



The Author Speaks

How I Found the Spirit of Christmas

Interview with Ted Gup, author of "A Secret Gift"

by Julia M. Klein, [AARP Bulletin](#), November 4, 2010

In June 2008, when Ted Gup's mother turned 80, she rewarded her son's longtime interest in family history with a musty suitcase filled with old papers. Among them were 150 letters and an equal number of canceled checks for \$5 each, all signed by "B. Virdot."

A tiny newspaper advertisement, addressed to "the white-collar man," helped unravel the mystery: On Dec. 18, 1933, in the depths of [the Great Depression](#), the pseudonymous B. Virdot had asked the townspeople of Canton, Ohio, to "familiarize me with your true circumstances." Then, he promised, "financial aid will be promptly sent" — and neither their identity nor his would be revealed.

B. Virdot was Gup's beloved grandfather, Sam Stone. And he was as good as his word.

Gup, a former investigative reporter for the Washington Post and Time, already had written two books about secrets, *The Book of Honor: Covert Lives and Classified Deaths at the CIA* (2000) and *Nation of Secrets: The Threat to Democracy and the American Way of Life* (2007). This time, though, it was personal.

In [A Secret Gift: How One Man's Kindness — and a Trove of Letters — Revealed the Hidden History of the Great Depression](#), Gup uncovers heart-rending stories of economically desperate men, women and children who were cheered one Christmas by an unexpected act of charity. The book is also Gup's exploration of his grandfather's suppressed immigrant past, which included poverty, discrimination, business failure, family rivalries and forged documents. ([Read an excerpt from A Secret Gift.](#))

On Nov. 5, in Canton, Gup, now professor and chair of the Department of Journalism at Emerson College in Boston, [hosts a reading of some of the letters](#), followed by a banquet for about 50 of the letter writers' descendants. On the book's website, Gup provides examples of the letters and photographs, and a chance to share Great Depression memories.

The AARP Bulletin talked to Gup about his project.

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Q. Your book is subtitled in part, *The Hidden History of the Great Depression*. What did you learn that differs from conventional accounts of the period?

A. This book offers something that is nearly unique in the annals of the Great Depression: It is a street-level view of an entire community, a biopsy of an entire American town taken the week of Christmas 1933 — as bleak a period financially in American history as there is. Franklin Delano Roosevelt was president, [but] the New Deal was still not much more than a glint in his eye. And so it captures that precise moment when Americans' distrust of government and their intense desire to make it on their own changed. People came to realize there were limits to what human beings could do. What you hear in these letters is the sound of pride mixed with capitulation.

Q. You write about that generation's reticence and aversion to seeking charity. Why did the letter writers open up to B. Virdot?

A. He promised anonymity. And that immunized them and allowed them to preserve their pride and their appearance of independence.

Q. What exactly motivated your grandfather's gift?

A. In part it was a way of thanking the country for taking him in, for accepting him, for allowing him to create a life here and a home. It's very hard for us today to imagine what it's like to live in a community where so many children are hungry, where half your neighbors are out of work. He was not the kind of person who could tune that out. I'm sure that it all affected him deeply because of his own impoverished childhood. He felt compelled, as a matter of conscience, to try to do something.

Q. How did your grandfather choose whom to help?

A. There's no evidence of how he triaged these letters. But what is clear is that every one of these letters came from someone who was desperate. And there was a humility and an innocence about each of the writers. Most of the letters do not ask for anything for the letter writer. They asked for something for their loved ones: They wanted to provide Christmas for their children, a winter coat for their wife, shoes for the family.

Q. Your family is Jewish. Why a Christmas gift?

A. My grandfather was born an Orthodox Jew, born speaking Yiddish, keeping kosher. When he got off the boat from Romania, in 1902, he became a not-untypical secularized American Jew. He was still proud of his faith, but he had a Christmas tree in his own home every year. [B. Virdot's gift] is also, in a strange sense, very much in keeping with the Jewish tradition that the highest form of giving is anonymous, where the donor seeks no benefit in return.

Q. Many immigrants altered their names and details of their histories to become American. What was remarkable about your grandfather's rewriting of his past?

