

Holocaust Conference in Harbin, China
“The World Jewish Studies and Holocaust Education Conference 2013”

Harbin Modern Hotel

Organized by the AHO and
College of Society and History, Harbin Normal University
October 9-15, 2013

The goal of the conference was to encourage dialogue between American and Chinese scholars, educators, and museum directors on studies of the Holocaust and Holocaust education in both cultures and consider ways there can be continued sharing of ideas for scholarship and pedagogy. Nancy Li, who organized the conference, plans to put together a proceedings with the help of participants so that there will be basis for future exchange virtually and face to face. The first four days were held in Harbin and the final three days were in Shanghai.

The opening day of the conference, October 9, began with Mary Lee Webeck, education director of the Holocaust Museum Houston, and Mary Johnson, Senior Historian for Facing History and Ourselves, leading a three hour class for three hundred history and liberal arts students at Harbin Normal University. The topic was how the Holocaust was presented in the United States, with Mary Lee focusing on how a large museum does educational programs and Mary Johnson highlighting the major themes and approaches of Facing History and Ourselves. Prior to the session, Mary Lee and Mary met with faculty and deans from Harbin Normal University at a formal luncheon where we learned why the university took such an interest in making sure their students had an understanding of the era of World War II and the Holocaust and what the era meant for the Chinese people. Since one of the deans had attended a seminar at Holocaust Museum Houston, he took opened the luncheon discussion describing how he had experienced Holocaust education in the United States and how he hoped some of the approach and information he learned would be integrated in the curricula of Harbin Normal University.

The three hours with students was quite incredible. Many did not speak English but an expert translator was able to convey our major ideas. Since we used PowerPoint and pictures, students were able to follow much of what we were saying. One amazing thing of presenting in a place where English is not the

overall language is how the modern cell phone works. When I spoke of the Milgram experiments, every student brought out a cell phone to check the meaning. And, when Mary Lee described her museum in Houston, the cell phones brought up photos of the museum. After we each described our work and how we seek to encourage civic engagement and concern for others through the study of the Holocaust, there was time for questions. And, the questions came (of course through the use of the translator). They wanted to know if American students were interested in the topic and what they knew of Jews in China. They also commented on how interested they were in our mention of studying history through the lens of human behavior. When the formal class time ended, many students came forward to find out more and speak directly to us. What was so amazing to Mary Lee and me was the level of interest and concern these students showed and the length of time they were willing to sit in a large auditorium. It was the kind of afternoon neither of us will ever forget. We both mentioned afterwards how interesting it would be to arrange for an exchange with American undergraduates and Harbin Normal University students. Not so impossible with webinars etc. today.

The formal conference at the Harbin Modern Hotel began in the early evening where scholars, local political leaders and university students joined American participants for a formal tour of the hotel and the unveiling of the statue to the founder of the hotel in 1906. The hotel was selected for the events since it had been a central meeting place for thousands of Russian Jews in the early twentieth century who had fled the Russian Empire and found acceptance and business opportunities in Harbin. In subsequent decades the hotel was meeting place for members of the League of Nations and international conferences.

The first full day of the conference, October 10, focused on presentations by Chinese scholars who deal with the history of Jews in China and the study of the Holocaust in China. There was a particular focus on what took place in the area of Harbin in Northeast China which had been targeted by the Japanese in 1937 and throughout World War II. The agenda attached to this summary gives the names of the presenters.

I would like to mention three outstanding presentations. One was the overview of Chinese Holocaust Research on education in the 20th century by Professor Zhang Qianhong; the second was the study of the Eichmann Trial and Israeli Collective Memory on the Holocaust with a focus on Hebrew Literature by Professor Zhong Zhiqing; and the third was The Crimes of Japanese invaders in Northeast China by Professor Le Shujuan. Also of interest was the local

history of Harbin by Professor Fu Mingling who stressed the significant role Jews played in early twentieth century Harbin where they found refuge from the Russian Empire and the Bolshevik Revolution.

