



# Three Generations of CHRISTMAS

*A father, son, and grandson share tender Christmas experiences far from home and years apart.*

## Christmas on the Rhine

By Leslie Thomas Foy

It was the night before Christmas in Germany. Scarcely a month before, the armistice that terminated the first World War had been signed. As part of a U.S. Army unit assigned to keep watch on the Rhine river, I was stationed a little distance from the city of Koblenz.

The night was cool and crisp. Snow fell, seemingly sent to put the finishing touch on the first Christmas since the close of a brutal war that for four years had kept the world in turmoil.

After being separated for many years from those who had gone to serve their fatherlands, family members all over Europe were being reunited: sweethearts, mothers, fathers, sons, brothers, sisters, and daughters were once more to feast together. It was a time of great rejoicing.

But for me, a soldier stranded on the Rhine far away from loved ones, it was not so. Feeling dejected, I pulled my khaki overcoat about my throat and strode along a busy city street. My spirits lifted as I beheld the hurry and scurry of shoppers as they filed in and out of tiny shops lining the crooked avenues. I understood German, and every now and then I paused to listen

to conversations as shoppers and friends wished one another a Merry Christmas.

I leaned up against a shop front. Two German brothers who appeared to be around ages six and eight had their noses pressed tightly against a frosty window. There were clusters of trinkets, toys, and gingerbread cakes. The boys' restless feet tapped the frozen ground and their hands beat a cadence on their hips to warm themselves.

"Well! After all," said the older of the two to the younger, "it's all right to wish for Santa Claus to bring us some of those things, even though Mama says that he cannot come to our house this year. We're awfully poor, you know."

I leaned closer so as to not miss a single word. "I wish I had that and that," replied the younger boy. "I wish I had a gingerbread man, too."

*Two German brothers pressed their noses against a frosty window. One said, "I wish I had a gingerbread man."*



At this point, I engaged the little strangers in conversation and learned that their father had just returned from serving in the German army as a soldier at the German front. His pay had stopped, his job was gone, and there was no money in the house for presents. Their mother had made that clear so her four little children (the two boys and their two little sisters) would not be disappointed to awaken on Christmas morning and find that Santa Claus had passed them by.

Soon, they had to hurry home. It was quite a long way, so I offered to

accompany them. When we arrived, they pointed out their apartment, which was four flights up in an apartment complex so large it enclosed a solid block.

I made a resolution: Santa Claus would come to their home that year. With the location of the house and the number and ages of the children fixed firmly in my mind, I retraced my steps to the tiny shop where the two nose prints were still visible upon the glass.

The shopkeeper carefully wrapped the trinkets and the gingerbread men into four tiny bundles, which he folded into one larger bundle. After I paid him, he smiled at me as I opened the door and called out *gute Nacht!* (Good Night!)

Back at military quarters, I confided my secret to a friend, who agreed to accompany me to the family's home. That

night, two khaki-clad soldiers greeted a former enemy in his home. The children's mother wept tears of joy when she opened the package. In the adjoining room, the four children slumbered in their bed, dreaming of gingerbread men and trinkets in shop windows, expecting to awaken to empty stockings. Meanwhile, three soldiers, former enemies, kindled a friendship.

At midnight, two Yankee soldiers sauntered homeward, their hearts full of Christmas cheer. The bells in the great cathedral pealed forth, "Peace on earth and good will to men." In my heart echoed the words of the Master: "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me" (Matthew 25:40). I knew then it was truly greater to give than to receive.

## The Christmas Man

By Leslie Tuttle Foy

As missionaries in Germany a few years after World War II, my companion and I sat on the edge of our beds one December evening opening Christmas cards sent by family and friends from home. In each we found a few dollars. Over and over in our minds, we thought of things that we would like to buy for ourselves with our gift money.

We used the cards to decorate the small Christmas tree we had purchased. Reading the cards had made us feel homesick; as Christmas neared, it seemed that everyone we spoke to turned us away, reminding us that Christmas was a family time, so we were not to bother them.