A. There was a great deal of fabrication going on. The immigrant generation were frequently reinventing themselves. He was extraordinary, and yet not. People of that generation demonstrated such grit, such determination and such humor in the face of so many obstacles, that in many ways my book is not about my grandfather, it's about the formation of American identity. He was so intent on becoming an American that he couldn't wait to do it the right way. I think that was not at all uncommon.

Q. B. Virdot's gift of \$5 per family wasn't a huge amount of money — the equivalent, you say, of about \$85 today. What impact did it have on people's lives?

A. Things were so inexpensive then that it was enough to buy an entire family a Christmas dinner and have stocking stuffers. In a landscape that was bleak and devoid of any hopeful features, it changed that landscape for that Christmas. It was emblematic of civic engagement, of community, of neighbors. And the idea that this was someone who asked nothing for himself, that the donor could be anyone among them, that mystery also multiplied the effect of the gift.

Q. For this book, you did an astonishing 500 interviews. What were your most exciting finds?

A. There were a couple of things that were just mind-boggling. I was all done with the book. I had found all the descendants of the letter writers that I had sought — with one exception, a 14-year-old letter writer named Helen Palm. I tried so hard to find one of her descendants, and had given up. I decided one afternoon, I'm going to try once more, and eventually I finally found her daughter Janet. I was interviewing her, asking her about when her mother was born, when she married, was about to ask when she passed, when she interrupted me and said, "Would you like to talk to her?"

Q. What did you do?

A. I nearly fell off my chair. The idea that there was a living letter writer was something I had never imagined. She was 90 when I spoke with her, and the thing that was doubly remarkable is that she remembered writing the letter, she remembered using the money to buy shoes and to take her family out.

Q. How many descendants of the letter writers knew anything about the gift?

A. Very few.

Q. And how did they react to learning about it so many years later?

A. In many instances, they remember a particular Christmas getting a gift, when all the other Christmases they didn't. But they did not know that their father or their mother had reached out to B. Virdot. The people given copies of their parents' and grandparents' letters, most of them wept. It was a very emotional event.

Q. What convinced you that you needed to tell this story?

A. Part of the reason that I became increasingly convinced I should write about it in late 2008 is that America was descending into the greatest recession since the Great Depression. Everywhere there were signs of hardship. My sister lost her job, my brother-in-law lost a job, my mother's travel business suffered profoundly. No one was immune. It made me think two things: One, people started referencing the Great Depression. And having read these letters and absorbed them, I realized that this was not the Great Depression, and that I could provide some degree of perspective. But also I could provide some support that we would get through this — because we got through worse.

Q. What are some of the differences between this recession and the Great Depression?

A. One of the profound differences between then and today is that there are myriad nets to catch us, or at least to break the fall. There was no Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation when this story occurred, there was no Social Security, there was no unemployment [compensation], no Medicaid — none of the many things that actually came into being largely because of the suffering that these people experienced.

Q. What impact would you like this book to have?

A. I don't want these people to be forgotten. This is the story of Canton, Ohio, but also the story of every town in America in this period. This book may create something of a "no-whine" zone. There are many people that are hurting today. But the difficulties that many Americans face today are very different not just in degree, but in kind. People in 1933 were not fretting because their 401(k)s took a haircut — they faced a padlock on their bank and the loss of a life savings. When I started this book, I asked the descendants in their 80s or 90s if, as children, they ever went to bed hungry. I stopped asking that question early on because the response was, "I don't remember *not* going to bed hungry." We can draw strength from that knowledge and their examples. The character, self-sacrifice and the community coming together provide exemplars for today.

Julia M. Klein is a cultural reporter and critic in Philadelphia and a contributing editor at the Columbia Journalism Review.

