

Christmas 1954

As told by Lyman Carpenter

I believe it was Christmas 1954, my first Christmas at Camp Darby. I didn't speak much Italian yet. The base sponsored an orphanage somewhere in Livorno, I think. We bought them a washer and dryer for Christmas. This was the typical American attitude of getting something big and expensive-something everyone wants, needs, right? WRONG.

Evidently no one consulted with the orphanage. We came to find out they did not have much of any water pressure or gas or electric connection, some major problem that made the gift unusable. So the orphanage told them what they REALLY wanted, and we got it: Stainless steel plates and cups for every child!

The children were brought to the school gym or some large room. We went there and met them and mingled and then ate a nice meal. Presents were given to every child and they played with them right away. Of course, they loved the presents as they had nothing. I'm sure the orphanage relies on meager donations or our help to do the best it can.



It was tough economic times then in Italy. They had rebuilt the center of Livorno (Piazza Grande). If you walked one block, there would be bombed out buildings still standing. I took an Italian friend that worked at the shop to the movies. Told him I would pay an extra 100 lira for a better seat. He said most Italians would argue all day if they had to pay an extra 100 lira. At that time 100 lira was worth about .16 cents U.S. dollars!

The children were EXTREMELY hungry emotionally! I was 20 years old and had never been exposed to this kind of deprivation, and it was a very touching and emotional scene. The children walked around trying to attach themselves to anyone. I soon learned not to establish much eye contact or the child would follow you around.

Many of them were obviously mixed racial, probably taken to the orphanage by Italian prostitutes or other women who had gotten pregnant. Later the children were taken back to the orphanage. It was the most memorable Christmas I have ever spent. I can still see the faces of those poor, hungry children.