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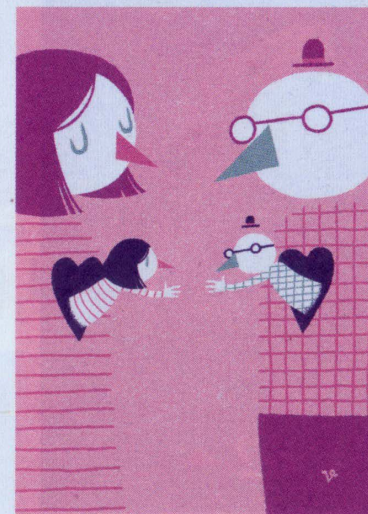
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A Desperate Time

Gertrude Larson was 22 when she was forced to dodge the bombs dropping out of the sky over Vienna and watch on as the Austrian city was reduced to rubble, chaos and despair

THE AIR-RAID SIRENS CAME with a calculated regularity, sounding every morning at about 9am, bringing all activity in Vienna to a halt. We would rush to the shelter as the Allied bombs above us dropped indiscriminately.

Emerging some two hours later when the all clear was given, we never knew what we would find. Was our house still standing? Would it be our turn next? Life had become an uncertain day-to-day existence and a feeling of impending doom hung over the city. The air-raids were becoming more sustained and on September 10, 1944, we lost our home and grandmother, too.

Vienna was coming to a standstill: trams stopped running and were left abandoned on their tracks; buildings were reduced to rubble; shops were ransacked by people desperate for food.

A dairy warehouse had been damaged in one attack and, as it was being demolished, people jostled to get closer to grab items such as butter that might have fallen in a crevice. My mother and I managed to come home with a few eggs before they were crushed in the pandemonium.

The customs warehouse in the Third District was badly damaged and people were walking in freely and helping themselves to whatever they could find, coming out with Persian rugs and cowhides over their shoulders. It was a strange sight and there was nobody to stop them. All law and order had broken down. To get home we had to duck in and out

of doorways, as planes directed their guns into the streets below.

When we returned to our apartment building, we had to take refuge in the cellar. Above us we could hear the fighting. The pounding was relentless, day and night without let up. Then the shelling finally stopped and I dared to leave the

cellar and step outside – all around me was utter devastation. The houses on the other side of our street and further along were piles of rubble and people were stumbling about, dishevelled and bewildered.

I picked my way through the rubble

Gertrude Larson survived the war and, in 1950, migrated to Australia to find a better life for her son. She became an Australian citizen and now lives in Mandurah, Western Australia.

Buildings were reduced to rubble and shops were ransacked by people desperate for food

Soup for the Soul

Goodness and sharing can nourish us to the bone

BY LIZ LONG

Liz Long is a proud grandmother who has recently moved to Queensland. She is interested in film and literature.

OVER THE YEARS, I'VE BEEN GUILTY of hastily shutting the front door to religious groups when they came knocking with the intention of 'saving my soul'. But earlier this year, around Easter time, a dear friend of mine had an experience that changed my mind and perception towards these 'intruders'.

Linda, who recently moved to a new neighbourhood, had been housebound all week suffering from a severe case of flu when, early one morning, there was the dreaded knock on her front door. Peering out the window, she saw two young ladies demurely holding leaflets and a book. She knew of a large religious establishment nearby and assumed a message was



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about to be gently delivered. "This is the last thing I need today," she muttered to herself and hesitantly opened the door.

Coughing, she poked her head out and crankily informed them that she wasn't the slightest bit interested in any religion whatsoever.

Furthermore, she added, she was feeling quite unwell and abruptly shut the door. The ladies politely turned and left in silence.

A few hours later, another knock.

Linda glanced out the window and to her surprise, there at her door were the same two ladies, back again. Really annoyed this time, she opened the door ready to give them a piece of her mind. Before she could speak, with concerned looks on their faces, these women handed Linda what looked to be a dish and said, "We're so sorry we disturbed you earlier. We thought you may like this homemade chicken soup. Hopefully it might make you feel a little better."

Linda was taken aback by this lovely gesture. Being new to the area, she didn't know many neighbours or people who could assist her with shopping or errands so the gesture was all the more appreciated. She could only smile sheepishly and sincerely thanked them. With that, the ladies left.

After she related this story to me, I thought about how very touching this deed really was. Especially in today's world where sadly, kindness and thoughtfulness seem so rare. I also realised that thinking about others and showing kindness is the real essence of religion.

P.S. The chicken soup worked! Linda felt much better the following day.

Share your story about a small act of kindness that made a huge impact. Turn to page 8 for details on how to contribute and earn cash.