The Family Gift

A writer's trek through his family's past unearths a rarely reported World War II saga and the importance of embracing heritage

by Greg Archer

I have come to believe that the best gifts arrive unwrapped. No curly ribbons. No bows. No tags. No warnings.

I received my 2003 Christmas present early this year. Actually, I first held it in my hands in the fall of 2002. It was a floppy disk my Uncle John had sent to me from Chicago, where he lives and where I was raised. There was a note: „Here it is Greg … I wrote something about our family. Take a look."

I did. I read a few paragraphs, felt some odd emotional stirring within and quickly stored the story on my laptop, where it would be safe, and, more importantly as I would later discover, where it would be hidden.

„My Uncle thinks he wrote a book," I thought. „Cute. Very cute. But nothing about what my uncle sent me was „cute"". Deep, intoxicating, angst-ridden, interesting, horrific, unbelievable, jaw-dropping yes, but cute? No.Growing up in Chicago, the history of my Polish family, particularly my mother's side, always fascinated me. It was during the Easters, the Thanksgivings, the Christmases that the stories about their past would tumble off their tongues as if they had just lived the events days earlier. So I was surprised by my reaction when I began reading the actual details as told through Uncle John. I loved this family „drama," didn't I?

My mother was the youngest of the seven Migut children, which included Ted, Mary, Jasia, Joe, Stanley and John. Ted was the black sheep, Mary passed away before the family arrived in America, Jasia (Jenny in English) was gregarious (think 1950s Zsa Zsa Gabor), Joe direct, Stanley sensitive, John rebellious, and my mother, Bernice, outgoing yet practical.

My first recollection of the family "story" was on Christmas Eve 1969. I was 5. Aunt Jenny, late as usual, had stormed into our house on Chicago's Altgeld Street. Miffed because she had to keep dinner warm for her tardy sister, my mother fought the urge to pitch the evening's sauerkraut across the room toward her older sibling while Aunt Jenny showed off her new wig, her new boyfriend and kept the room captivated. I plopped down on the yellow shag carpeting, my eyes fixated on this curious blood relative of mine, this creature whose fake blonde hair and heavy mascara somehow blended too well with our Kelly green foam sofa from Sears that welcomed her full-bodied figure.

„We lived in Africa, sweetheart," Aunt Jenny chirped.

Africa? What the hell is Africa?

Somebody, my older brother Rich perhaps, shoved a small globe in front of me. It spun around until Uncle John's finger pointed to a bizarre-sounding place, far, far away, called Tanzania. I immediately wanted to go there.

„It was called Tanganyika then," somebody chimed in. „We lived in huts."

Huts … a la Gilligan's Island? Wild. I wanted to know more.

And so it began. Over the years, during the holidays, I probed their minds. One Thanksgiving, Uncle Stanley waved me over from across the table. „Get over here … I'll show you the Masai handshake we learned in Africa."

I had no idea what he was talking about, but as I approached him, he told me „Masai" was the African name of the tribe that lived near the family's „huts" in Africa. He set

down his fork and looked me directly in the eyes. Was he trying to put a Masai spell on me? I stood there, oddly captivated by the texture of the large, moist, half-eaten piece of stuffed cabbage trying to disappear inside of my uncle's mouth. Quickly, he licked his fingers, wiped his mouth and extended a greasy palm toward me. I took it. He squeezed hard. As Uncle Stanley demonstrated this three-part Masai handshake, he recited the Masai greeting in the native language. The whole thing lasted about 10 seconds and finished with a tug at the back of the neck. I felt a warm, tingling sensation. It was the remnants of my mother's stellar stuffed cabbage sauce, which had left my Uncle's messy hands and was now trickling down my neck. (Uncle Stanley was always a messy eater).

By the time I was in high school, I knew: where my family lived in Poland … and why they left; what happened to them in Siberia … and why they left; how they arrived in the tundra of Tehran … and why they left; why they lived in Africa for eight years … and why they left; how they relocated to Chicago … and why they stayed.

