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CLIFF RADEL

Man's dream overcomes nightmares

Orphaned by World War II. Separated from his older brother since 1940. Homeless on the streets of Cincinnati for eight years.

Gino Vertassich has not had it easy.

Yet, when he describes himself, he smiles as he says: "I'm a lucky child."

Gino feels fortunate because he lives in a small, sunny apartment overlooking Over-the-Rhine's Washington Park.

He has a room with a view, the songs of birds in the trees, the sound of Mozart coming from his CD player.

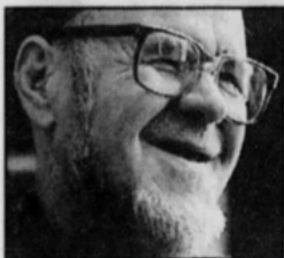
Even better, he has a dream.

"Every night I pray to the good Lord that my dream comes true and I get to meet my brother," **Gino** says earlier this week as he warms his 59-year-old bones in the sunlight pouring through his windows.

Gino lives in the New Morning House.

Not far from Music Hall, this 19th century town house has been converted into apartments for residents of Tender Mercies, a United Way agency providing homes for the homeless.

Yesterday, **Gino's** dream came true. He flew to visit his brother, Francesco, in the little Italian town of Sistiana, just outside Trieste.



Gino Vertassich

War-torn childhood

Gino was 2 years old when he last saw Francesco. "I have no memory of that," he says. "My life was so mixed up when I was a child."

"I was in a refugee camp during the war. Then an orphanage. I came to America from Italy on a boat with other orphans. My brother, who's older, maybe by 10 years, stayed behind. I don't know exactly what happened to my parents. All I know is we came from Pola, Yugoslavia, and they were killed."

He's had dreams about the war. "Terrible nightmares," he calls them, "of killing and dying. I remember waking up from them and crying."

For years, **Gino** had no memory of Francesco. "I didn't even know I had a brother until he wrote to me out of the blue in the '60s. We write to each other, oh, maybe seven times a year. I've never heard the sound of his voice."

The story of the **Vertassich** brothers' reunion is also a story of how **Gino** is slowly rediscovering himself and regaining his dignity after a long stretch of rough years.

In 1978, he lost everything but his faith. He resigned from the Glenmary Home Missioners, where he had served the small Catholic order for 14 years as a brother. "There was so much chaos in the church," he notes. "The religious life wasn't for me anymore."

He took odd jobs, working as a painter, a gardener and a short-order cook.

"I tried living alone," he says. "But I felt alone and that nobody cared about me." He became depressed, started drinking and wound up struggling to survive eight lonely years as a homeless man on the streets of Cincinnati.

"Oooooo, those streets were rough," he says with a shudder as he reaches for a cigarette. He smokes the way they do in European movies, half a cigarette disappears in one, long, slow drag and a big, hazy cloud of fumes.

Lucky man, not bitter

After what **Gino** has been through, many people in his shoes — brown loafers with a so-so shine peaking out from under the cuffs of his black jeans — would feel bitter or be on the public dole.

He is neither.

"I am a very fortunate man," he says. "I have everything I need."

And \$3 in the bank.

The rest of his savings — accumulated over the last six years, sometimes just a dollar a week — paid for his plane ticket to Italy and his hotel room in Sistiana.

"I don't need much spending money,"

Gino says. He looks around his room. His slippers are carefully lined up under a bedside table. Volumes of Reader's Digest condensed novels line his bookcases. His traveling clothes are neatly folded on his sofa and ready to go abroad.

Turning to gaze out the window, **Gino** laughs at his lack of money worries.

"What do I have to buy?" he asks. "My dream has come true."

Cliff Radel's column appears in The Enquirer Monday, Wednesday and Friday. Tips and comments most welcome. Call 768-8379 or fax to 768-8340.