Teaching the Holocaust
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In my first year of teaching about the Holocaust at UTM, I realized it would be an experience like none I’d had before. It was 2003, and I’d just returned from a year as a professor at Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. I say returned because I had done both my undergraduate and PhD degrees at the University of Toronto. So being back in the GTA was a very happy homecoming.

As a PhD student, I had been the TA for “The Holocaust in History” at least three times. On the downtown campus, where I taught, the class was filled interested and engaged students, many of whom were very familiar with the Holocaust from different vantage points; either hearing about it from their family and friends, or having grandparents who were survivors. I once even had a student who himself was a survivor of the Holocaust from Hungary (and let me tell you, he was pretty skeptical that a 25 year old Canadian woman would be able to teach him much about what he had lived through. But I will never forget the words of my wise and wonderful professor, Jacques Kornberg, who reminded me that one doesn’t need to experience all of history to be able to teach it well. After all, he said, “breaking your arm doesn’t make you an orthopedic surgeon.”) At Marquette, the student body was very different: a Jesuit school with a very famous basketball team, most of Marquette’s students were the Catholic children of alumni from the Milwaukee/Chicago area. This means that to them, learning about the Holocaust was a completely new encounter, an eye-opener, something of a shock to the system about man’s inhumanity to man. They were earnest, engaged, horrified, and ultimately grateful to have learned about what happened in Central Europe 60 years before.
The student body at UTM was completely different for me yet again, but in the most wonderful and surprising ways. In 2003 I taught the course to a group of 45 students, and it was a year long. I got to know many of them very well because of this longer time period, and was amazed and delighted to find that they were fascinated by the history not because their family members had lived through it, or because it was all new to them. Instead, I learned that many, many of my students were either first generation Canadians or new immigrants from war-torn countries: Albania, Bosnia, Croatia, Ethiopia, India, Pakistan, Serbia, Sri Lanka, Sudan… the list went on and on. And every year since, I have seen a similar pattern, where students bring their own histories and experiences to the classroom. One student in particular remembered the bombs raining down on her beloved city of Sarajevo when she was a small child, and explained that even while it was happening she could not fathom that it was happening to her. Another recalled feeling persecuted and terrified as a Tamil in Sri Lanka, always aware that her ethnicity put her in real danger, even though she was an innocent teenager who had already suffered the indignities of discrimination and intolerance.

The most extraordinary and rewarding aspect of teaching the Holocaust to the diverse body of students at UTM has been the surprising learning experience it has been for me. I was admittedly somewhat suspicious of the motives behind all of these students taking the Holocaust course. Were they there to prove to themselves and others that what they had gone through was worse? To relativize, compare, and belittle the experience of the Jews in the 1940s? Were they going to engage in a kind of “hierarchy of suffering” in which they would try to hijack the Holocaust with sentiments of “enough already, what about what our people went through?” Worse, were some of them going to deny that it had ever happened? I was wrong on all counts. Each time I have taught the course I have understood from my students that they are really there
to learn, to comprehend, and to combat the factors that lead down the slippery slope from racial persecution, to segregation, to expulsion, and to murder. They all in some ways have shared in the understanding that it is the turning away, the indifference, the apathy towards one’s neighbours that creates an atmosphere in which governments and nations can engage in the most horrific of crimes. For my many students who have not had to endure war or persecution, this message has come across loud and clear not just because of what they learn from me, but what they learn from their fellow students in the seat next to them.

The student from Sarajevo was grappling with the concept of comprehension: how was it that the world stood by and did nothing about the mass murder of the Jews, even though they had a great deal of information about what was happening? Why did the Jews themselves not react more defiantly? Her experience showed that one could experience horror without really being able to comprehend it, to grasp its full weight and consequences. The Tamil student was wrestling with the very real ordeal of being degraded and denied rights simply by being born into an ethnic group. All of these shared experiences greatly enrich the classroom and my teaching of this subject. And what of denial? My only real encounter with this pernicious phenomenon was when a newly emigrated Pakistani student told me that he had been told by his family and friends that the Holocaust was not real; but now, he went home every week after class and gave his parents mini-lessons on the facts and horrors of the Holocaust. He was happy to report that both his father and mother were receptive and open to what he was learning at UTM, and now eagerly awaited the next installment of his lessons every week. So much for my preconceived notions about closed minds and intransigent prejudice.

“The Holocaust in History” is now a half-year class with over 100 students every year. It has grown and evolved immensely, and mainly because of what I have learned from my students
rather than the other way around. On the first day of class I always ask students: “why are you here?” and push them to examine their motives for signing up in droves to learn about such a horrific chapter of history. By the same token, I ask myself: “why are you teaching this subject?” Other than the usual comforting explanations I give myself – it’s part of my history as the child of German parents who left that country out of disgust at its past, it’s important that we never forget, it’s a noble goal – I have come to realize that we must not examine the Holocaust in a bubble, as a singular, incomparable event of the past that we need to remember. Instead, my students have taught me that there are many events, attitudes, and prejudices we can all universally recognize as steps on the path that descends into persecution. Be it in former Yugoslavia, Sri Lanka, Pakistan or Canada, this is what teaching at UTM has taught me: we are all students, and we all need to listen to each other.