I have spent a great portion of my adult life writing about people in the entertainment industry. They seemed "interesting" to me and if I could find a way to bring out their humanity, maybe it could make a difference. But the arrival of Uncle John's disk changed everything. Suddenly, I could care less why Hugh Hefner's iconic empire made for interesting copy, or why, say, it's important to know that comedian Will Ferrell rotates his clothes so they all get equal play. My family's story was living inside of me: a survival story about the brutalities they experienced during World War II; a tome filled with the not-much-reported startling truths of what Joseph Stalin unleashed on nearly 2 million Poles and many more of his own people; an "epic" that included African adventures.

It would be more than a year before I opened my laptop to Uncle John's "book" again. And when I did, the "family story" finally found me. Much later, I would realize that I had become an integral character in their unforgettable tale.

The Russians at the Door

„This book, 'From the Snows of Siberia to the Snows of Kilimanjaro,' is about John Migut and his family," Uncle John writes. "They were taken out from their home in Poland by force and sent to Siberia and became prisoners of war".

On Feb. 10, 1940, my grandfather, grandmother and their children - my mother, aunts and uncles, save for Uncle Ted because he had been visiting a family member in another town - were removed from their home in the village Lukawiec, in Poland, by Soviet soldiers following Stalin's orders to round up as many Poles as they could for slave labor. These „round-ups" actually began months earlier, in September of 1939, just after Hitler's wrath began to officially spread throughout Europe, particularly in Germany and the western borders of Poland. Nobody, especially those living in rural parts of Poland - my family had lived on a small farm on more than an acre of land - had truly absorbed the ramifications of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Treaty, which was secretly signed in August of 1939. The treaty clearly specified the partition of all Polish territory between the two temporary allies, Germany and Russia.

„The soldiers came early in the morning," Uncle John writes. „We were given 10 minutes to bundle up and to board a large sled, which had a machine gun mounted in the front. After we boarded the sleds we were taken to boxcars at a train station by the Polish-Russian border. In the deep freeze of February, and large snow accumulation on the ground, we had no idea we were about to start the longest journey of our lives. My family and I, along with thousands of other Polish families, traveled for about two weeks in these boxcars - without food or water - until the train arrived to Novosibirsk, a district

in Siberia. Approximately 2 million Poles were evacuated from Eastern Poland to Siberia [between 1939 and 1941]. They were given death sentences for just being Polish. Half of the people died before they reached the final destination in Siberia. The other half lived to experience the worst humiliation of their lives. It was an experience I will never forget."

I studied more. On the way to the train station, they encountered roads crowded with trucks and sleds, all of them occupied by their fellow Poles; their neighbors. There were endless lines of rail boxcars parked on the Russian border. The NKVD (Communist Russian Soldiers) strutted around with their carbines and fixed bayonets, guarding the trains so nobody would escape.

„Soviet Soldiers were brutal to us," Uncle John goes on. „They shoved men, women and children into the boxcars like cattle, packing in as many people as they could. We were like sardines in a can. In the boxcars, there were four wooden shelves, two on each side, and one wood fire stove in the middle. People fought for the best position in the boxcar near the stove to keep themselves warm. My family and I were not so lucky. We had a spot on the end of the boxcar on the top shelf, the coldest area. The frozen metal walls of the boxcar provided us with much needed moisture as there was no food or water during the journey.

„The train kept going, full speed, through towns and villages. (I judged this from the noises outside, because the boxcars had no windows.) I was very cold and hungry and I cried myself to sleep. Many people died in our boxcar from cold and hunger. The survivors pulled off the clothes from the corpses and covered themselves to stay warm. Some children, including myself, were so hungry that they licked the ice that had accumulated on the boxcar walls. When the train stopped at various points, the people pounded on the boxcar for help, but nobody came to help us. I couldn't stand looking at the dead bodies lying on the floor. I turned my head toward the wall so that I wouldn't see it. But in my mind I could still see it."

