

Knowing What Young Readers Don't: Filling Jewish Holes in Their Knowledge of American History **Norman Finkelstein**

Description: Jews have been part of the American fabric since 1654, yet you wouldn't know that from the history courses Jewish kids take. Textbooks reveal little about the Jewish experience and teachers themselves often are not aware. Jews have fought in every American war. They have contributed to every aspect of American life from literature and the arts to science and politics. We are a distinct minority whose story remains hidden. So how can young readers learn about the Jewish presence in American history? Through nonfiction, historical fiction and biographies targeting all aspects of Jewish involvement in the story of America.

Norman H. Finkelstein is the author of twenty nonfiction books for young readers. His subjects range from the Holocaust and Israel to biographies of Theodor Herzl and Julius Rosenwald. Two of his books, *Heeding the Call* and *Forged in Freedom* are National Jewish Book Award winners. A retired public school librarian, Norm has been teaching history in Hebrew College's Prozdor program for thirty-five years. His forthcoming books are *The Workers' Champion: Samuel Gompers* and *The Capture of Black Bart*. He is a member of AJL, the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators, Biographer's International and The Author's Guild.

I fill holes. Whether teaching high schoolers or through my books, my goal is the same: to help Jewish kids understand and appreciate their place in American history. If, kids only learn what is in their history class texts, they come away thinking that Jews played no role in the building of America. They read of Roger Williams and William Penn but not of Asser Levy. They learn of Paul Revere and Thomas Jefferson but not of Gershom Mendes Seixas and Mordecai Sheftall. They hear of Susan B. Anthony but not of Clara Lemlich and Lillian Wald. In an age of multicultural sensitivity, Jews are often unconsciously written out of American history.

Indeed the blessings of America have become something of a curse. We Jews are indisputably a minority, yet to many of our fellow Americans we've just been swallowed up into the mainstream. Because of this friendly assimilation, Jewish children experience a disconnect between their lives as Americans and Jews. And since they don't know what they don't know,

they aren't aware of the Jewish connections to the history they are studying. That's where I come in.

I want my young readers to find themselves in the history of America. I want them to understand the complexities of being both Jewish and American. I want them to know that we've been here since 1654. I want them to appreciate how American Jews went from learners of American culture to its creators. I want them to feel a sense of pride in how far we've come.

Think back to your high school history classes. Few if any Jews appeared in your textbooks. But if we dig just a little, we can find Jewish men and women who played significant roles in every era of American history. Asser Levy was the first. His fight for religious equality set the benchmark for future generation. How many books about him do you know? I am a hardline proponent of nonfiction. Yet there are times when historical fiction fits the bill. In Asser's case, we do not know much about him personally except from documents. That's where good historical fiction comes in. At the last AJL convention in Boston my friend Jackie Dembar Greene and I presented jointly on two of our respective books, her historical fiction and my nonfiction both dealing with the arrival of the first Jews in America. Two sides of the same coin, each providing a different approach.

By the time of the American Revolution there were about 2000 Jews living in the Colonies. Some supported Britain but most supported the Revolution. When you are asked to name a Jewish hero of the Revolution, I'm guessing you will come up with Haym Solomon. I have nothing personal against him - he bankrupted himself supporting the Cause - but who was he? A moneylender! Doesn't that fit the stereotype! My choice for a hero is Frances Salvador. Not only the first Jew to win a popular election in the New World, he was a fighter who carried a gun. Unfortunately, his life was cut short in battle. Unless you happen to be from South Carolina

you probably never heard of him. Yet, here was a role model whose story can captivate all readers, not just Jews.

Let's face it. American history textbooks are never going to include the number of Jewish connections we would like to see. That's where writers and publishers come in to create appealing books that address Jewish contributions to American history. Whether historical fiction or nonfiction, picture books or biographies, Fortunately, we've begun to see growth in that market, but we have a long way to go. I am heartened by the recent books for kids about contemporary Jewish personalities. There are books about sport heroes, entertainers, Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Dr. Ruth. My personal interest is in the long-forgotten figures of American history. The possibilities are endless.

Let's look at just a few areas that go largely uncovered.

American wars. Jews have participated beyond their population percentages in every war we've ever fought. In fact, Jews made up half of West Point's first graduating class in 1802. (Well, to be perfectly honest, there were only two graduates that year). During the Civil War there were Jewish generals on both sides and civilian men and women who made a difference. Some interesting stories there. Cesar Kaskel's *chutzpah* deserves to be told. He was not a soldier but a Paducah, Kentucky businessman. When General Ulysses S. Grant issued his infamous General Orders No. 11 expelling all Jews from three Southern states, Cesar jumped into action. He hastened to Washington where he sought the help of Abraham Lincoln to quickly rescind the order. His was a great example of Jews standing up for their rights as Americans.

The Dark Side. When we think of the great wave of Eastern European immigration, nostalgia sometimes overtakes reality. The warm and fuzzy image of *bubbes* stirring chicken soup over a hot stove twenty-four a day does not negate the terrible living and working

conditions of the time. Jews led the way in building unions. In my forthcoming book, *Union Made*, I tell the story of Samuel Gompers and his fight for worker rights. His founding of the American Federation of Labor changed the way America treated workers. Although he does appear in history books, his Jewish connections do not.

Another book for young readers I'd like to write, but no publisher I've approached dares to do it, is the story of the Jewish gangster in America. I know, it's a *shonda*, but it is a reality we cannot sweep under the rug. Understanding who these gangsters were and why they did what they did should not be swept under the rug. It can help young readers better understand how some American Jews coped with the 1920s and 1930s. It's OK for kids to know that American Jewish life has not always been rosy.

And then, there is *the Holocaust*. There is certainly no lack of books for kids on the Holocaust including my 1985 *Remember Not to Forget*. But not many books focus on how American Jews dealt with that era. What was life like for them in 1930s and 1940s America? I teach a course to high schoolers titled, *Safe and Afraid: American Jews During the Holocaust*. We learn about the activism, the political powerlessness amid the rampant anti-Semitism of the times. While the focus of Holocaust literature should be on Europe, it is important for students to understand how their American great-grandparents lived through that terrible time.

Biographies of important but largely forgotten Jewish men and women let kids place themselves in American history as Jews. Remember, my reading audience was not yet born when Bill Clinton was president. They have no historical memory. So, as I write, I can't take anything for granted. In 1927 Charles A. Lindbergh became the first person to safely fly across the Atlantic. What no one realizes is that he was in a highly publicized race with another Charles A. – Charles A. Levine to be first. He beat Levine but Levine flew anyway to make the second

successful crossing and receive almost the same amount of public adulation as Lindbergh. His story, now long forgotten, is fascinating, and I tell it in *Three Across: The Great Transatlantic Air Race of 1927*. At a time of great anti-Semitism, his headline making exploits boosted Jewish self-image. Who knew that Jews could fly?

Jewish philanthropy may not be a hot topic for kids, but when one individual changes people's lives its worth considering. Guggenheim, Bloomberg, Annenberg, Schiff, and Warburg are just a few of the American Jewish families that took *tikkun olam* seriously. There are stories there to be told. Years ago I discovered the life of Julius Rosenwald, who headed Sears, Roebuck and Company for decades. The result was *Schools of Hope: How Julius Rosenwald Changed African American Education*. Rosenwald was responsible for the building of over 5300 schools for black kids in the deep rural South. His story connects readers to the long struggle for civil rights and how one person can make a difference for good in people's lives.

To summarize, there are stories that can place Jews in the center of every major event in American history. We just need to identify them, research them and write appealing books about them. Whether as teachers, librarians or writers, we all need to do our part to fill those holes.