View PDF



Nancy Cande was a middle school teacher in Toronto and retired as a teacher and educational administrator in New York City (dual citizen), following a satisfying and joyous 40 years. She is currently consulting schools in New York State.

Teaching and learning history at any age engages and introduces us to times past and highlights and informs the present. It asks us to compare and contrast our own experiences. Most importantly, it invites us, begs us, to return to probe deeper and question our understanding and ourselves. Teaching the History of Jewish Life in Europe Pre Kristallnacht to young adolescents asks us to question our motivations, objectives and focus.

The study and experience of history occurs in informal and formal ways. With good teachers, students can develop and connect their understandings and experiences to what is presented. The following is based on my many years of classroom teaching experience in both secular/public and Jewish schools. This is not a scientific/academic study but rather the development of an intuitive understanding during the early years of teaching the Holocaust followed by awareness of the need to shift my approach and perspective in teaching Jewish history.

I grew up in the NYC suburbs following my earliest childhood in Brooklyn in the mid 1950's. Three of my grandparents left E Europe in the 1890s and one Grandmother was born and resided on the Lower East Side. Yiddish was spoken at home only to disguise the content to us. The Holocaust was barely mentioned and was never taught. My childhood friend's aunt was the exception who shared with our 4th grade class her Buchenwald concentration camp experience and wrote about it in a children's book. Her approach to storytelling brought us into her story. Otherwise, Jewish life was absorbed through the "Jewish Secular Orthodox" culture in which I was raised among relatives. My identity was absorbed and accepted, which I mainly attribute to my Grandmother's pious and lovely ways. It was intergenerational learning.

Wanting to know everything about my Grandmother's life led me to reading and watching what was available about the old world which were her ways. Wanting to know more about this "lost world" of Jewish history led me to read about many eras of Jewish History, emigration and minimally the Holocaust; this came later. The context of Jewish history had already begun for me.

50% of the students at a Toronto Jewish Day School where I taught for a decade had at least 1 grandparent that the Holocaust directly impacted. The students didn't refer to it but their family histories were absorbed. For the first two years of teaching the Holocaust I showed films, film clips, and we read books with the Holocaust as a theme and setting. In the third year when we were watching the film Night and Fog, I asked myself in disbelief what is the purpose of presenting this to

students? What are they learning, what is the context for them? Why do they need to know this before they know their own history? Students never directly referred to the specifics of the world their families left.

Honest, rigorous study of history contains ugly, raw elements, as well as moments of beauty and simplicity. 12 year olds have not yet developed an understanding/context of their own past/present. The study of the Holocaust can all too easily become a deficit model of their history while in this formative phase. The immense tragedy of the Holocaust was essentially the finality for millions of our millennial history of Jewish European culture. It reconvened predominantly in The United States and Israel along with Caribbean islands and South America. What was this rich, dynamic, populous, diverse Jewish culture that is essentially geographically and numerically lost in today's world? Much of the jewels of this lost world are under the radar with us. Let's open this not far away landscape and timescape to them by shifting to the telling of their own generational family stories, children's stories, maps, fact based fictional movies, languages, food, population numbers, and geography. They will undoubtedly lead them to ask: what happened to us in Europe, where can this be observed now? Why did this happen?

Focusing on these final few years erases our story. It also shows us in a tragic situation that we did not construct; instead it was done to us. First, a more thorough understanding of Jewish life in Europe before and later following Krisallnacht is crucially needed.

Reading the teenage stories of survivors' lives before the war open discussions, curiosity, connections, grief, and pride. The study of the Holocaust can begin in depth in High School and beyond. By presenting this study as a continuation of centuries of thriving and surviving, the result is a very different and comprehensive perspective. This approach is just as important for the general population. The mechanisms of The Final Solution are not for teenagers to grasp. Rather it is especially for those who deny and diminish the impact. The role and history of Israel can also be better understood in a different perspective.

Let us acclaim and honor our very long history that continues and thrives.