So could I - every vibrant detail my imagination conjured up - but I kept reading.

One day, the doors of the boxcar slid open. The Miguts were drawn to some commotion taking place across the car near the open doors. They watched as another family, so frantic, so traumatized, quickly stuffed their little girl into a potato sack and lowered her down to the ground, hoping somebody would find her outside. They didn't want her to be hauled off to slave labor in Siberia. But within minutes, the NKVD guarding the train caught the girl and the boxcar was locked and marked.

Uncle John writes: „At every station the train stopped, there were extra soldiers to make sure the door in our boxcar would not be opened. This made it even more difficult for the people inside, because in addition to having no food or water, now, we had no heat. At each station, the other boxcars were given wood for burning but not our boxcar - it remained shut until we reached Novosibirsk, Siberia. When we arrived, all the people inside the boxcars were unloaded. The dead were tossed out in the snow. The rest of us, those who could walk, were pushed and kicked and forced to march to the barracks in the Siberian forest."

The Miguts survived the journey from Poland to Siberia. But now another, much crueler odyssey awaited them. The Siberian camp they „lived" in contained 12 barracks, each one holding approximately 20 wooden bunks, three levels high. The barracks housed about 70 people and those confined to the barracks slept on sawdust six inches deep. There were no pillows to sleep on, no sheets, no blankets to get lost under during what Uncle John referred to as „bitter Siberian winters". They covered their bodies with sawdust to keep from freezing and often slept in their clothes, clothes that were soon infested with lice. There was one large wood-fired stove in each barrack. The healthy

adults, Grandfather and 18-year-old Aunt Mary among them, were rounded up and assigned to cut down the trees in the forest. For a day's work, they were rewarded a slice of bread and a cup of hot water. The sick, the weak - those that couldn't work - did not receive anything to eat or drink.
Tree-cutting is grueling, especially in a Siberian forest. Without any proper equipment, the majority of the work was done by hand with an old-fashioned saw operated by two people - the push-pull action saw. The workers, or gruszczyki in Russian, were expected to reach a daily quota. Desperately in need of the daily bread allowance so that they, themselves, could survive, Grandfather and Aunt Mary instead divided their bread among the Migut children. The children were alive. That's all that mattered. But Grandfather and Aunt Mary became weaker each day.
„I remember how my father would get up for work early in the morning," Uncle John writes. „We raised our heads to watch him eat his slice of bread. My father knew why we watched him. So instead of eating his bread, he would break it up into small pieces and give it to us. He would go to work hungry".
Meanwhile, Grandmother resorted to pilgrimages to the forest, too, but for different reasons. Scraps of bread were not going to keep her children alive, so she forced them to join her in her searches for birch tree bark. It actually made for a tasty batch of soup. They also fueled up on birch tree sap and dug deep into the snow for frozen roots, also ideal for soup. During the summer months - they don't last long in Siberia - they picked wild berries, mushrooms and various flowers, which were used for other „meals."
Over time, the hard labor drained the life out of Aunt Mary. Physically weaker than the males around her, Mary died of starvation.
„After her death, my mother cried day and night and she prayed to God to help her find a way to take care of us," Uncle John writes. „She had to pray quietly at night so the Soviet soldiers guarding our barracks wouldn't see or hear her. Praying in Siberia was against the law and if someone was caught praying, they were taken outside the barracks and shot on the spot. The Soviets would say „There is no God. Pray to Father Stalin and he will help you".
Death became a routine part of their lives. Dead bodies accumulated around the barracks, the carcasses sprawled out on the snow because nobody bothered to bury them.
The mind-bending events wandered into the surreal. Uncle John and his friends took to playing a game of „Hop and Stop." The rules were easy enough. Each participant - mostly kids - jumped from one corpse to the next without falling in the snow. It was a temporary distraction from the tragedies that followed: During the winter of 1941, the majority of the small children in the barracks died.
„Only the kids in my family survived," Uncle John writes. „My Mother said to us, God listened to my prayers. God is helping us.'"

