

Creative Contest: „Christian-Jewish Dialogue –  
Why? What for?

# Contribution by Samantha Lin

## Christian-Jewish Dialogue — Why? What For?

That summer, I was almost five and my mom bought me a pair of black patent leather loafers, three pinafores with navy blue tartan, four long sleeved white blouses, two white button downs and a backpack with The Powerpuff Girls on it. The school was just three grades, including my kindergarten class, and all the classrooms were clustered in the basement of a building near the historic downtown. The only windows in my classroom were floor-to-ceiling and faced the courtyard and Ms. Carbone hung a Crucifix on the wall above her organized desk with a stack of graded work and, tucked underneath, a big heavy black purse that clacked when she closed it.

Ours was the sunniest room – every other classroom had only a small grate that let in weak light in the mornings. Every morning at 7.55 AM we filed into the hallway and a chosen student from the oldest class — usually an eight-year-old — led us in the Our Father, a Hail Mary and the Glory Be as we stood and held hands in the hallway. There were just fifteen of us and my friends and I pretended to be the Spice Girls in the courtyard after our turkey sandwiches at lunch.

On Friday afternoons we had twenty minutes of free time before our parents came to pick us up. Catherine, always advanced for her age, read stories aloud. Ginny played with the dolls she brought from home in the sunny library next to those large windows. Ms. Carbone reached up and gently took down the Crucifix before tucking it away in her clacking black bag.

*Why?* I asked

*Because boys and girls come here when we're not at school and they don't like to have the Crucifix on the wall.*

*Oh.* And then I wandered away.

As a (finally!) five-year-old, I imagined the boys and girls sitting in our classroom, warmed by the sun. The strangest thing to me however was the unanswered question: *Why do they go to school on the weekends?*

In the spring, Ms. Carbone lined us up. As we filed into the hallway to snatch our coats from their pegs in the hallway, we noticed the rest of the school spilling out of their classrooms too. This was not unusual — we often walked to the nearby church for mass with the loud but rather boring Fr. Greg. He was kindly and greying but I often got lost in my own imagination by gazing at the fans lazily rotating above as he paced up and down the aisles, talking about Jesus (or something).

This time, we were stopped. *No need for coats* Ms. Carbone said *we're just going upstairs.* Out into the brisk spring air, across the courtyard, and up the stairs until we were parallel with the tops of the large windows that warmed our classroom. The whole school spilled into what looked very much like the parish hall where my mom brought my baby sister and me every

Sunday. The carpet was the same velvety green that drew patterns if you dragged your feet and the hall had the same musty smell. Honestly, it was kind of boring.

We sat in chairs (not the wooden pews I was used to — *how weird* I thought *they're not lined up straight*) in front of an ambo and a tabernacle, much bigger than the one I was used to seeing. The man who addressed us was the same man letting us use the basement for our school, though if I knew this at the time or if, when my mom told me later, I simply applied it to my previous memories, I cannot tell you.

The man was an off-duty priest, a simple outfit I had come to recognize. No black shirt and flash of white peeking from the collar — just a shabby jacket and khaki pants. He was talking about something — my memory is distracted here — when he went to the tabernacle and opened it up. *An ark* he called it as he pulled out *his* Bible. He unrolled it, sang something, and then told us a story I recognized too. Suddenly it all clicked. The poor students who filed into our classrooms in the evenings when we were away were doing Sunday school (except it was Saturday school?) were learning the Bible and their religion, just like we did ours. Only they were Jewish. And this guy was not a priest.

As a five-year-old, my conception of “Jewish” was limited to the facts on hand: Jewish children went to school on Saturday (what bad luck!), didn’t like the Crucifix, and instead of a book, they got to read an enormous scroll.

And with the mystery of the weekend classes solved, we gathered at the synagogue’s front door and I ran down the stairs, back to the courtyard, and watched myself in the windows as I twirled until I fell.

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It was only later that I learned our poor Catholic school was refused money from the diocese for what they called “a lack of interest” and that the enterprising corps of four Catholic moms had searched low and high for a space with rent cheap enough to accommodate us. After hearing what we needed, the local synagogue gave us space at a reduced rent so we could open a school for a first year while we “got our feet” under us.

Growing up, the story became a familiar touchstone, repeated in introductions, “about me” blurbs, explanations, and even fun facts. The accidental symbolism – a Catholic school born in the basement of a synagogue – was not lost on me once I began to understand that to be Jewish meant more than just going to school on a Saturday. Bits and pieces fell into place, from the latke parties at Dr. Shenkman’s, to welcoming Elijah from the floor of Sarah’s dorm, to passing the *mezuzah* as I put my neighbor’s son to bed, a broader picture unrolled before me, putting into context the enormous scroll and that marvelous ark.