My companion sensed my discouragement. He tried to lift my spirits by asking me which Christmas had been my most memorable. I shared with him the account my father had written of when he and a friend, while stationed in Germany after World War I, had provided a surprise Christmas to four German children.

My companion and I thought that in like manner we might be able to use the

money we had received in our Christmas cards to provide a surprise Christmas to a poor family in our branch with three small children. Jobs were scarce and transportation expensive, and the family had been forced to get along on scant government welfare. They lived in a run-down cabin in the woods.

In some parts of Germany, the Christmas Man (*der Weihnachtsmann*), tall and slender, delivers the gifts on Christmas Eve. My companion was tall and slender, so we rented clothing to make him look like the Christmas Man.

We used the gift money we had received from our families and friends to buy toys, candy, clothing, and oranges (a hard-to-get treat in Germany) for the family.

We wore several layers of clothing to keep us warm on that cold Christmas Eve. The snow was deep, and we had to push our bikes through the snow in order to reach the family in the woods. My companion knocked on the door of the dark house. When the door slowly opened, my companion saw a room nearly bare of furniture. The family shared a mattress on the floor because there was no bed, and it helped them stay warm. Instantly the family was

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awake as they eagerly greeted the Christmas Man and received his gifts.

As we walked home, the only sound was the crunching made by our feet in the snow, each of us deep in thought. The surprise, gratitude, and love we felt from the family were well worth anything we had given up, and we realized that by forgetting ourselves and loving others, we had lost our homesickness and found the true love of God.

As we entered our room, our eyes fell on our little Christmas tree with its Christmas card ornaments. The exchange between the angel and Nephi came into my mind: “Knowest thou the meaning of the tree which thy father saw? And I answered him saying: Yea, it is the love of God, which sheddeth itself abroad in the hearts of the children of men; wherefore, it is most desirable above all things” (1 Nephi 11:21–22).

## A String and a Tuna Fish Can

By Jeffrey W. Foy

As my first Christmas as a missionary in Ecuador approached, I was not sure what to expect. A few weeks earlier I had been transferred to what was up to that point the poorest area to which I had been assigned. Without even a single paved road, the frequent passing of buses would keep more dust and dirt in the air than what was on the ground, making it next to impossible to see the relatively few Christmas lights that had been hung.

Upon my arrival at my new area, I was greeted with a letter from home. It included a story from my father about how he and his missionary companion, while serving in a poor post-war section of Germany, had bought a bag of candy and walked the streets on Christmas morning passing it out to children. He described the children’s faces as he gave them what was probably one of the few gifts the children had received. For some, it was the first piece of candy they had ever had.

After I shared the story with my companion, we decided to set out and do the same. As we walked the streets and passed out candy, the children graciously accepted our gifts and ran to show their parents, whose thanks we felt as they nodded their approval. We found, as had my father and grandfather,

that the greatest joy at Christmas comes from serving others in whatever manner we can.

We approached a happy six-year-old boy playing in the dirt. To our amazement, he declined the piece of candy we offered him. When we asked him why, he told us he had already been given the best gift ever. We were curious and asked him to tell us what it was. He looked at us impatiently and said, “Can’t you see?” Our eyes searched for a shiny toy or new clothes—anything that seemed worthy of declining our piece of candy. But we saw nothing. We asked him again to tell us about his great gift.

He stopped playing, looked up at us, and with the biggest smile I have ever seen, showed us a piece of string. He told us how much he loved his parents for teaching him to be good enough for Santa Claus to leave him the string. He told us his father had helped him put a hole in an empty

tuna fish can so the boy could tie it to his string, turning it into a “dump truck” that he had used all morning to haul rocks across the neighborhood.

“Thanks for the candy,” he said, “but I have too much work to do. I have to haul these rocks before it gets too dark to see.”

On Christmases since that day, I have seen children show off the gifts they have received for Christmas. But I have yet to see evidence of happiness that compares to that of the boy whose joy lay in a simple piece of string tied to a tuna fish can, a gift from his father, who served him as best he could. ■

*A boy and his dad made a “dump truck” from a string and empty can. The excited boy hauled rocks all day.*