Southern Comfort

In the beginning of Uncle John's notes, he writes: „I wanted anybody interested in knowing how cruel a war could be and how courage, faith and will power keeps people alive during crucial moments in their lives … I believe our story may inspire some people not to give up on life even if all the odds are against them".
I kept reading … and learned.
In 1942, when Soviet Russia became an American ally in the fight against Hitler, General Sikorski, once exiled, made an agreement with the Russians to form a Polish Army, which would fight alongside the allies against Hitler. Another general, General

Anders, was in charge of the Polish Army formed in Siberia. Upon hearing of these changes, thousands of „qualified" Polish men throughout Siberia immediately enlisted. As a result, their family members were released from the Siberian labor camps. But there was nobody qualified to enlist in the Polish army in the Migut family. Grandfather was weak from years of grueling labor in the forest and the rest of the Migut males were not old enough.

Fate had another plan

A man whose family had died in Siberia was enlisted in the army. He „adopted" my family as his own. On paper, that is - basically, he did what he could to help a family in need and he knew it would be the only way out for them. Many other Polish families were similarly adopted by Polish soldiers and they, too, were released from the Siberian camps. This stranger's „adoption" triggered another course of dramatic events, which began with freedom. But the snow on the other side of what my Uncle John called „hell's gates" was no more whiter. Finally, after two years in the labor camp and the loss of their dear Mary, the Miguts and other laborers—cold, hungry, sick and without proper winter clothing and with nowhere to go - were released.
They began their escape through what was, really, still considered hostile territory in Siberia. My grandmother set the course south along the railroad tracks. She knew that it was warmer in the south and if they were going to survive, it was the only direction to go. Using the sun as a compass, and hoping to reach some kind of civilization before nightfall, the family - Grandfather was hardly in the condition to travel, especially by foot - began the trek along the railroad tracks. Other refugees followed. After a few hours, they arrived at an abandoned train station used for log storage and spent the night. The following day, when a train toting logs from a Siberian camp arrived, they all jumped into the last empty boxcar and hitched a ride to the next station.
„It was cold and dark and our stomachs curled up from hunger," Uncle John writes. „People were pressed hard against each other to keep themselves warm. Before morning we had to get off the train so the Russians wouldn't spot us. (They were more than eager to report us to the authorities). We were OK until the dogs from the nearby village sniffed us out. This wasn't hard for them to do because we smelled pretty bad. We all started to run, but the dogs still chased us. They quickly caught up and had a field day with us - Polish hobos. My brother Joe, the oldest of the boys, found a big stick and whacked the dogs until they left us alone. We had to hide in the woods for the rest of the day and travel by night to avoid similar situations. During our travels, we ate anything we could find - or steal. We tried a frozen rabbit, raw chickens and even fresh snow. The smaller kids, me included, just got too tired and could not walk any longer, so my brother Joe and my sister Jenny carried us on their backs until we could walk again. We came to an abandoned cemetery where the hyenas dug out some bodies for dinner. It was a terrible sight; the smell even worse. Later we learned that the locals had been burying their dead in the sitting position - without coffins - and that the bodies were wrapped in white cloth. Food had been placed on the graves because they believed the souls of the dead would be hungry. It was good for us that they had such a belief because we found something to eat that night."
The trek south spanned many weeks. At times, strangers with vehicles helped the clan move farther south. Other times, my uncles, not quite teens at the time, begged for food. The exhausting journey found an unlikely pitstop in Uzbekistan, a southern republic of Russia near the city of Tashkent. On the evening they arrived, they found a hut filled with hay and slept there for the night. In the morning, they were being stared

down by a bewildered Uzbeki woman. Concerned, realizing they did not speak her language, the woman brought the family food and water and provided them with fresh clothes. Grandfather was taken to a hospital in Tashkent and somehow, the kindness of the stranger changed the course of events. The Miguts remained in the small Uzbeki village for a time and eventually my uncles tended to the Uzbeki woman's animals, mostly cows. My mother and Uncle John attended kindergarten. And Grandmother? She'd visit her ailing husband in the hospital whenever she could. Mostly, she and several other Polish women who'd been traveling with the family searched for food in the fields. On the menu: turtles. The Uzbeki people were prohibited by their religion to eat the turtles so this became quite a delicacy for the Polish family.

