

DEAR FELLOW ROTARIANS,

When the Canadian army liberated the Netherlands in 1945, they found the country on the brink of starvation. Seeing the suffering of so many, and especially moved by the faces of the children, four Canadian privates stationed near Apeldoorn that year decided to make that Christmas special for as many Dutch children as they could.

Together, they made the rounds among their fellow soldiers, collecting chocolate bars and chewing gum, candy and comic books. In their spare moments, they built toy trucks out of wood and wire, sawed scrap lumber for building blocks; one, risking the military police, sold his cigarette ration on the black market, using the money to buy rag dolls. Each thought longingly of his own family at home; each channeled his energies instead toward the children whose Christmas they knew they could brighten.

By 1 December, four sacks of gifts lay ready; the soldiers eagerly looked forward to the 25th. But two days later, they learned the date they were to depart for Canada: 6 December, long before Christmas. With mixed emotions, the soldiers decided that the best plan simply would be to take their sacks over to the local orphanage and leave them there to await Christmas.

The night before they were to leave the Netherlands, the four set off for the orphanage, one of them in a makeshift white beard and red cap. On their way, they were surprised to hear church bells ringing and see houses lit brightly, with Christmas still some weeks away. As they approached the orphanage, boots crunching in the snow, they saw through the windows that the children, two dozen girls and boys, were gathered at their evening meal. Only a few months after the war's end, food was still scarce; the meal was small, and the children's faces pale and thin.

"Santa Claus" raised the knocker on the door and knocked three times, hard. As if by magic, the chatter of young voices inside fell silent; a priest opened the door. His polite expression gave way to one of shock, as the children behind him erupted into cheers, rushing forward and swarming the private who had dressed for Christmas three weeks early – but exactly on time. For in the Netherlands, *Sinterklaas* comes on St. Nicholas Eve: 5 December.

For an hour, joyful chaos reigned as packages were opened and exclaimed over, sweets were tasted, dolls caressed. The last wooden truck, the last bar of chocolate, went into the hands of a little boy who had been waiting patiently all the while. After thanking the men, he turned to the priest and said something to him in Dutch, his face alight with happiness. The priest smiled and nodded. "What did he say?" one of the soldiers asked.

The priest looked at them with eyes full of tears. "He said, 'We told you he would come.'"

By sending joy out into the world, we do not sacrifice it for ourselves – we only multiply it. As we enter this season of giving, let us multiply the gifts we have been given by sharing them with others. Through acts of caring, kindness, and generosity, in our clubs and through our Foundation, we become and remain a gift to the world.



ON THE WEB

Speeches and news
from RI President
K.R. Ravindran at
www.rotary.org
/office-president

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "K.R. Ravindran". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal line extending from the end of the name.

K.R. RAVINDRAN
President, Rotary International

