



*Lydia was thrilled  
at our invitation.  
Here was a chance  
to do something she  
could never have  
done on her own.*

# THE GIFT OF Giving

By Boyd C. Rich

It was the Christmas season of 1950 in Linz, Austria. During the years immediately following World War II, this city on the Danube housed large numbers of refugees from various countries, many of them huddled in ramshackle abandoned army barracks. There they lived in stark poverty as Europe began to slowly rebuild after the war's devastation.

My missionary companion and I had come to love and feel compassion for these refugees, many of whom lived in a large camp about a mile from our apartment. We visited them often and were received with friendship and respect.

One especially dear lady was a member of the Church. Lydia Haslinger was a native German who lived in a small room in one of the oldest barracks. Lydia survived on meager earnings from sweeping up the fine sawdust in a camp woodworking shop. She had a severe bronchial cough that was aggravated by the dusty work environment. It didn't help that she had only an old, brown, threadbare sweater to keep out the damp cold of the Austrian winter.

But Lydia didn't complain or show discouragement. On the contrary, she did her best to bring a bit of happiness to her many destitute refugee friends with her ready smile and hearty laugh. Having had some nursing experience, she would try to help those who were suffering from illness. Since she had no money, it was all she could offer.

In my letters to my family back in Star Valley, Wyoming, USA, I had written often of these struggling refugees. Nowadays, Church policy is to help those in need by contributing through the Church's organized welfare and humanitarian efforts, not through missionaries and their families. But those were different times. My parents spread the word among the members of their ward, who responded generously. It was an astonished postal delivery man in

Linz who, over several days, delivered 22 large boxes to our apartment. They were filled with warm socks, coats, shoes, and other clothing for all ages.

Three days before Christmas we found Lydia at home, coughing and shivering, but happy to see us as always. "Sister Haslinger," we said, "we have a problem. Could you help us out?" Puzzled, she assured us that she was willing. "We have many boxes of clothing for the people here in the camp, but we don't know the people well enough to determine the needs of the families. Would you take charge of distributing these things to your neighbors and friends for Christmas?"

Lydia was thrilled. She set about organizing the gifts for the various families and delivered them on Christmas Eve. When we visited her the next day she was bubbling with happiness. "Never in my life have I been so happy!" she exclaimed. The recipients had wept with joy and thanked Lydia profusely. She in turn had quickly denied personal responsibility, saying the gifts had come from America. We were impressed, but not surprised, to note that Lydia had kept not one thread of that clothing for herself.

The next morning, my companion and I went to a downtown department store. Then we were off to see Lydia again. When she opened our package and held up the heavy, warm winter coat we had bought for her, she wept with gratitude.

As for us, we were happy that we could do something for Lydia that she couldn't do for herself. But we also knew that she had already received a far greater gift. She lived by the Savior's teaching that "inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me" (Matthew 25:40). Lydia had been able to feel the real joy of Christmas by giving unselfishly to others. For her, giving had been the greatest gift of all. ■