

**Don't be afraid of silence! Let your interviewee take the time they need to pause, think, and speak.**

Be sensitive to any hesitation on the interviewee's part. Emphasize the importance of preserving these stories and making them available to later generations. Be reassuring about the fact that these are spoken reminiscences, not polished essays.

While conducting the interview, glance periodically at the recorder/camera to be sure it is still recording and the tape or hard drive has not run out. There's no need to stop and start the recording – just let it run throughout the interview.

## **7. FINISHING UP**

Before you stop recording, ask the interviewee if there is anything else he or she would like to share. Be sure to thank your subject for their time, and for opening up to you. Let them know that the interview will be archived at the National Hellenic Museum as part of the Oral History Project and that the museum appreciates their contribution to the preservation of Greek and Greek American history.

## **SHARING THE MEMOIR OR INTERVIEW WITH THE MUSEUM**

With the memoir, please include your name, the date you finished the memoir, as well as the city and state where you live. With the recorded interview neatly and consistently label your recordings, including the interviewee's name, date, location, and your name. Be sure to mark each tape/CD/DVD label with the same information listed on the case. Note: If you're using a tape and Side B is blank, mark "blank" on the tape label. You may want to label your recordings and cases in pencil while in the field and then complete the proper labeling when you are preparing your materials for delivery. Finally, if using a tape, push in the tabs on the tape to protect it from accidental re-recording; if using a CD or DVD, make sure it is finalized.



We also strongly encourage donations of photos, other written materials (letters, diaries, etc.) and artifacts to enhance the memoir/interview, so please use the included forms to describe potential donations. **NHM staff will then contact you to finalize the donation process. Please do not send photograph, artifact or document originals without first speaking with appropriate NHM staff.**

Make sure that you also include the following documentation when shipping materials to NHM:

- Memoir / Recordings – properly labeled
- Contact Information Form (pages 5 or 6)
- Signed Biographical Data Form (pages 7-8)
- Release Form(s) (page 9) signed by memoir author or interviewer and interviewee (make individual copies for each person to complete and sign)
- Photograph Log and Donation Data Sheet to describe any other potential material (photos, albums, written materials, artifacts, etc.) **Please do not send photograph, artifact or document originals without first speaking with appropriate NHM staff.**

Ship package with a method that can be insured and tracked, or hand-deliver to:

**Oral History Coordinator  
National Hellenic Museum  
333 S. Halsted St.  
Chicago, IL 60661  
(312) 655-1234**

**National Hellenic Museum  
MEMOIR CONTACT INFORMATION FORM**

**Memoir Author:**

Last name: \_\_\_\_\_

Maiden Name: \_\_\_\_\_

First Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Gender:      MALE                      FEMALE

Relationship to Donor (if any): \_\_\_\_\_

Address:

Home Phone:

Cell Phone:

Email:

**Donor (*if different from Author*):**

Last name: \_\_\_\_\_

First Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Gender:      MALE                      FEMALE

Relationship to Author (if any): \_\_\_\_\_

Address:

Home Phone:

Cell Phone:

Email:

**National Hellenic Museum**  
**RECORDED INTERVIEW CONTACT INFORMATION FORM**

**Participant/Interviewee:**

Last name: \_\_\_\_\_

Maiden Name: \_\_\_\_\_

First Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Gender:      MALE                      FEMALE

Relationship to Interviewer (if any): \_\_\_\_\_

Address:

Home Phone:

Cell Phone:

Email:

**Interviewer:**

Last name: \_\_\_\_\_

First Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Gender:      MALE                      FEMALE

Relationship to Interviewee (if any): \_\_\_\_\_

Address:

Home Phone:

Cell Phone:

Email:

**Recording Format:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Interview Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Interview Location:** \_\_\_\_\_

## Biographical Data Form

(Please print clearly- Additional space on back of page, if needed)

Today's Date \_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_ First Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Last Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Maiden Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Marital Status: Single / Married / Widowed

Birth Date: \_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_ Birth Place: \_\_\_\_\_ Ethnicity: \_\_\_\_\_

**SPOUSE** - First Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Last Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Maiden Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Ethnicity: \_\_\_\_\_ Birth Date: \_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_ Birth Place: \_\_\_\_\_

**MOTHER** - First Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Maiden Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Ethnicity: \_\_\_\_\_ Birth Date: \_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_ Birth Place: \_\_\_\_\_

**FATHER** - First Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Last Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Ethnicity: \_\_\_\_\_ Birth Date: \_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_ Birth Place: \_\_\_\_\_

**GRANDMOTHER (Maternal)** - First Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Maiden Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Ethnicity: \_\_\_\_\_ Birth Date: \_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_ Birth Place: \_\_\_\_\_