One day, Grandmother visited Grandfather in the hospital in Tashkent. He wasn't there. When she inquired about his whereabouts the hospital officials told her that Grandfather was dead. (They also thought he was a Jew because of his dark features and long beard.) For a moment, Grandmother felt the urge to search for his dead body. But then she realized what was done with dead bodies in the area, particularly dead Jews - they were tossed in a ditch with no regard. She couldn't stomach wandering out to the ditches behind the hospital to see what the hyenas had been feasting on all week. She left the hospital a widow and never looked back.

Weeks passed. One day, the Uzbeki woman, Hadziajka, came to my family with some interesting news. General Anders' army - one of the Polish armies formed in Siberia - was nearby conducting maneuvers. His troops were heading south to take advantage of the warmer climate for their training. Grandmother turned to her female Polish soul sisters and off they went. When they found an army officer, their stories fell out of their mouths. Moved, the officer assigned an army personnel to my family and shortly thereafter, the Polish Army formed an orphanage to care for thousands of other orphaned Poles in the region.

The army took the newly formed „orphanage," which now included the Migut clan, to Karkin Batash, which, literally means The Valley of Death - the soaring desert heat turned the traveling orphanage into a death camp and hundreds of children died each week due to malaria and other diseases. After a move to Kitabu, an oasis replete with walnut trees, vineyards and the gift of crisp, mountain air, this caravan was afforded time to relax and recuperate. But the realities of the world situation, especially their own people, was hard to digest.

Approximately 75,000 Polish children in Soviet Russia required immediate help after the „amnesty" and the newly established temporary Polish Embassy in Kuybishev organized about 130 orphanages (approximately 9,000 children). The fate of these children still hung on a loosening thread. But then, several months later, the authorities began moving the refugees to Teheran, and a tent city was established on the outskirts of Persia for the Polish orphans. They set up a tent camp on the Persian beaches. It was the first taste of freedom for the Polish children.

„The weather was warm and clean waters of the sea made some kids smile for the first time in years," Uncle John writes.

The International Refugee Organization (IRO), which prepared the tent city, cared for the Polish refugees, providing them with candies and toys, which had been brought by Persians, Brits, Indians and Americans living in the area. Surprisingly immune to the violent outbreak of typhoid fever - my Aunt Jenny was the only one who'd acquired it - the Migut children outlived the other dying children around them. About 400 Polish children from Soviet Russia were buried there.

Political situations, which mounted in Persia due to the growing global threat of WW II, forced the Polish Army to move the refugees. (There had been a growing Russian

presence here.) The army and the orphanage were separated at this juncture and the orphanage was transported to Karachi, India; the Polish Army marched on to Baghdad. Later, my family learned that the Polish Army fought in Italy at Mount Casino Abby. Thousands were killed there, but they did defeat the Germans and a Polish flag flew on the top of Mount Casino. The Polish Army also fought in Tobruk, North Africa. They were victorious there, too.
And then … new developments. The International Refugee Organization and the British government finally found a safe place for these wandering Poles. Their next stop? East Africa.

