

How I Learned About Antisemitism By Ron Lang

Bio: Ron was born in Hell's Kitchen (Manhattan) two weeks after his parents arrived in America from Hungary in 1932. He studied engineering at City College of New York and Columbia University. He met the love of his life, Evelyn Baker, on a blind date on St. Valentine's Day in 1954. Ron was the chief engineer for the Project Apollo Space Suit and Portable Life Support System. He later founded "Ronald Lang & Associates," an international crisis management consulting firm, where he remains engaged to this day. He and Evy are the parents of three marvelous women, Beth, Debby, and Carry.

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In 1932, my grandfather saw that antisemitism in Hungary was growing with the emergence of Hitler. When my mother got pregnant, he insisted that my parents return to America immediately. They demurred but, in my mother's ninth month, they reluctantly agreed to leave Budapest.

I was born in Manhattan in 1932, two weeks after my parents returned to America from Hungary. They had lived in America from 1924 until 1929. They became American citizens during their stay here. My father, however, could not make a living here as the Depression developed and so returned to Hungary, but only for a few years.

From when I was about eight years old, in 1940, until 1953, my family lived at 120 Vermilyea Avenue in Manhattan. Our apartment building was called "Piccadilly Gardens." I guess it was one of the fancier apartment houses in the area. It was on the west side of Vermilyea Avenue at 207 Street in an area called "Inwood."

About a fifth of the units in the apartment houses on the west side of the street were rented by Jews. All the apartments on the east side of the street were rented by Irish Catholics. Those families included Johnny Coughlin, Dick Mooney, and other Catholic kids about my age.

Johnny Coughlin was a couple years older than me, and he was a real bully. He was also the leader of the Catholic gang of bullies.

Whenever I walked down Vermilyea Avenue and saw him coming up the street, I would rush to cross the street to try get out of his way. Every time he had an opportunity to beat the shit out of me, he did so. And on Sundays it was even worse. After they came out of church, Johnny and his gang would come looking for us and beat us up.

It got so bad that one day I proposed to my Jewish friends that we go to the local church and ask the priest if he could tell us why these kids were such bullies. My friends agreed.

When we went to see the priest, I was the spokesman because it was my idea.

At the church front office, I asked to speak to the priest. I did not realize that there was more than one. I did not know any of their names.

Nevertheless, we met with the priest who seemed to be the top guy.

He asked, "Why are you here? How can I help you?"

I said, "Father, please, can you tell us, why do Johnny Coughlin and his friends, who all attend this church, come looking for us after church on Sundays to beat us up? Why do they do that during the week when we are walking to school or home again? We are not bothering them, but they come after us and beat us up. Why?"

After a long silence, the priest took my hand. He looked me straight in the eyes. He said, "My son, they do not learn that in this house. They learn that at home. From their parents. And I have tried repeatedly to address and condemn antisemitism from our pulpit."

He did not explain "antisemitism," a term I had never heard. I learned its meaning only years later.

And so it went. After our talk with the priest there was no change. From about 1945 until about 1949, we ran the gauntlet two or three times a week!

When we all got to be about 17 years old, the beatings had stopped, with no help from the priest.

I graduated from Washington High School and went on to City College of New York in January, 1950. In June of that year, the Korean War began.

Johnny Coughlin, who was about 19 at the time, joined the Army and went to Korea. I was at City College. So our lives took us in separate ways, thank God.

When I finished my first year at City College, I heard from someone, I don't remember who, that Johnny was back in the States and was in the hospital recovering from wounds he suffered in the war. Ironically, life being stranger than fiction, Johnny was a patient at Jewish Memorial Hospital in Washington Heights.

I decided to go visit him. Why did I do that? I have thought about that question, but I do not know exactly why I went and I have no idea now what I expected to find.

When I got to the hospital I learned that Johnny had been so badly wounded that he was now a quadriplegic!

I found out where he was. I walked into his room. He looked at me. He said, incredulously, "Are you Lang, the Kike?"

I said, "Yes, I am Lang, the Kike, the same guy that you beat the shit out of every time you had the chance. But I'm not here about that. I just want you to know I thank you for your service to our country."

Johnny burst into tears. He said, as he wept, "I can't believe it. You, a Jew, are the very first person apart from my family to come here and visit me. You're a Jew. None of my Catholic friends have shown up to see me!"

I said, "That's a real shame."

We talked a bit more. Then I said goodbye, saying as I left, "I hope the doctors find a way to heal you, or at least make you better."

I never saw Johnny Coughlin again. About three years later, he died, having never recovered from his wounds.

I've thought a lot about Johnny Coughlin since then. His hatred of me and my Jewish friends made no sense to me then and still makes no sense. I've learned that, contrary to what that priest told us, it was official Catholic church doctrine until Vatican II in 1965 that all Jews in every age bear the responsibility for the suffering and death of Jesus Christ. Johnny Coughlin and his buddies took that teaching literally and punished us every chance they got. Or maybe they came up with their own reasons to hate us!

I never forgave Johnny Coughlin. I think, as I reflect on that period in my life, I went to visit him because he was one of the few guys I knew who went to war and was badly wounded. It was the right thing to do. I felt good about myself. Even now, however, every time I see his face in my bad dreams, that old feeling of my early boyhood panic returns.