**GRANDFATHER (Maternal)** - First Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Last Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Ethnicity: \_\_\_\_\_ Birth Date: \_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_ Birth Place: \_\_\_\_\_

**GRANDMOTHER (Paternal)** - First Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Maiden Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Ethnicity: \_\_\_\_\_ Birth Date: \_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_ Birth Place: \_\_\_\_\_

**GRANDFATHER (Paternal)** - First Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Last Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Ethnicity: \_\_\_\_\_ Birth Date: \_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_ Birth Place: \_\_\_\_\_

### Biographical Data Form - *Continued*

Please list any immigration data – country of origin, entry date and location, ship name, etc. for you, your spouse, parents or grandparents. Be sure to indicate whom the information pertains to (ex. “Anna Kokolakis, maternal grandmother. Immigration from Kalamata, Greece through Ellis Island in September 1932).

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Please list your **siblings'** names, birth dates and place, and fluency in Greek (ex. yes, no, spoken but not read, etc.).

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Please list your **children's** names, birth dates and place, and fluency in Greek (ex. yes, no, spoken but not read, etc.).

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Were you fluent in English prior to entering school?    Yes    No

What was the primary language spoken in your home?    Greek    English    Both    Other





## **ORAL HISTORY PROJECT RELEASE AGREEMENT**

In consideration of my participation in this Oral History project, I, the undersigned:

- Do hereby release to the National Hellenic Museum (NHM) all rights (including copyright), title and interest which I may possess in and to the written memoir or audio/video recording(s) and any transcript(s), biographical data form, and associated or accompanying items.
- Grant the NHM exclusive license in the contents of the written memoir or audio/video recordings and any transcript(s), biographical data form, or associated or accompanying items so that the NHM may use such material in connection with its mission and purpose and to advance the interests of the NHM.
- Grant the NHM the right to use my name and likeness in connection with these materials.
- Understand that the primary purpose of the written memoir or audio/video recording(s) and any transcript(s), biographical data form, and associated or accompanying items is to gather valuable historical resources for preservation and will be made available for historical and other research and may be used for educational, documentary, and entertainment purposes, including use in books, publications, film, radio, television and the Internet. All rights, title, and interest in any reproduction that subsequently may be made from these original productions will be assigned to the NHM. Original recordings, any transcripts, biographical data form or written memoirs will be deposited in the archival collection of the NHM. The NHM may offer reproductions of these materials to other entities as it determines.
- Hereby release NHM from any and all claims, demands, or cause of actions that I may now or hereafter have by reason of anything contained in the written memoir or audio/video recording(s) and any transcript(s), biographical data form, or associated or accompanying items

NAME (print) \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

TELEPHONE \_\_\_\_\_

EMAIL \_\_\_\_\_

SIGNATURE \_\_\_\_\_

DATE \_\_\_\_\_

## **National Hellenic Museum**

### **Prompting Questions**

- 1) Give your name, date of birth, birthplace.
- 2) Please tell us your parents' names and your siblings' names.
  - (a) Where were they born?
  - (b) What did they, or their families, do for a living?
  - (c) Describe your relationship with your parents.
- 3) When did your parents or family members come to America?
  - (a) What were their reasons for coming to America?
  - (b) What did they do when they arrived here?
  - (c) Where did they settle?
  - (d) Did they ever return to Greece?
  - (e) Did other members come to the United States before or after your family?
- 4) Describe growing up Greek in the United States.
  - (a) What was life like then?
  - (b) Describe your home and neighborhood.
  - (c) Did you experience or observe discrimination as a Greek-American at some point?
  - (d) How important was it to integrate both Greek and American cultures?
  - (e) Did you feel you had to choose between the two cultures?
  - (f) What customs did your family follow, and do continue these practices?
  - (g) Was there a larger Greek community you were a part of?
  - (h) If so, in what ways were you involved?
  - (i) As a child, what did it mean to you to be Greek/Greek American?
- 5) Tell us about your family.

- (a) What is your spouse's name?
- (b) How did you meet?
- (c) What is/was the relationship like between your family and your spouse?
- (d) When and where did you get married?
- (e) Do you have children?
- (f) What differences, if any, do you see in your marital relationship and that of your parents'?

6) How did the armed conflicts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century affect you and your family?

- (a) Which war/conflicts were impactful (Balkan Wars, WWI, Smyrna, WWII, Civil War, Korea, Vietnam, the Junta, Cyprus, etc.)?
- (b) Were you, or members of your family, involved?
- (c) If you or members of your family were involved, please tell us about the experiences (branch, rank, where you/they were stationed).

7) Tell us about your education.

- (a) Where did you attend?
- (b) What did you study?
- (c) Why did you choose that course of study?

8) Tell us about your professional career.

