

Casual

ONLY IN AMERICA

With the holidays behind us, it is time for a paean to change in America. Those who saw a threat to social harmony in the decision to allow Wal-Mart greeters to say “Merry Christmas” after a more secular “Happy Holidays” last year, or in the various skirmishes over crèches vs. menorahs on public lawns, should reflect on how until very recently religious differences in America were marked by much, much less civility than we are used to these days.

On the Lower East Side of New York, during my childhood, holidays were when the simmering antagonisms between the children of immigrants boiled to the surface. On Jewish holidays the Russian, Ukrainian, Italian, and other kids were outraged that we Jews “got to stay home from school on our holidays as well as theirs.” My father was equally outraged that the public schools would close on Christmas, an act he took to reveal the anti-Semitism of the powers-that-be.

Retaliation on the days after Jewish holidays was swift and physical. We would walk to school in groups, usually leaving early enough to reach the safety of the school building before the other kids took to the streets. So, too, on those Christian holidays when the schools remained open. Good Friday was for us a bad Friday. Collective Jewish responsibility for the crucifixion of Christ was still an unquestioned belief of Eastern European and Mediterranean Christians who lived on the opposite side of the street. To get to school from our apartment required—well, didn’t actually require—passing

through a park that we were told was off limits to us on those days. Some of us, as a result, felt it important to use that route, even though other routes were equally direct, and even though our teachers, fearing bloodshed, had given us permission to stay home on particularly inflammatory holidays.

Three circumstances added to the tension. First, the rise of Mussolini and Hitler led to a sudden popularity for black and brown shirts as attire for many of our neighbors. Second, there was the requirement that no boy could graduate unless



Danen Gijg

he had passed a swimming test. Lessons were held at a pool in the neighborhood YMCA, and swimming was in the nude. This resulted in the exposure of a certain physical difference among the boys that served as still another provocation. The teachers’ solution was to exempt the Jewish kids from the swimming requirement, which led to the third aggravating circumstance.

Rather than let us loose during the swim period, our teachers provided extra tutoring in math and other subjects. Add that to the pressures provided by Jewish parents, and you had a bunch of students far outpacing their non-Jewish classmates. The

school then fanned the flames by setting up fast-track classes that further divided Jewish kids from the others, and set them on track to do very well indeed on the examinations for admission to the city’s better high schools, in which Jews came to be “overrepresented,” to borrow from the language of affirmative action.

In other institutions, we Jews were underrepresented. The building that was most visible on the Lower East Side was the Consolidated Edison tower, with a clock that was uniformly accepted as telling “the right time.” You weren’t late if you were on time by the Con Ed clock, no matter how slow that massive timepiece might actually be. On Easter and Christmas, the office lights in the Con Ed building were turned on in the shape of a giant cross, announcing to the Jewish community that they might pay their bills on time, but they had better never apply for jobs at one of the city’s major employers.

Con Ed, of course, was no different from the many accounting, consulting, and Wall Street law firms that had de facto “Jews need not apply” signs on their doors. So those of my fellows who could beat the quotas went to medical school; the rest became academics, or entrepreneurs, or started law firms that have since overtaken the old white shoe crowd. Markets do work.

So fret not over minor problems like whose symbol gets displayed on the lawn in front of city hall. Or what a Wal-Mart greeter says as you shop among the output of China for a Christmas or Chanukah gift. We’ve come a long way, Baby, if that’s all we have to worry about in this country. And if you doubt me, consider the nervousness of Jewish parents in many European countries where it is now dangerous for their children to cut through the park on their way to school.

IRWIN M. STELZER