

During World War II, governments used an old trick to get people fired up about the conflict, and that was to get people to see their enemy in a vicious light. And while even though I think it can be argued war was tragically necessary to fight facism as it was really the only means to combat the evil actions on the part of the German and Japanese governments at the time, sadly one of the effects was that people became both terrorized and filled with hate at people who might be on the other side. They were seen as either less than human or like an animal in some cases; and most certainly they were often not seen as a fellow human being.

But of course that is a generalization. For while indeed there was hate, there was also compassion. And this is because that while inside all of us is the capacity to hate, far greater is the capacity to love and live out the commandment Jesus gives us in our Gospel, namely to love one another as I have loved you. And when we live this commandment out it has such amazing power to change lives.

Renie Szillak Burghardt, a woman who grew up in Hungary during the war, remembers how one soldier from the Soviet Union did just this for her.

As part of the Axis powers, and then occupied by Germany when the Hungarian government tried to make peace with the US and Britain and then occupied by the Soviet Union as the war waned, Hungry suffered greatly as World War II, and the atrocities of Soviet soldiers there and in Germany are well documented. Renie had reason to be terrified.

She recalls that the first time she saw the enemy, he was pointing a machine gun at her family. It was early spring of 1945, and her grandparents and her had just emerged from a bunker, where they had spent a terror-filled night.

She was nine years old and the war was playing havoc with their lives. Her grandparents, who were raising her, along with Renie, had been on the road in their horse-drawn wagon for many months, searching for safety. They had left behind the village of their birth in the Bacska region because Communists, who would later rule Hungry during the Cold War, were closing in on the region.

By day they moved swiftly, ready to jump out and take cover in a ditch if warplanes approached. By night, they camped with other refugees along the roadside. Renie usually laid bundled up in her featherbed in the back of the wagon, cradling her cat. War was almost all she had known during the nine years of her life.

After Christmas of 1944, when they were almost killed in a city bombing, her grandfather decided that a rural area would be safer, so the family moved and settled in a small house that had an old cemetery as it's neighbor. Here her grandfather, with the help of some neighbors, built a bunker in a flat area behind the house. And on that early spring day in 1945, they spent the entire night in the bunker. Warplanes buzzed, tanks thundered, bombs exploded over their heads all night, but finally at dawn, everything grew deathly still.

Her grandfather decided it would be safe to go back to their house. Cautiously they crept out into the light of early dawn and headed toward the house. The brush crackled under their feet as they walked past the cemetery. The markers looked lonely, separated by tall, dry weeds. Renie shivered, holding on to her orange tabby cat tightly. He had spent the night in the bunker with them. Without warning there was a rustle in the bushes just ahead. Two men jumped out and pointed machine guns right at them.

“Stol!” One of the men shouted. Since they were from an area where both Serbian and Hungarian was spoken, they knew the word meant “Stop!”

“Russians!” Her grandfather whispered. “Stand very still and keep quiet.” But Renie was already running after her cat. He had leaped out of her arms when the soldier shouted, so she darted between the soldiers and scooped him up.

The younger of the two soldiers, tall and dark-haired approached her. She cringed, holding the cat against her chest. The soldier reached out and petted her cat. And he spoke to her. “I have a little girl about your age back in Russia, and she has a cat just like this one,” he said, gently tugging one of her blond braids. “And she has long braids, too, just like you.”

Renie looked up into a pair of kind brown eyes and her fear began to wane. Her grandparents sighed with relief. Both soldiers came back to the house with them and shared in their meager breakfast. They found out that the Soviet occupation of Hungary was in progress. Many atrocities occurred in their area, as well as throughout the country in the following months, but because the young soldier took a liking to her and her family, they were spared.

He came to visit often, bringing with him little treats and always talking longingly of his own little girl. Renie loved these visits, but she was terrified of the Russians in general. Then one day, almost a year later, he had some sad news. “I’ve been transferred to another area, malka, little one, so I won’t be able to come and visit anymore. But I have a gift for you,” he said, taking something out of his pocket. It was a necklace with a beautiful turquoise Russian Orthodox cross on it. He placed it around her neck.

“You wear this at all times, malka, he said.” God will protect you from harm.” She hugged him tight and then watched him drive away with tears welling in her eyes.

World War II was over, but for the people of Hungary, a life of bondage was at hand. Many men, like her grandfather, who had been involved in politics or deemed undesirable, were being rounded up by the secret police, never to be seen again. Not long after the end of the war, the dreaded knock on the door came. The police had come to take her grandfather away. Fortunately, her grandfather managed to flee and went into hiding. Then it was just Renie and her grandma, trying to survive as best as they could. Fear became their constant companion, and prayer their solace. Sometimes

Renie would finger the cross the soldier had given her and wonder where he was. Was he back home with his own daughter? Did he even remember her?

Time passed in a haze of anxiety and depression. Then in the fall of 1947, a man came to get them in the middle of the night. He said he would take them to the Austrian border, and they would be reunited with her grandfather. They traveled all night to a place where the ethnic Germans of Hungary were being loaded into transport trucks and deported from Hungary. The man gave them counterfeit papers so they could cross the border to freedom. When they arrived at dawn, a weary-looking man with a thick, scraggly beard and a knit cap pulled low over his forehead was waiting for them.

