In the den of his elegant duplex in Manhattan's River House, Henry A. Kissinger corrects the galley proofs of his memoirs. Volume I, covering his first four years in Richard Nixon's White House, will be published in the fall. Subsequent events, including the Watergate period, will be dealt with in a second volume. Kissinger, 56, has worked on the project for more than 15 months, encouraged by his wife, Nancy, and with Tyler, their beloved yellow Labrador, usually at his side. Recently the former Secretary of State interrupted his labors to talk with PEOPLE's Patricia Burstein.

How many hours a day did you write?
Well, on the days in which I wrote—about five days a week—I would write eight or 10 hours. I write in spurts.

Are you more comfortable with the written or spoken word?
The spoken word is easier. The written takes tremendous self-discipline, and I keep rewriting. I've rewritten every chapter five or six times.

Your desk overlooks the East River. Were you distracted?
No. The river is very consoling. Nancy arranged the desk for the view.

Did your wife read your manuscript?
She read some chapters, not all of them. We discussed the material when I had a question of how to handle it.

What are your writing habits?
I use yellow legal pads. When I attempt to type, my mind isn't connected to the typing, it's connected to my hand. So I wrote about 700,000 words in longhand.

How did you keep your weight down?
I tried to do a lot of swimming and walking. I just didn't get up and have a soda or sandwich.

Did you rely on documents or memory?
The problem with writing contemporary history is that there are so many documents it is impossible to take account of them all. In fact I don't know them all. On the other hand, my memory tends to focus on some dramatic instance that meant a great deal to me.

It tends, at least in my case, to weed things out that struck me as less significant. So what I really needed was a combination of memory, notes I kept, plus documents to enable me to reconstruct what happened.

Could you explain the meaning of "dramatic instance"?
I may have had a two-hour conversation with someone in which there was a five-minute passage that I remember as being particularly dramatic. I may remember those five minutes as the dominant part, and have forgotten major elements of the rest. Thus if I wrote strictly from memory I would say in this conversation one thing happened, which would be true, but one-sided.

Was the shift from memoranda to memoir-writing difficult?
It's not a book of documents. It's my account, which I hope will be supported by documents with which I am familiar. This does not exclude that there are people who have other documents that would give a different perspective.

How many documents are there?
From that period, five to 10 million. I am familiar with only a small number.

Do you worry about how people will react to your portrayal of them?
Of course it's a problem. I have tried to be compassionate and to avoid gossip. I've sought to bring the personalities into the problems they had to deal with. I've written about those things that affected decisions. I don't think it will be very wounding to people.

Were there moments of euphoria while you were writing the book?
There were some events I am describing, like the secret visit to China and the breakthrough in negotiations in Vietnam, which I remembered with great pleasure.

Were you upset by the book by William Shawcross—Sideshow: Kissinger, Nixon and the Destruction of Cambodia? Did it affect your own writing?
The book came out after I was all but finished. I think it's a one-sided polemic which is essentially untruthful. It's a shame he either misunderstands or...
misrepresents the problem. If Cambodia had been as simple as he presents it, we would have found the answer too. I added one or two footnotes to my manuscript, but I really did not change it in any significant way as a result of his book.

In reviewing your decisions, did you think you might have acted differently?

You must remember this—if a serious person is conducting policy he will have thought through the implications of his actions when he took them. Whatever mistakes he may have made the first time he's likely to make again when he thinks it through a second time. It's not likely he'll change his mind on too many things.

What do you hope will be the value of your book?

That people in the future will see how somebody in high office perceived his choices, what he thought he knew and on what basis he acted.

Will Tyler like your memoirs?

He is very understanding. He just wants to make sure he gets mentioned and has some good pictures of himself. But he wasn't born in the period I am writing about.