Reflective Essay

The research project that we are submitting for consideration was conducted in Dr. Levitsky’s course, “Holocaust Literature”, in the Spring of 2015. During WWII, Europe was not safe for the Jewish people as they were being persecuted. Many Jewish people were forced to flee Europe in order to survive. As a result, a large group of Jewish people sought refuge in Shanghai. For our final project, we focused our research and aimed to answer the question, how was life in Shanghai for the Jewish refugees during WWII? More specifically, we focused on the interaction between Chinese citizens and Jewish refugees as well as how the existing Jewish community, Baghdadi Jews interacted with the fleeing European refugee Jews. Our successes and obstacles that we faced during the completion of this project were dependent on the use of the library’s resources. The final project consisted on the use of the Werner von Boltenstern Shanghai Photograph digital collection, a collection of photographs taken during 1937-1947 in Shanghai. Gathering textual as well as any evidence that related to life in Shanghai during WWII, specifically about the Jewish refugees was very scarce. We had to use different types of sources in order to successfully complete our research project.

As a group we were to view and analyze the Boltenstern digital collection and correlate our findings with our research. The library’s resources played an essential role in our research. We used Flicker to access the digital collection and obtain images that supported our focus. Many of our successes derived from the use of the library’s events and the discovery of an image in a documentary that we found on YouTube. While watching the documentary, “Shanghai Ghetto” we were able to identify an image that is part of the Boltenstern collection, where we discovered that there was an existing Jewish presence in Shanghai. The Baghdadi Jews had a thriving and rich Jewish presence in Shanghai. The Baghdadi Jews prospered from the rich trade
as Shanghai was able to grow into a bustling economic hub while it still held close to its native roots. We also made use of the events that were being held at the library. We reached out to our library contact, Melanie Hubbard and she was thrilled by our findings. She was able to reach out to the director of the film and ask where they had gotten the image or if they knew Boltenstein and he may have given them the image.

Additionally, we attended “The Werner von Boltenstern Shanghai Photograph and Negative Collection Launch Celebration” where we were able to network and secure an interview with the son of a Jewish refugee who lived in Shanghai during WWII. We interviewed Rabbi Yisroel Blumenstein and he gave us an enormous amount of valuable information that explained the images that we were analyzing and researching. He gave us helpful insight to the life in Shanghai during WWII. Moreover, he gave us pictures of his mother of when she lived in Shanghai as well as an array of additional information.

The project also consisted of obstacles that we overcame. The project was to create a Tumblr page and we had to design it. Using Tumblr was new for both of us. The formatting, gaining access and the layout were all challenging. We turned to librarian, Melanie Hubbard for guidance and assistance. Her assistance in using this type of media was instrumental for our group’s success.