“Grandpa!” Renie cried out, rushing into his arms. It was so wonderful to see him again. Then they walked toward the transport truck loaded with dozens of people and got on, fake papers in hand. She knew if they were found out, it would mean her grandpa would get hauled off to prison and might even be executed. She glanced toward the Russian soldiers who were coming closer to inspect the papers. Fear gripped her heart. Then she looked up as a guard boarded her truck. She caught her breath.

“Grandpa!” She whispered. “Look, it’s my soldier, Ivan! He’s checking this truck. She wanted to leap up and run to him, but her grandfather told her they had to be quiet.

“Maybe he won’t recognize us,” he whispered, pulling the knit hat farther down his forehead. He seemed afraid of Ivan. Then the Russian stood before them. Her grandfather handed over their papers to them without looking up. She leaned closer to her grandfather and put her hand protectively on his shoulder, peering cautiously at Ivan, hoping to see the familiar kind sparkle in his eyes. But he was intent upon the papers, his expression grave. She didn’t dare to breathe. Finally, he handed the papers back to her grandpa.

“Everything is in order in this vehicle,” he said. Then winking at her, he walked away and got down. The next instant the truck began to move on. She looked over her shoulder and caught his eye.

“Thank you,” she mouthed, holding up the cross hanging around her neck. He nodded discretely, then quickly turned and walked away. And as they crossed the border to freedom, they all sighed with relief. For although they had suffered much sadness during the war, one blessing will always stay with her the rest of her life: the memory of a kind soldier who turned her fear into faith, and showed her the compassion that can be found anywhere, even in the eyes of an enemy.

Loving others is perhaps one of the most overlooked aspects of our faith. But it’s not a suggestion, rather it’s a commandment. It was love that triumphed over darkness and sin on Good Friday, and through love’s power, time and time again so many good things have happened, as Renie’s story illustrates. What then is the Christian to do to make this a way of life?

I think for starters, we have to open up our eyes and remember that God shows no partiality. Peter had a challenging vision of a sheet with animals in Acts chapter 10, a few verses from where our reading picks up. In it, he hears a voice telling him to eat of both the clean and unclean animals; he declines and the command is repeated twice with the voice saying what God has made clean, you can not call uncommon. The point is that God is challenging Peter to expand his narrow vision that the Gospel was for only those who embraced Judaism. Peter meets a gentile in our first reading, Cornelius, and he ministers to him. A few verses later that gentile will be baptized. This might not have happened though had Peter not grown, just as the peace that came via a Soviet soldier might not have happened to Renie had that soldier not grown too in his vision of seeing the people not as an enemy to be looted or ransacked, but as human beings. Sometimes we might not want to admit it or see it, but there can be a fear of others that can manifest itself when we look at people of a particular culture, race, religion or nationality as inferior to us, or we look down upon them. While we can't control how we feel, we can control what we do with it and try to grow from that by seeing the good in others, praying for them, and praying to overcome any animosity we may have. It does not mean that one cannot be critical of aspects of a religion or culture, but it does mean a starting point should be the words of our second reading: let us love one another, because love is of God.

Secondly, I think sometimes we can lose sight too of the people around us and how we treat them. One of the most common things we can do as humans is to gossip about others. When we do this, sometimes we can fall into pride too, because we place ourselves above others or fancy ourselves to be better than them. Now we all have to vent sometimes when our families, our coworkers or our bosses drive us crazy. But sometimes that can cross over into constant negativity. We have to remember that words mean things, and a person's reputation is important. So before we reach out to help someone, we first should make sure we are not tearing them down through our conversations or postings on social media, because when we do that, it can take on a life of it's own.

Third, it's so important to open our eyes like that Russian soldier who saw a scared little girl and reacted with kindness and used that to bring her peace. Sometimes it can be so easy to get tunnel vision we lose sight of the people around us who need us there for them. Who around us may be lonely or hurting? Do we see when there is need even if a person does not ask for help, or do we ignore others and just focus on our own lives? When we open up our eyes and give people the gift of time and compassion, it can do so much to transform a life as Renie's story illustrates.

And lastly, never forget those words "as I have loved you." The Russian soldier clearly had a Christian faith, and in giving Renie the cross, reminded her that God would journey with her. God journeys with us too through our highs and lows. Not only can we cling to God in trying times, but we can come to him when we fail, which we will do. Remember the words of Peter: I am a human being. Peter failed and so do we, but Peter trusted in Jesus. We need to do the same when we sin, clinging to the Eucharist and to the love of God which will always be there to strengthen us.

What a joy it is to celebrate First Communions this weekend. It reminds us all of the sacredness of what transpires at each Mass. But hopefully too for those making their first Communion and for those who have received for many years, we remember the significance of what happens and open ourselves up to the grace we receive. God's love is always there, but we cooperate with grace by letting that love heal us and make us better, and also remembering the key word "union" that is a part of "Communion" - receiving Jesus brings us closer to Him and to one another. Just as His love redeemed a fallen people, namely all of us, whether it was the kindness the soldier showed to Renie, or the love we show to one another, when we live out the commandment of Jesus and truly love one another as a way of life, we can do so much to fill this world with hope and joy, helping people to see the love of God because we show it to them.