# Someone else's Christmas

**By Ruth Ostrow**

“LOOK mummy, there's Santa,” says my little girl, full of glee and excitement as the fat man with his fatter beard stands on a busy street corner, selling Christmas trees. “What's he going to bring me?” she asks, in anticipation.

I begin fidgeting, not knowing how to deal with the situation. It's not easy handling the issue of Christmas presents with children when you live in a predominantly Christian country and you're not Christian.

I immediately flash back to my own childhood and the pain that very issue caused my mother and I.

Christmas was all a big mystery to me when I was my daughter's age. I had been sent to a state school in my early primary years, and everyone in my class had marvellous, magical visits from someone called Santa Claus. They'd all sit around talking about what they wanted before the big event.

There were multiple sightings of the man in red. It was of profound significance to me that I never had any visits from him, nor received any gifts.

For a long time I presumed this was because I was bad or inadequate in some way. Children always blame themselves for any lack of love or attention. I suffered a terrible private grief.

And it didn't stop at school. Right through the Christmas break, the kids on my block would show off their prizes while I stood silently looking on. They knew there was something awfully wrong with me. Being snubbed by Santa wasn't the best PR in the world. I was teased mercilessly: “What did he get you this year?” And I would turn red or run off crying.

Their cruel barbs followed me home. After a while I took to lying, making up bicycles and things that ultimately I could never produce and which caused further pain.

When I was finally despairing enough to discuss the matter of Santa with my mother, I was met with rigid discomfort. “We don't believe in Santa,” she said simply. “We are Jewish.”

In these early years of my life I was still unsure of what being Jewish meant, except that it forced me to endure grave humiliation each lunchtime when I pulled pickled cucumbers and chopped-liver sandwiches out of my lunchbox.

I also knew it meant being different. Something awful and unspeakable had happened to relatives in far-off Europe. And there was a profound sadness about our home that seemed at odds with my sunny, suburban surrounds.

My religion looked different. Short, plump aunties who had food under their fingernails, and short, plump uncles who pinched you hard on the cheek as a sign of misguided affection. We were from Polish and Russian peasant stock, immigrants smelling of coffee and garlic and strange continental things.

The religion of my school peers seemed so elegant in comparison. It was light and fun, and full of sweet-sounding carols. Churches seemed so lofty and mysterious, smelling of incense.

The girls in my class had long, fair hair and longer legs, had names that cascaded out of the mouth like babbling brooks: Jennifer, Frances, Catherine. Our names were short and to the point, or guttural: Ruth, Chuva, Leah.

Being Christian meant belonging. Being Jewish did not. It was as simple as that in my childhood world. And being Jewish was always worse during festive times -- Easter when all the other kids got chocolate-coated eggs, and Christmas.

“Why? Why? Why?” I kept nagging my mum. I needed to understand why I was being forced to endure such terrible deprivation and misery. What was this thing that robbed me of the two things I most wanted in my life: acceptance and gifts.

It was the 1960s and everywhere we went -- department stores, restaurants -- Christmas carols were bellowing out. Television was dominated by Christ and shopping commercials. Nothing else seemed to matter to a country steeped in Christian elitism.

And yet it was a time of mass migration to Australia. The country was beginning to fill with not only Jews, Italians and Greeks from Europe who had survived the war, but Chinese immigrants, Muslims and Buddhists.

Finally, nearly 40 years later, the religions and rituals of Australia's various ethnic groups are being publicly acknowledged. Greek Easter, Chinese New Year, Jewish New Year are celebrated by street festivals. This year saw the first organised Halloween festival in Sydney in honour of our pagan community.

My daughter will not have to suffer the same ignorance as I did. In what has become a truly multicultural society as we head into 2000, she will not be teased or mocked when she says she doesn't believe in Jesus.

And, although she'll probably always resent not getting a new bicycle as the years draw to a close, and I'll always resent having to deny her, as I do now, Christmas will never be as painful a time of year as it once was for me.

For while this country is still draped in red and bombarded by jingles and consumerism, there is great joy for me in the fact that so many Australians I now meet acknowledge the significance of the holidays others celebrate. Almost as often as I wish people “Merry Christmas” they are wishing me “Happy Hanukkah” in return.

From the heart

Dear Ruth,
My heart goes out to Kelly and Craig Hubbard (Review, December 4-5), wonderful people in a world of greed and violence, and to you for sharing their story with us. But that same heart is heavy contemplating the tragedy that has befallen a once thriving country of plenty.
My late wife and I spent more than 20 years in Rhodesia-Zimbabwe. The gentle people looked forward with hope to rule by their own black government. I asked one friend what his vision of such a future would be. He answered: “Everyone will have a car.” Such a dream gives one a measure of the disillusionment that these innocent, struggling people must be suffering. Kelly and Craig's charity may be

only a drop in the ocean, but such sentiments have always been the crowning glory of humankind.
Arthur McDermott
Albany, Western Australia

Dear Ruth,
Re: your column on charitable people. Two years ago I had a mastectomy and a taxi-driver dropped me off at the wrong train station. In trying to find the right one, I was very puffed and had to stop. A Japanese girl hurried past, but then turned back and asked if I was all right. When I said no, she took my overnight bag and helped me.
At the station another girl saw I was struggling, picked up my bag and gave me her left arm. She helped me on the train and said: “I need a seat for this lady” and a young man jumped up and said: “Take mine.” When off the train, the pay phone would not accept my money, so I went to the ticket office and the lady there phoned my sister-in-law without accepting payment. Thank you for your inspirational article. It reflects the true kindness of strangers.
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First published in The Weekend Australian FRI 24 DEC 1999