

“The Puzzle King” by Betsy Carter
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In 1892, Simon Phelps’ Lithuanian mother lovingly packed his belongings and put him on a ship bound for New York. Simon not only made the journey alone, he had no family to receive him in America. There was no one to guide him, help him or provide him food or a warm bed to sleep in. At nine years old, he was completely alone in a strange new country.

From the minute Simon set foot in America, he was driven to make enough money to bring his family over. Everything he did, from finding a boarding house to take him in and enrolling in school to selling newspapers on a corner was another step toward that dream.

Simon’s mother’s parting gift was a drawing pad and a new box of crayons. Simon combated his homesickness by drawing. He drew his home and family, his new surroundings and friends. His art became a source of income as well as a means of escape.

A chance encounter at a dance brought the lovely Flora Grossman into Simon’s life. Like Simon, Flora’s mother had sent her to America to find a better life. Flora was intrigued by the serious young ad man. Simon was captivated by Flora’s beauty and sunny disposition.

Flora and Simon married and settled in Yonkers. Despite his wonderful marriage and growing fortune, Simon was haunted by the family he’d left behind in Lithuania. Sadly, his attempts to find out what happened to any of them were fruitless year after year.

Simon and Flora weathered the lean years of the Great Depression better than some, thanks to smart investments and the success of Phelps and Adler, Simon’s advertising agency. When a toothbrush manufacturer came to Simon seeking a way to boost his sales, Simon came up with a method for mass-producing jigsaw puzzles on cardboard, to be given away with the purchase of a toothbrush.

Simon’s puzzles were a hit. Unlike the traditional handmade wooden puzzles, the cardboard versions could be manufactured cheaply and sold for pennies. Orders poured in from around the country, and the puzzles flew off the shelves.

The news coming from Flora’s family in Germany was increasingly disturbing. The Nazi party was on the rise, and life for German Jews was becoming harder. Simon became obsessed with the plight of the Jews and the idea of getting Flora’s entire family out of Germany while there was still time.

Betsy Carter has crafted a captivating, moving novel inspired by her own family’s stories, handed down through parents and grandparents. In 1936, after her husband’s death, Carter’s Great-Aunt Flora traveled back to her homeland to sign affidavits for over one hundred of her relatives, securing their Visas and removing them from harm’s way as the Nazi’s iron fist closed on the Jews.

The Puzzle King is a beautifully written snapshot of the immigrant experience in the early twentieth century. The sense of loss and isolation is palpable on each page, but it is ultimately a story of hope.