Out of Africa

Around Christmas 1942, the IRO made preparations to transport Polish refugees to Tanganyika, Uganda and Kenya in East Africa. A small group of refugees would be heading to Mexico. Three ships, carrying approximately 5,000 people each, mostly orphans and people working with the orphans, embarked in the Persian Gulf and set sail for the Indian Ocean.
Grandmother dove into her new job as an official orphanage worker, joining many other Polish women in overseeing thousands of misplaced children. But even here, Grandmother was a minority. While most women had lost their children to the war, somehow, hers had survived. As for the Polish men? There weren't many on this journey. They were either dead or enlisted in the Polish Army.
As the convoy headed further south, the unpredictable terrors of war made a comeback.
One day, a German submarine, undetected by radar, broke through the convoy. It was only a matter of time before the torpedoes were launched. The deafening blast put everybody in a state of shock, especially Grandmother, who, once again, feared for her children's lives. They heard another blast. Had their ship been hit? No. But the ship behind them had.
„I was terrified to death as I watched that ship go under," Uncle John writes. „The screams of children struggling in the water, were unbearable. Desperate, drowning kids tried to hang on to the sailors, who were trying to save themselves too. Several sailors held knives in between their teeth. I wondered why they did that. Soon I saw the biggest horror in my life. In order to save themselves, the sailors knifed the kids who were trying to hang on to them. None of the other ships in the convoy came to their aid. They blew steam and went into a zig-zag pattern to avoid being hit by another torpedo."
Weeks passed without another incident. They seemed suspended in time, drifting, homeless on the ship.
After the two ships crossed the equator, they arrived in Kenya's Port of Mombassa and bid farewell to the second ship, which was destined for Mexico. In intervals, 5,000 refugees boarded trains. The Miguts' destination: Tanganyika. During the trip, the family was fascinated by the site of Mount Kilimanjaro and, eventually, Mount Meru and the town of Arusha, a thriving spot with international merchants. When the caravan finally arrived at Camp Tengeru, west of Mount Meru, another site found their attention: natives from the Swahili and Masai tribes.
Uncle John's eyes widened as he watched this native group walk alongside the dirt road. Both parties flashed each other odd looks. Many natives had never seen white men and women before. And the Miguts - as well as the others traveling with them - had never seen a black man. But the Masais seemed exotic and otherworldly to the children. The Masais' long ponytails graced the backs of their heads and their white-

painted faces held a sense of mystery. Barefoot, and some of them without any clothes on at all, the tribe carried spears in one hand and a „fimbo" - a special club made out of wood with a round head at the end - in the other. Long knives or mastheads hung from their sides. As they walked along the road they sang songs; their bodies jumping up and down. There was happiness here.

A new way of life began for the 5,000 Polish refugees in Camp Tengeru. Grandmother and five other women worked, cooked, washed (by hand) and ironed clothes for the orphans in a camp that, really, was self-sufficient, complete with outdoor toilets, outdoor water faucets and outdoor food supply grown on the farm surrounding the area. Fresh meat from cows and pigs was rationed daily. Grandmother's work here afforded her the small luxury of living just outside the camp with her children. They shared two round mud huts, one for the males, the other for the females. The huts themselves were nothing spectacular, just a bit unusual for people who'd braved below-zero temperatures in Siberia months earlier. These three-person huts were painted white, had rooftops consisting of palm tree leafs - some with banana leafs - and dirt floors. Sleeping bunks were roped to hold a sisal mattress and a mosquito net over the bed. A rectangular table usually sat in the middle of the hut. There was one food cabinet and one door and one window made from solid wood. It was very dark inside the hut, so the door and the window had to be opened - no screens to keep away the bugs, especially mosquitoes. Naphtha lamps, which emitted a horrible stench, provided evening light. Banana trees grew alongside papaya trees and beautiful flowers in the garden. Stanley and John raised pigeons, chicken and rabbits for food. John also enjoyed being an altar boy - after one year, a Catholic priest had arrived and the camp helped him build a church. Joe learned the trumpet and played at various dances. Jenny worked in the local store - she used her „expense account" to charge items for other people. My mother, who was 6 when they arrived at the camp, eventually attended school and ran around like a „gazelle." The family had a hound dog called Norciu. Life, a normal life - that's what they were experiencing.