- (a) Where did you work?
- (b) Describe your job(s).
- (c) How did you get into that profession?
- (d) What did "achievement" or "success" mean in to your family?
- (e) What are the professional achievements you're most proud of?

9) The Greek Orthodox Church plays a role in the lives of many in the Greek community.

- (a) What impact, if any, has it had on your life?

(b) Do you have any role in the Church?

10) Are you involved with any Greek organizations?

(a) If so, can you tell me the organizations you're involved in?

(b) Why is this/are these organization(s) important to you?

11) What are your favorite Greek traditions?

(a) Why are they your favorite traditions?

(b) What are some of your memories around these traditions?

(c) Do you have a favorite Greek food?

12) Final Thoughts.

(a) What in your life makes you the most proud?

(b) Do you have any regrets in life?

(c) How do you see Hellenism today?



## National Hellenic Museum Donation Data Sheet

Please complete this form if you are interested in donating items to the National Hellenic Museum. [It is to be used in conjunction with the Biographical Data Form and Interviewee's Release Form.] National Hellenic Museum staff will assist you in completing your donation. Please do not send any original photographs, artifacts, or documents without first speaking with appropriate NHM staff.

1. Name of Donor: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City: \_\_\_\_\_ State: \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP: \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone: (\_\_\_\_\_) - \_\_\_\_\_ Email: \_\_\_\_\_

2. Full name(s) and life dates (birth–death) of the person/people about whom the materials relate. In many instances, this person is the interviewee whose name appears on the Biographical Data Form.

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3. Types and dates of materials submitted, for example:

Diary, November 20, 1942–February 17, 1944; Family photo album, 1951–1953; Letters, 1969–1972; Commendations, 1991; Unpublished memoir, 2001; etc.

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4. If these items are copies of originals, describe how they were reproduced. Are they transcripts, photocopies, or photographic prints? Identify when the copies were made, and give the name and address of the person or group who holds the originals. We encourage you to donate the originals to the National Hellenic Museum for long-term preservation and for access by researchers.

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(Continue on next page.)

Donation Data Sheet, continued.

5. Describe the scope and content of the materials by addressing the following:  
Please identify by name the writers and recipients of the letters and other documents.  
What is their relationship to the donor whose name appears on the Biographical Data Form?

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What historical time periods are covered? \_\_\_\_\_

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What are the most interesting/important topics and events described in these materials?

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6. Have any of these materials been published or have copies of them been donated elsewhere? If so, please provide full citation of the publication or the location of the copies.

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**National Hellenic Museum**  
**Photograph Log**

Please use this log (or the related excel spreadsheet) to organize and describe photographs that you would like to donate to the National Hellenic Museum. Please do not send any originals in the mail without first contacting Museum staff. We want to make sure nothing gets lost in the mail and we can help arrange proper handling. You may however mail or email copies, digital photos or scans prior to donating originals. Digital photos or scanned photos should be numbered in the file name with your name or an abbreviation and the photo number. (For example: NHM1.jpg, NHM2.jpg, etc.) Copies should also be labeled to correspond with this log. If you are planning to submit a large number of photos, please use the related Excel Spreadsheet.

**Name of Donor**

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**Address**

**Phone & Email**

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Total Number of Photographs: \_\_\_\_\_

**PHOTOGRAPH #** \_\_\_\_\_

Place: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
month/day/year

Person(s) left to right: \_\_\_\_\_

Description: \_\_\_\_\_

Photographer (if known): \_\_\_\_\_

**PHOTOGRAPH #** \_\_\_\_\_

Place: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
month/day/year

Person(s) left to right: \_\_\_\_\_

Description: \_\_\_\_\_

Photographer (if known): \_\_\_\_\_

(Please photocopy this form to use for additional photographs if needed.)

## National Hellenic Museum Artifact & Document Log

Please use this log (or the related excel spreadsheet) to organize and describe any letters, diaries, other printed and handwritten materials, and any objects that you would like to donate to the National Hellenic Museum. Please do not send any originals in the mail without first contacting Museum staff. We want to make sure nothing gets lost in the mail and we can help arrange proper handling. You may however mail or email copies, digital photos or scans prior to donating originals. Digital photos or scanned photos should be numbered in the file name with your name or an abbreviation and the photo number. (For example: NHM1.jpg, NHM2.jpg, etc.) Copies should also be labeled to correspond with this log. If you are planning to submit a large number of items, please use the provided Excel Spreadsheet.

### Name of Donor

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Address

Phone & Email

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Total Number of Items:

### ITEM #

Reproduction or Original

Date/Age

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Description of Item

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Significance of Item

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### ITEM #

Reproduction or Original

Date/Age

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Description of Item

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Significance of Item

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(Please photocopy this form to use for additional items if needed.)