A Secret Gift, by Ted Gup

Discussion Questions

1. Which of the letters jumped out to you?
2. What did you think of how Gup told the story of his grandfather, Sam Stone? Would the book have been as effective without that inclusion?
3. The book describes how suffering during the Depression brought some families closer together, but tore others apart with lingering bitterness. What characteristics do we need during our current economic situation to succeed as families?
4. \$5.00 brought only a temporary relief. Was it worth it?
5. Gup reveals a lot of family secrets. How do you think Sam Stone would feel about this book?
6. What are some differences between the Great Depression and our current economic downturn?
7. Were the Romanian Jews who came to America lucky?
8. What does Gup say about the experience of the Great Depression for women? Do women experience our current economic downturn any differently from men today? Do any groups?
9. What does Gup say about where people looked for help then, and now?
10. "The Depression is over for you if you have a job." Is our current economy only affecting those who are out of jobs now?
11. How hard is it for the "haves" and "have nots" to live side by side? Is it ever acceptable to turn to crime?
12. Can you imagine what letter Francie from "A Tree Grows in Brooklyn" might have written to B. Virdot? or Frank in "Angela's Ashes"?
13. Is it shameful to accept charity? Government help?
14. How can we help others today?

Book World: Ted Gup's 'A Secret Gift' draws from Depression to enlighten us now

By Robert S. McElvaine

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One day in June 2008, Ted Gup's mother gave him an old suitcase that contained a large envelope on which his grandfather had written, "PERTAINING TO XMAS GIFT DISTRIBUTION." Inside were 150 letters written by residents of Canton, Ohio, in December 1933 to someone named "B. Virdot," responding to his offer to give \$10 each to 75 people who wrote to him describing their need. Gup soon realized that this mysterious B. Virdot was, in fact, his grandfather Sam Stone, and he began to investigate the story behind the offer.

In exploring a mystery of his own family, Gup, a former reporter for The Washington Post, simultaneously explores America's past, taking us into the depths of an era that was both similar to and very different from where we are today. He captures one of the main differences when he pointedly notes that it was "a time when consumption meant TB, not a shopping spree. . . . Their creed was self-discipline, not self-indulgence."

"Reading the letters put things in perspective," the author says, and reading his book should do the same for others. "They reminded me of the difference between discomfort and misery, between the complaints of consumers forced to rein in their spending and the keening of parents whose children went hungry night after night."

As I read this book, it brought back not only the hard times of eight decades ago, about which I have written extensively, but also my own experience. Gup's reaction when reading the letters sent to his grandfather duplicated mine when I began reading letters written to Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt that became my first book, "Down and Out in the Great Depression: Letters from the 'Forgotten Man.'" Gup says the Depression had had no "immediacy" for him, but the letters made it come alive by providing an "unvarnished and compelling" account of the era.

He writes that he felt as if he were "eavesdropping on others' prayers." The letters in "A Secret Gift" were written in one city at one moment during the Depression and largely by one class of people, yet the conditions they portray were similar across the country. "I worked all my life and would work at any honest work if I could get it," one letter writer said, speaking for much of the nation. Another pointed out that those who were "lucky enough to have no worry where the next meal is coming from don't realize how it is to be like we are."

While there are significant parallels between the 1930s and today, the differences are striking. The Great Depression tended to unite the United States; the so-called Great Recession has tended to divide us. Americans during the Depression were much more familiar with hardship, more reticent about their personal problems, less greedy and more compassionate than we are today. And, terrible as conditions

are now for many of our citizens, they were far worse in 1933. This book reminds us that the main reason people are not as bad off in the wake of the 2008 collapse as they were after that of 1929 is precisely because of government intervention in the economy that Republicans have just won an election by deriding.

Gup points out that his grandfather's experiences had "chastened him to remember that the line between the down-and-out and himself was not drawn in indelible ink." That is a realization that all too many of us no longer have. Gup describes his grandfather as "a onetime socialist-turned-capitalist" who had "seen the faults in both and was a true believer in neither." Sam Stone had a checkered past, which he frequently altered to suit his current needs. In 1933, he owned a chain of clothing stores and thought he was in a position to assist others who had fallen on hard times, as he had in the past.

"Enough," Gup rightly notes, "was a byword of the Depression." It is a word that nearly vanished from the American lexicon in recent decades, as the national anthem could appropriately have been changed to "I Can't Get No Satisfaction." "A Secret Gift" speaks to us eloquently of how similar are the consequences of economic folly in both times and how sobering are the differences between us as people today from what we were eight decades ago.

McElvaine teaches history at Millsaps College. His most recent book is a 25th anniversary edition of "The Great Depression: America, 1929-1941."