One holiday, Stanley and John, deciding to have a real Polish Christmas, ventured outside the camp and deep into the jungles to cut several Christmas trees near Mount Meru. They had no idea Masais were in the area.

„Stanley and I managed to cut down four young trees and were heading back to home at Camp Tengeru," Uncle John writes. „We crossed two rivers and fought our way through the jungle thinking that we will have one Christmas tree at home, and sell the other three. All of the sudden, a group of Masai men jumped us. They carried long spears, their faces were painted white and there were bones through their noses. Round pieces of wood in the lower lip made their lips hang. They surrounded Stanley and I, shook their spears and screamed at us. They pointed to the Christmas trees we were carrying and Stanley and I were very scared, of course, but the Swahili language I picked up from a servant, Shauri, back in the camp, came in handy. With tears in my eyes, I offered the Masai some shiny coins. I told them that it would make a fine decoration for their wives. I knew the Masai people liked all kinds of shiny things to wear around their necks. Then, I motioned to Stanley and we gave them our shoes, which we had taken off earlier to cross the rivers. The Masai were happy with their presents. They let us go - but not before we left behind the trees we'd cut down. The Masais were cattlemen and warriors, but many of them were known to eat white people so when they let us go, my brother and I were so relieved. We never ran so fast through the jungle before."

If time raced on, the children here didn't know it. The angst of war now behind them, at least physically, the children of camp Tengeru experienced a sense of hope for eight

years. They accumulated numerous, often humorous, life experiences.
In 1950, five years after the International Red Cross began assisting people in locating family members throughout the world - Grandmother located her eldest son Ted in Tarnow, Poland, where he'd lived with his wife after being released from a German labor camp in 1945 - Camp Tengeru and 21 other Polish Camps in East Africa were closed. Canadian Catholics agreed to sponsor Polish orphans from Tengeru, thanks to organizer Father Lucjan Krolikowski. (He'd eventually pen „Stolen Childhood" in the '60s, a book chronicling the Poland-Siberia-Africa journeys.) Refugees were sent to England, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Poland and any other countries that would take them. The Miguts, having American visas thanks to Grandmother's sister in Chicago, joined two other families. They waved goodbye to Camp Tengeru and began another long journey - with pitstops in Nairobi, Italy and Germany - to the United States. Sailing the General Balloon, which crossed the Atlantic in nine stormy days, they were greeted with smiles on Ellis Island. With tears in their eyes, the family thanked God for their new country and new home. After debarkation and processing in New York, the Miguts boarded the Illinois Central Train. Destination: Chicago.
„It was very cold that winter of 1950 and we were wearing the shorts we'd had on in Africa," Uncle John writes. „It was Thanksgiving Day when we arrived in Chicago".

The Perfect Present

It was Thanksgiving Day 2003 when I began to integrate my family's experience, moving it beyond the glossy fascination I gave it in my youth. Slowly, I seemed to wrap my mind around the realization that I had been running away from the harsh realities of their story and that there was something I needed to embrace - that the past experiences of family somehow, whether we're aware of it or not, live on, through us; that my family's saga, their unexplored emotions, their frozen grief, their untouched torment, had lived on inside of me. (Haven't I spent significant portions of my life fearing that "Russians" were at the door?) I can still hear the echoes of their past; how they were among the millions of Polish children rounded up by Stalin's forces more than 60 years ago. But the future, thankfully, is quite clear: I have a responsibility to share a remarkable tale. And I will share it.
California's unpredictable December rain had taken a brief reprieve when I first opened my laptop to write about what my family had given me. „I have come to believe that the best gifts arrive unwrapped," I wrote. „No curly ribbons. No bows. No tags. No warnings …".

Greg Archer is a nationally published writer and editor of Good Times.
He can be reached at www.greg-archer.com or 415-699-0454.