It All Began with "You Dirty Kike"

by Fredricka R. Maister 6 min read

I am no longer ignoring the ignorance.

I was only eight years old when Carl Schmidt's mother called me a "kike."

Anti-Semitism on Cadwalader Terrace? It was the best-kept secret on the block.

Cadwalader Terrace, the street where I grew up in Trenton, New Jersey in the 1950s, was a multi-religious, multi-ethnic melting pot where diversity, inclusiveness and mutual respect were the norms. My best friends were Margo Russo from an Italian-Irish family and Angie Apostolaros who was Greek. A few African-Americans even lived in our predominantly white neighborhood.

As part of a Jewish minority, I never encountered anti-Semitism nor heard the “k” word until Mrs. Schmidt raged against a group of us kids for causing a ruckus as we played in the alley. I assumed “kike” was a curse word used by angry grown-ups like Mrs. Schmidt, not an ethnic slur invented for Jews.

I may not have recognized the anti-Semitism in Mrs. Schmidt’s rant, but I felt like her scapegoat, the one she blamed for our rowdy behavior. Her glare settled on me as she screamed “you dirty kike!,” her face beet-red, nostrils flaring, her large frame barreling across her backyard like a Mack truck as she chased us from the alley.

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I never told my parents what happened. Even if I had understood what “kike” meant and come home crying, I imagine my mom would have told me to “just ignore Mrs. Schmidt.” My dad, a former professional athlete who had lost a spot on the Olympic Soccer Team in the 1930’s to a less qualified non-Jew, would have agreed, explaining, “Anti-Semitism has been around for 2,000 years and will be here for the next 2,000.”

For me, growing up only a decade or so after the Holocaust, anti-Semitism, even in America, was a reality that we Jews had to accept. For my parents, ringing Mrs. Schmidt’s doorbell and confronting her hatred head-on would have been unthinkable.

That 1950’s mindset followed me into adulthood. I became adept at listening passively to anti-Semitic remarks in my presence as if they didn’t apply to me.

I recall once sitting on a train when a woman talked about her daughter who had been engaged to a Jew. “Thank God, she didn’t marry him. You know those Jews, they’re such snobs,” she said. She stuck her nose way up in the air to demonstrate.

A black woman who had been sitting with us later asked me, “You’re Jewish, right? Why didn’t you say something?” I just shrugged.

How ironic, in retrospect, that it took a black woman, no stranger to racial prejudice, to point out that my Jewishness had come under attack, something I chose to ignore.

Over the years, I’ve been in the room when other anti-Semitic canards have been expressed, such as: “Jews are obsessed with money. They go to the synagogue to pray for it;” “My landlord personally comes to collect the rent, you know, because he’s Jewish;” or “Where do you think the word jewelry comes from? Jew…jewelry.”

Even more recently, while eating in the employee lounge, I overheard a loud discussion about the executives who “are obsessed with power because they are Jews.” I felt tempted to inform them that there was only one Jewish executive, but I remained mute, choosing not to respond.

My habitual reaction on hearing such absurd falsehoods has been to sit back, keep quiet and disregard them. I initially may have felt shocked or offended, especially since it was no secret that I was Jewish, but then I would tell myself that, unlike the hate-spewing, anti-Semitic Mrs. Schmidt, these non-Jews spoke out of ignorance, their words innocuous with no malicious intent.

But now, with the recent proliferation of hate speech and hate crimes, I find myself looking at what I considered “innocuous” statements in a new light. Wasn’t it thoughts and words that smacked of anti-Semitism that ultimately led to Jewish cemetery desecrations in Philadelphia and St. Louis, a New York City subway car covered with swastikas and “Heil Hitler,” and neo-Nazi threats against Tanya Gersh, a Jewish woman in Whitefish, Montana who was told, “Thanks for demonstrating why your race needs to be collectively ovened”?

Such blatant anti-Semitic acts rattled me to my Jewish core, forcing me to confront my history of indifference.

And then, this summer, we all witnessed the expression of anti-Semitism in full display as white supremacists and neo-Nazis marched through Charlottesville, Virginia, shouting “Jews will not replace us!” and the Nazi slogan of “Blood and Soil!” For the first time in my life, I felt vulnerable as a Jew living in America.

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I consider myself an outspoken person willing to dive into potentially confrontational situations in the name of justice and morality, so why did I cave in to and inevitably enable the expression of anti-Semitic slurs? Was I fearful of being disliked or socially ostracized if I spoke out? Maybe I was too curious, wanting to be the “fly on the wall” to get the scoop on what non-Jews really think of us. Or was my passive approach a cop-out because I simply did not know what to do in such instances?

The latter explanation resonated as the most plausible, but what were my options? I could have eyeballed the perpetrators as they spoke or angrily accused them of anti-Semitism, neither of which would have the desired effect. They might have perceived me as overreacting and not to be taken seriously.

As I pondered this dilemma, I remembered a tour guide in Santa Fe who many years ago taught me a lesson about my making disparaging comments against a group of people. She was talking about a Civil War battle won by the North when I piped in, “Hooray, the North wins again!” She later took me aside and politely yet firmly told me, “I had many Southern relatives who were killed in that war.” I never again thought or uttered an anti-Southern sentiment.

So, taking my tour guide’s lead, the next time I hear an anti-Semitic remark, I will approach the person involved and tactfully say, “You know, I am Jewish and what you

said was offensive." Such engagement might take me out of my comfort zone, but silence is not a choice in these times of escalating prejudice, hate and violence.

I don't have to be the Anti-Defamation League or Simon Wiesenthal Center to take a stand against anti-Semitism. As an individual, I can do my part in my own small way. Hopefully, I have evolved from that eight-year-old girl who didn't know the meaning of "kike" to a woman ready and able to stand up for herself and her Judaism.

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Fredricka R. Maister is a New York City-based freelance writer whose work has appeared in a variety of print and online publications, such as *New York Jewish Week*, *The Forward*, *Baltimore Jewish Times*, *Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles*, *Na'amat Woman magazine*, *Baltimore Sun*, *Miami Herald*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, and *Huffington Post*. Her essays have also been published in several anthologies, including *Poetica: Reflections of Jewish Thought*.

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