

What We Learned from the Bartender

(Sidney, Australia, 2000)

It was December 26, 2000. We were finishing a surprisingly nice supper in a restaurant burrowed in the corner of a small grocery store. Joshua ate Balmain Bugs with mango sauce. I, some kangaroo steak. For dessert, we shared some Anzac biscuits and “Impossible Pie.” The four of us – Peg, Joshua, Shoshanna, and I – walked down the street happily enjoying the fresh air of a cool summer night in Australia. This was one of the moments to treasure, one of the last times, for probably a long time, that we could take a vacation together, with our busy schedules dominating each one of our lives.

“What a pleasant evening. Let’s walk to that little shopping area.”

We had traveled from Sidney to the small, southern town of Adelaide, to meet Peg’s cousins, who had fled to Australia during the Holocaust. I liked Adelaide, a sleepy, 1950s place, noted for its churches, surrounded by pastoral lands, with a river running through it, set among distant hills.

Peg’s cousins were very warm and welcoming, taking us to the different sites around that part of Australia. The Barossa and Eden Valleys vineyards, with their aristocratic chateaus. The Tandanya Aboriginal Cultural Institute, with its wonderful display of Aboriginal art and culture. The Adelaide Zoo, with its wide array of kangaroo species – some nearly the size of elephants.

“The Aboriginal Cultural Institute was amazing!” Joshua said. “Just to realize what the Aborigines could create with their hands and imaginations – without all our modern machines!”

Shoshanna announced, “I liked the animal park. All those different kangaroos – some as small as rabbits, some as big as horses – and we could just walk among them and pet them. What an experience!”

As we strolled down the streets, peering in store windows, we passed a neighborhood bar, very plain, with some small tables and barstools. Inside, two men in their forties sat at the bar drinking, chatting with the bartender and watching TV. There was one pool table sitting unused. We hadn't played pool together for such a long time – and this place seemed fairly clean and smoke-free. It appeared to be a mellow, European neighborhood tavern. So, we entered.

The tavern had posters on the wall advertising Matilda Bay Premier beer, James Squire Original Pilsner, and Black Bart Milk Stout, which seemed an odd combination of ingredients. A large pair of the eyes, set in a huge kangaroo head, stared from the back wall of the bar towards the front door entrance. Off, in an adjoining restaurant, we could hear echoes of “Waltzing Matilda.”

The two men were slumped over on their stools at the bar, watching a CNN broadcast of a recent flare-up of the Palestinian and Israeli conflict on the television.

We got pool cues from the bartender, paid his fee, and began to play. The balls rarely found the pockets, but we laughed a lot, joking that if Shmuel would have been with us, he would be chiding us over our ineptness and embarrassing display of pool skills.

Suddenly, one of the men sitting at the bar shouted out, “Those Jews never learn! Just kill them all! Go over there and kill them! They run this country, and they run the U.S.!”

We froze, stunned, not only by what he had said, but more with the vicious vehemence with which he had said it. Our enjoyable family vacation smacked back to reality in this small bar.

I saw Shoshanna's face, flush with rage: “I don't have to listen to this! He shouldn't get away with saying that!”

Joshua, with his peaceful, naturopathic way, intervened: “I’ll go over there and talk with him calmly. I think I can help him see things more clearly.”

We placed the cues on the table.

My anger at the situation checked by the logical side of my brain. Two large men who had been drinking, an unknown place, my daughter’s fury, my son’s naivete. I didn’t want any interaction with those men now. It was far too dangerous.

We took the pool cues back to the bartender.

“Thanks for the pool game, but we don’t care to finish playing now.” Peg said.

“Let’s go,” I said quietly.

The children didn’t move.

“Let’s go now,” I repeated more sternly, steering everyone towards the door.

Without another word, we exited. My daughter glared at the men and then at me as we left. My son gave me a puzzled, uncomprehending look.

Once outside, Shoshanna and Joshua exploded.

“I wanted to confront him. Why didn’t we confront him and not let him get away with saying that?” Shoshanna spit out. “How can you just walk out like that?”

Joshua added, “I think we could have talked to him calmly. I could have reasoned with him, so maybe he would gain some understanding.”

“You don’t do that in a bar with a person who’s been drinking and who also has friends with him. There’s too much chance of violence and someone – probably us – getting hurt.” I tried to explain. “I know you’re angry and upset with him – and with us – but I felt this was the only thing we could do.”

We crossed over the river-bridge back to our hotel, walking single file, with me in the last place. The walk felt heavy, sullen, with bitterness and the shock of

reality. Shoshanna and Joshua climbed the stairs up to their own hotel room without a word of good night.

While I didn't regret the decision made to leave, I felt the weight and sting of my children's anger and disappointment. I too would have liked to have confronted that man, one of the ignorant multitudes over so many years, espousing the countless anti-Semitic conspiracies theories, the deep-rooted hatred that had caused so much death and destruction. But what would I feel like if it had resulted in violence, one of us hurt, or, possibly, sitting in jail in a foreign land. Just not worth it. Too dangerous. This was just an ugly incident that had ruined our evening. It didn't have to ruin the rest of our vacation.

What to do? How to help them understand, so we could enjoy the remaining days together in Australia?

A restless night of sleep. Searching for some positive, non-violent response to help us all feel less anger and frustration.

In the morning, I sat down and wrote the man at the bar a letter. I had a pretty good idea that he was a regular at the neighborhood tavern. I thought we could deliver this letter to the man at the tavern later that night, and leave, without forcing a confrontation.

