

# Goodman relates “A Jewish Kid’s Christmas”

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**‘Twas the morning after the night before Christmas, and all through our house not a creature was stirring.**

We’re Jewish. Our family simply didn’t stir on Christmas morning.

I was the exception on this particular day in 1944. **I was both Jewish and stirring.** It would normally take dynamite to get me out of bed early on a non-school day. But that morning mom didn’t need to prod my twelve-year-old body to get me moving. I was about to participate in my very first Christmas ever. And I couldn’t wait.

Being Jewish, Christmas had no religious meaning for our family. We Jews experience **Christmas as observers, not participants. The holiday was never celebrated in our home.** You’d find no clue that this day had any special significance.

So, I wasn’t **up and about to celebrate Christmas in our house, but at the home of Eddie Larson. Eddie was one of my best friends, and he was very, very Christian.** I’d been invited by his mom and dad to share their wonderful family tradition; **The Larson Family Christmas Brunch.**

I was actually going to get the inside scoop about something seldom experienced by any of my family or friends. I would get a look-see into the “mystery” of Christian life that most Jewish kids never witnessed; the secret rituals, the ceremonies, the customs. I was about to see for myself what this Christmas stuff was all about. I’d never even been to a brunch before, let alone a Christmas brunch. Didn’t even know exactly what a brunch was.

Eddie’s family went all out for Christmas, starting with a huge tree placed in the living room in front of the windows so it could be admired from the street. A week ago I’d gone to their house after school to help Eddie trim it with hundreds of beautiful glass ornaments as well as tons of tinsel and stunning colored lights. Most of these treasured items were very fragile and had been gently unwrapped from their protective storage boxes. Wartime shortages made them impossible to replace. And, in spite of cutbacks of nearly everything, there would be a mountain of beautifully wrapped presents spread under the tree this morning.

But that was only the beginning. The rest of the house exploded with Christmas spirit; stockings hung on the mantle, holiday candles, “Merry Christmas” banners strung across every doorway, and mistletoe hanging everywhere. Cut-out Santa’s and holly

wreaths were taped to windows and mirrors. It was the most Christian house I'd ever **seen! Of course, it was the only Christian house I'd ever seen.**

What a contrast to our home, which looked exactly the same as every other day of the year. No signs of any holiday festivities. No tree, no presents, no stockings on our non-existent fireplace. Not a hint of Ho-Ho-Ho.

However, we had one special object displayed in our home at this time of the year, though it had nothing to do with Christmas. Coincidentally, our holiday of Chanukah, or the Festival of Lights, arrived each year during the same season and lasted for eight days. Our beautiful Menorah, or candlestick, was placed in a prominent spot in our living room. **It held nine candles; one for each day, plus another used to light them.** Chanukah began by lighting a single candle on the first night and adding another each night until all eight were burning.

Traditionally, we also exchanged gifts each evening, which was also great. But although it was a festive time for us, it couldn't "hold a candle" to the celebrations that our Christian brothers experienced.

So, while my parents still slept with absolutely no visions of sugar plum fairies in their heads, I dressed in the multiple layers of my mom's required defense against Chicago's bitter cold; a wool flannel shirt, a sweater, heavy coat, scarf, wool hat, ear muffs, wool gloves and boots. I could hardly move, but I was motivated by the prospect of experiencing Christmas morning in a real Christian home for a real Christian Christmas.

I arrived at the Larson's at nine AM sharp after trudging three blocks through the snow. The family was sitting on the floor of the living room near the tree amidst a mountain of torn wrapping paper as they excitedly opened the last of their presents.

Finally Mrs. Larson announced that we should be seated at the dining room table. No rites, no rituals, no ceremonies; it was simply time to stuff ourselves. Mrs. Larson brought out plate after plate of wonderful smelling foods that I'd never had at home, like ham, bacon and sausages. The Larson's **definitely didn't** know about keeping kosher. But eating stuff that I'd never tasted before made the day even more special. There were also eggs, fruit, homemade biscuits, cakes, pies, and much more. I was in brunch heaven.

Eddie's mom must have used up every one of her ration stamps to put out all this food. One of the best parts came after we'd finished eating. Mrs. Larson handed me a small **gift package with my name on it. It was even wrapped in Chanukah paper.** I couldn't believe that they'd made me a part of their holiday.

What a great surprise. I opened it excitedly and found a pair of argyle socks. If my parents had given me a gift like that I'd have been disappointed. But these were the most appreciated pair of socks I'd ever owned.

Eddie and I were excused to play with some of his new toys. But my mom had warned me not to “overstay my welcome,” so after a while I dressed once again in my mountain of woolen clothing, thanked the Larson’s as my mom had instructed, and trudged home through the snowy streets.

My family was waiting to hear all about my great adventure. I excitedly recapped the day; the great food, the decorations, the tree, and the gift I’d received. They weren’t too excited about the ham and bacon part, but they were happy that I’d had a good time. **And they loved my argyle socks.**

The next week Eddie Larson was our guest for dinner as we lit the last of our eight Chanukah candles. My folks gave him a small gift wrapped in Christmas paper. It was a handkerchief, with an “L” on it. Moms gave very practical gifts during the wartime years.

I’ve enjoyed the sentiment, music and joyfulness of the Christmas season for many decades since that wonderful morning, always as an outsider looking in. But the warmth of that Christmas brunch at the Larson’s on that frigid Chicago morning in 1944 gave me a glimpse into the lives of people who shared the same deep faith and strong family ties as our family, even though we celebrated in different ways.

The words “anti-Semitism”, “bigotry” and “racism” meant nothing to me in 1944 at the age of twelve. Our parents protected us kids from the harsh truths of those words. Unfortunately, I would experience the reality of their meaning as I matured and went into the world.

In less than a year after that wonderful Christmas brunch the horror of World War II would finally end. It had been conceived out of hatred, bigotry and a fanatical quest for power. But on that lovely Chicago morning in 1944 a Jewish boy with Romanian family roots and a Christian boy with a Swedish heritage, had experienced the true meaning of diversity with no thoughts of their differences; only their bond of friendship.