

August 10, 2020

Dear Instructional Quality Commission of the California Board of Education

I wish there had been Ethnic Studies where I grew up. I'd have known the history of my people, understood the need for roots and continuity with our ancestors and the yearning for a place where we belong. Jews were *dhimmi*, in Arabic "protected" non-citizens, an immutable inferior status.

The grade school teachers in Tripoli, Libya—an Italian colony from 1911 to 1943--taught *Lettere*—Italian, Latin, Geography, History. But, unlike George Orwell, whose learning of history was recalling "orgies of dates" without interest in their meaning, the history I learned was a mixture of harmful sentimentality and exclusion. The conquests of the Roman Empire, the heroic Crusaders, the generous royals Isabel and Ferdinand--three Caravels we drew and colored in pencil--were facts worth celebrating. In *History of Libya*, a country born in 1951, we knew the full name of our King, Idris el Awal el Mahdi el Mohammad, el Senussi and stood with pride as we sang, in Arabic, the Libyan national anthem *Ya Biladi*, My Country.

With equal fervor we sang *Fratelli d'Italia*, the Italian national anthem. And in choir, when we sang Verdi's Nabucco "Va, pensiero," we didn't know that the title of the aria is "Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves," and that it recollects the period of Babylonian captivity after the destruction of the First Temple in Jerusalem in 586 BCE.

Jews did not exist in history textbooks. Israel did not exist in the atlas, except for the indelible black ink that obliterated it and, paradoxically, drew attention to it. Not a word about prejudice, about violence, about racial laws, about humiliation. We didn't know that Jews had been in this land--now called Libya--for more than 2,300 years; that the Spanish Inquisition tortured and expelled the Jews it couldn't convert to Christianity; that the Crusaders slaughtered many thousands of Jews; that the Romans destroyed the Second Temple in Jerusalem and massacred and enslaved the Jewish people. And that in 1943, Mussolini ordered the deportation of 2,500 Libyan Jews to the concentration camp of Giado, about 175 kilometers from Tripoli, where about 600 died of typhus and starvation before they were liberated by the Allies. Those with British passports were deported to Bergen-Belsen.

The denial and distortion of history is denial of people's cultural identity, of their right to exist. What I did see, though, cannot be denied: persecution, destruction, and the last pogrom of 1967 before the remaining 3,000 Jews of Libya fled with only one suitcase per person. All assets confiscated.

As an Emerita faculty at San Jose State University, I know that it can be tempting to feed answers rather than to allow students to think for themselves. But teaching students the truth about stories of struggles and triumphs without dogma, political ideology and bias, so that they acquire the confidence to discern, to form and to trust their own opinions is not merely imperative: it's the moral thing to do. Ethnic Studies has, indeed, the potential to enhance critical thinking, tolerance, understanding. For the wellbeing of our students and our faculty, please make sure that the ESMC Guiding Values and Principles do reflect the values laid out in the original legislation, AB 2016.

Sincerely,

Dalia Sirkin