I shared the letter with my wife and children. With their input, we added and changed some of it.

“Hello,

This letter is directed to the man at the bar last night who made the hateful, anti-Semitic and anti-Israel remarks during the TV news broadcast.

We are the Jewish-American family that had – until your outburst – been enjoying our time together in Adelaide.

We would like to ask you: have you ever been to Israel and seen life there? Do you know the history of the Israeli-Arab conflict? Do you know that the other Arab nations have kept the Palestinians virtually landless since those nations were formed after World War I? That they do not permit them equality in their countries? Who do you think protects and maintains open access for Christians, so that they can attend church in Israel, and, at the risk of their Israel-Jewish lives, secure them access to Bethlehem during the holidays?

Do you know that Albert Einstein, the greatest mind of the 20th Century, was Jewish? Do you know that Jonas Salk, who created the polio vaccine, Waksman, who developed antibiotics, Leonard Bernstein, one of the most famous musical composers, Von Reuter, who laid the first trans-Atlantic cable between France and America, were Jewish? Twenty-seven percent of prizes awarded to American scientists are awarded to Jewish scientists for their contributions and achievements to our world. Did you know that?

We have relatives in Israel who are struggling to survive, and who are in constant fear for their lives.

Do you honestly believe the Nazi-type propaganda that “the Jews control America?” Name them. Name the Jews who “control”

America, and what they control. Otherwise, it's just a display of ignorance and prejudice.

Jesus was a Jew. It is said that through his teachings he hoped to bring all peoples together in the Holy Land through mutual love and respect. We wish you well, and hope that you take the time, assuming you are Christian, to explore what Jesus was trying to say.

In the true spirit of the holiday, we wish you a Happy Christmas.

- The Rubinsteins

That evening, at 10 pm, we entered the same bar. At first, we looked in to see if the men from the other night were there. They were not. Now, a woman tended the bar.

Seated in the corner, we noticed the bartender from the previous night.

We entered the bar and walked towards him.

He sat there, a man in his sixties, stocky build, strong-looking. He glanced at us with a relaxed, wry smile, as he watched our approach.

“We’re the Jewish-American family that was in here last night,” I said, “when that man at the bar made those anti-Semitic remarks. Does he come here pretty regularly?”

The bartender nodded.

“We’d like you to give him this letter when you see him next.” I handed him the open envelope with the letter inside.

He continued smiling. “I knew you were Jewish – and American – when you walked in here. I could tell by your reaction to his remarks how you felt.”

“My name is Cohen. I’m Jewish and came from Poland. A few years ago, I returned to the house where I spent my childhood to visit my mother. The bullet holes were still there in the wall from the time the Nazis had come and shot my grandfather, a rabbi. I watched as the Nazis beat and whipped my mother and brothers. One of my brothers had his arm cut off. Most of my family and relatives were sent to the concentration camps, suffered and died there. Here, where I’m living now, they call me ‘The Jew.’”

We stood there in shock.

My daughter asked, “But how could you just sit there and listen to that man and not do something?!?”

A nod of understanding added to his smile. “What should I do? Take him outside and beat him up? I could do that. I know how to handle myself. Then, what? I have to live here. His remarks, like many I’ve heard, make me seethe inside. But how many people can I go around beating up? There’s too much ignorance and hate. So, I try to keep my feelings inside, and instead, keep feeding them bits of information – and then, maybe, they’ll think and see a little more. You should have heard that same man a year ago! He was much worse!”

“Let me tell you a joke I know. ‘What’s the difference between a Chinaman and a Jew?’ You don’t know? Well, a Chinaman will sell a piece of cloth for a profit, while a Jew will divide the cloth in two and sell each piece for a profit.”

The smile never left his face as he saw our negative reaction to his analogy.

“There’s nothing wrong with it. We Jews have had to learn to survive for centuries in all sorts of difficult circumstances. Some countries forced us to live in ghettos. We were not allowed to own land, work in labor unions, have weapons, go to the university, or enter professions. We were forced to be the money-lenders and work the businesses that no one else wanted to do. Yet, our people are educated. They value, and will sacrifice, to learn and to educate their children.

Those who are not making anything of their lives, not smart enough to do so, are bitter and jealous – and hateful.”

“What do you have when you have an empty forty-gallon oil drum and bang on it?”

We didn’t answer – we didn’t know.

“You have a loud noise, because there’s nothing inside. That’s what you have with these people. Maybe one-third of them in this country of Australia are anti-Semites. They get their information and react to the prejudiced media accounts of what’s happening in the Middle East. They have a neo-Nazi radio station broadcasting each day, saying hateful things about the Aborigines, the Orientals, the Jews. I see some of them walk around here at times with Nazi armbands, or screaming hateful things. They hold Nazi marches right out here on this street!”

“What do you do when you have an empty forty-gallon oil drum?!? What you have to do is put things in the barrel, try to fill it a little at a time, to dull the noise.”

“You Jews who live in the United States are too protected. You don’t know much about these things. You don’t know what it is to live every day in the real world with these things.”

We remained listening intently, trying to absorb – to comprehend – all that he was saying. We had come there in anger and outrage, but everything had turned, I realized, to an incredible learning experience for all of us.

“If you remember that when he shouted those things, I did say something. I said, ‘I think, and wish, this would be solved peacefully.’”

His name was Cohen, from the Kohanim, the descendants of the priestly class from our ancient times, the spiritual leaders of the Jewish people. He taught us, and we listened, gaining new insight, new understanding.

Filled with awe and wonder, we silently walked, hand-in-hand, over the bridge back to our hotel.