I still drove by the synagogue regularly on my way to that Catholic church we had once walked to weekly — Fr. Greg died young (in addition to a penchant for long homilies, he was also a serious smoker) but we still went to that church, driving by the little courtyard with the big windows that tinted gold on Sunday mornings.

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In August 2017, I, along with the rest of my family, sat with mouth agape as neo-Nazis marched past those long windows and stood facing the courtyard of the synagogue. Terrified attendants left in twos and threes following Friday evening services as armed neo-Nazis roamed downtown Charlottesville ahead of their planned “Unite the Right” rally.

My memories, my kindergarten and what I had come to feel like as somehow *my* synagogue sat quietly overshadowed by the drum beating, gun brandishing, sweating, seething, molesting, jostling, spitting, raging crowd that surged in circles around the synagogue, the streets I had skipped along, and even the church where Fr. Greg droned on as the fans beat lazily against the air.

The tall windows reflected redblackwhite flags in the courtyard.

The images of the crowds swarming in front of the synagogue play before me, projected on my closed eyelids, a loop of hatred as I cross the Atlantic just weeks later. Living in Rome, those images feel closer, realer.

One night I am out with a friend, laughing as we walk back from dinner. Out of the corner of my eye – months after arriving I have become accustomed to spotting them – a glint of bronze on the ground tugs and then pulls my attention, Startled, expecting to see one or two *Stolpersteine* as usual, I see instead an entire family, three generations, and their neighbors. A branching tree of bronze under a streetlight and I stand, immobile, as idyllic families wander past.

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After mass one morning, we walk through the ghetto on the way to the Tiber. Children are playing in the square by the synagogue and the same old grandparents sit hip-to-hip on the square’s benches, watching their grandchildren run and yell. There is a fortified guard box at the entrance to the synagogue and, along with a cluster of *carabinieri* in imposing black boots and heavy weapons belts, it faces a church purposefully built at one of the main entrances of the ghetto.

On its façade, along with a picture of the crucifixion, is a dual inscription in Latin and Hebrew written after the historical Jewish residents refused to listen to the compulsory weekly sermons broadcast from the church: *I have spread out My hands all the day unto a rebellious people, that walk in a way that is not good, after their own thoughts (Is 65:2).*

The sky is clear this Sunday morning and so is the meaning of this church.

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A different courtyard with steps and big floor-to-ceiling windows – though this is much older than my beloved kindergarten. We descend, not ascend as I did so many years ago. The main sanctuary is above us, but the basement is heated, and the Florentine synagogue is far too cold

in February. Like the many churches here, congregants retreat to smaller spaces that are easier to heat. I recognize the logic and am grateful as I shrug off my coat.

My professor is not here — I confirmed with him that I was coming after sundown, so he never saw my text — but after some explaining to the guards at the entrance, a woman in a tight black cap takes my elbow and hands me a *siddur*. We are only barely separated from the men as the basement is compact and there is space enough just for a short wooden fence.

I clunkily following along, both trying to remember the order of the liturgy for Saturday morning and sounding out the words under my breath so I can try and understand where we are. I sneak glances at my tight-capped neighbor who has since removed her hat and who catches me flipping through the book – she pointedly stabs her finger on a page, allowing me to catch up to the rest of the congregation.

People trickle in, whispers multiply from corner to corner of the warming basement.

And then...

...the ark!

The *Torah* is removed differently than what I remember from when I was five; it's hugged to the chest and escorted by a group of four as they keep rhythm, and the congregation gets on its feet as the praying swells. A small detail but a favorite one — the *yad* is produced as they begin to chant. Though, in theory, I know more Hebrew than I did as a kindergartener, I still don't know what they're saying so I just listen, watch, and soak it in.

When we leave the long windows reflect only the steely clouds of a cold Italian February morning and the cross from the church across the street.

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**Comment on the text by Samantha Lin:**

*My motivation for knowing better my Jewish brothers and sisters comes from a sense of "belonging". Because I was introduced to Judaism at a young age, there was never a sense of "otherness". But I have witnessed the destruction of hatred both new and historic, and the way the Catholic Church has both stoked that hatred and worked toward a better understanding. Through this essay, I wanted to knit together how all these things work together and ultimately drive toward dialogue: childhood experiences, shared lives and celebrations, the awareness of both historic and present anti-Semitism, and deeper education.*

**Short biography Samantha Lin:**

Samantha Lin is an American living in Rome finishing her advanced degree at the Cardinal Bea Center for Judaic Studies at the Pontifical Gregorian University and working on her final thesis, "Post-Shoah Theology in Literature". She graduated with a Bachelors of Science in Foreign Service from Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in 2014, earning honors for her thesis " 'Yad Vashem with an Air Force': The Effects of the Collective Memory of the Holocaust on Israeli Defense Policy." In addition to her studies, Samantha also leads the marketing team at Premium Service Brands, an American franchise company.