A SECRET GIFT

How One Man's Kindness - and a Trove of Letters - Revealed the Hidden History of the Great Depression

By Ted Gup

Source: http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/12/24/AR2010122402744_pf.html

About the Author

<http://www.asecretgiftbook.com/about-the-author/>

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Since 2009, he has been professor and chair of the journalism department at Emerson College in Boston. From 1999–2009 he was the Shirley Wormser Professor of Journalism at Case Western Reserve University. Gup has also taught at Georgetown, Johns Hopkins and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing. He has been an invited speaker at numerous venues including Harvard, Columbia, Williams, Duke, Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, The Asia Foundation, The National Archives, The FDR Presidential Library, The European Fulbright Commission, The United Nations International School, The Association of Former Intelligence Officers, the Defense Intelligence Agency, the Center for Public Integrity, the Smithsonian, etc.

He has also been a frequent guest on news programs including those of ABC, NBC, CBS, CNN, PBS and NPR. He has written for a wide range of publications, including Smithsonian, National Geographic, The New York Times, Boston Globe, Village Voice, Sports Illustrated, Slate, GQ, Mother Jones, Audubon, Columbia Journalism Review, NPR, the Chronicle of Higher Education, Far Eastern Economic Review, and Newsweek. He has been a Pulitzer finalist in national reporting, and recipient of numerous awards, including the George Polk Award, the Worth Bingham Prize, the Gerald Loeb Award, the National Conservation Achievement Award and the Book-of-the-Year Award from Investigative Reporters and Editors (for *The Book of Honor*). He has been a grantee of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, a Fellow of the Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics & Public Policy at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, a Thomas J. Watson Fellow, a Guggenheim Fellow, and a Fulbright Scholar (to China.) Gup studied classics as an undergraduate at Brandeis and Trinity College, Dublin, and law at Case Western Reserve University. He was admitted to the DC bar. His interests include guitar, fly-fishing, canoeing and billiards.

He and his wife, Peggy, live in Boston, Massachusetts and Bucksport, Maine. They have two sons, David and Matthew.

Canton, Ohio

Background:

Canton is the county seat of Stark County in northeastern Ohio, approximately 24 miles (39 km) south of Akron and 60 miles (97 km) south of Cleveland.

The City of Canton is the largest incorporated area in the Canton-Massillon Metropolitan Statistical Area. As of the 2010 census, the Canton-Massillon metropolitan area, which includes all of Stark and Carroll counties, had a population of 404,422.

Founded in 1805 on the West and Middle Branches of the Nimishillen Creek, Canton became a manufacturing center because of its numerous railroad lines. After the decline of heavy manufacturing, the city's industry diversified into service economy, including retailing, education, finance, and healthcare.

According to the 2010 census, Canton's population declined 9.7%, down to 73,007 residents. Despite this decline, the 2010 figure actually had moved Canton up from 9th to 8th place among Ohio cities, as nearby Youngstown in neighboring Mahoning County, once considerably more populous than Canton, had suffered a larger decline.

Canton is home to the Pro Football Hall of Fame, the McKinley National Memorial, the William McKinley Presidential Library and Museum, the First Ladies National Historic Site, and is the terminus of the Cuyahoga Valley Scenic Railroad.

History:

Canton was founded in 1805. Cantonrep.com quotes Kim Kenney, the curator of the William McKinley Presidential Library & Museum, whose information came from E.T. Heald's series, *The Stark County Story*, as saying that Canton was incorporated as a village in 1822, and then as a city in 1838.

Bezaleel Wells, the surveyor who divided the land of the town, named it after Canton (a traditional name for Guangzhou), China. The name was a memorial to a trader named John O'Donnell, whom Wells admired. O'Donnell had named his Maryland plantation after the Chinese city, as he had been the first person to transport goods from there to Baltimore.

Canton was the adopted home of President William McKinley. Born in Niles, McKinley first practiced law in Canton around 1867, and was prosecuting attorney of Stark County from 1869 to 1871. The city was his home during his successful campaign for Ohio governor, the site of his front-porch presidential campaign of 1896 and the campaign of 1900. Canton is now the site of the William McKinley Presidential Library and Museum and the McKinley National Memorial, dedicated in 1907.