I personally was amazed at how little I knew of what had happened in Northeast China (No Man's Land). I did know of Nanjing but not of other areas during the war. This was reinforced the following day by a visit to the museum 731 where so many of the gassing and biological experiments took place under Japanese auspices. I was also interested in learning how much the Eichmann Trial was singled out as the start of interest in China regarding the Nazis and the Holocaust. And, pieces of literature used by Professor Zhong Zhiqing to study Jewish experiences and World War II were pieces I had never studied. (The papers presented will be available in the forthcoming proceedings)

The second full day of the conference in Harbin focused on American Holocaust educational institutions and pedagogy along with global efforts of Facing History and Ourselves and the United Nations. Kimberly Mann who has worked with the UN Remembrance Days since 2006 did an excellent summary of how she and a small staff encourage Holocaust education worldwide with a special focus on Latin America and parts of Europe. She emphasized that effective films with usable study guides have a tremendous impact and how interest in the subject continues to grow as does interest in her Holocaust Remembrance Day at the UN each January. She also mentioned how she enjoyed working with partners such as Facing History and Ourselves and sees this as the most effective way to sustain interest in Holocaust Education. Dimitry Anselme did a brilliant presentation of Facing History's work in China, explaining its evolution since 2007 and how our work has gotten some significant inroads in certain areas. He also described how Facing History works with schools after teachers are trained and how we are just now beginning to approach governmental leaders for deepening the work. Dimitry left all wanting to know more about Facing History and Ourselves. The next session featured Mary Lee Webeck of the Holocaust Museum Houston and Mary Johnson of Facing History and Ourselves. Mary Lee did an in-depth examination of how the Houston Museum reaches students of all backgrounds and integrates arts and media in all their presentations. Mary Johnson gave more background on the approach of Facing History stressing the scope and sequence and our continued interest in engaging students in interactive forms of learning. Even with an audience of non-English speaking college students, she tried a Facing History exercise with Dear Teacher and encouraged think pair share. She also mentioned how Facing History works with museums such as

Houston and other Holocaust and Genocide centers go achieve the partnerships that Kimberly Mann had mentioned were so important earlier. (PowerPoint by all of the presenters in the morning will be available in the proceedings).

The afternoon had a fascinating panel of Holocaust museum directors who discussed how they keep their organizations abreast new approaches to learning as well as maintain necessary funding. Once again, it was clear that partnerships are essential for the future generations of Holocaust education. They also discussed ways they see bringing some of the Chinese scholars and preserves' teachers to the United States for continuing the dialogue begun in Harbin. Kori Street's presentation on the I witness project with a clip of a Nanjing testimony enhanced the whole discussion of how important partnerships are and how I witness is expanding to work with the project internationally. Her presentation was a strong reminder of the power of testimonies in Holocaust and genocide education.

The late afternoon visit to the Museum 731 was a sober reminder of the continuing legacy of World War II. Still in the 21st century remnants of where gas was used have potential for harming and, at times, killing people. The artifacts of the medical experiments are all too familiar for those of us who have studied the Nazi doctors' trial.

The next two days in Shanghai were spent visiting the Shanghai sites, most importantly the Jewish Refugee Museum where we learned how a new museum is gaining continued attention. It was of special interest to me since I am friends with Betty Grebinshikoff, who was a child in the Shanghai Ghetto, and she is featured in the museum. The overall experience at this museum is to suggest the difficulties of refugee life even when Jews escaped Nazi Europe but also how incredible it was that the Shanghai community found a place for the refugees. We also had an opportunity to hear Kimberly Mann who runs the UN program at the Shanghai Refugee Museum and hear the response of her Chinese audience to the work the UN is doing.

What was so striking in Shanghai was how different it was as a city from the more northern city of Harbin. English is much more in use in Shanghai and the overall appearance of the city seems more European than Harbin.

Most important, however, were the discussions of American participants at the conference about their time in Harbin and the conference presentations. The more we spoke with one another, the more we began thinking of the Holocaust

as an event embedded in the much broader experience of World War II. We are left with large questions: why was brutality and mass murder so accepted in this era in many parts of the world? How much was known of what was happening in Europe among those in the Pacific? How does the world ever come to terms with what occurred in the 1930s and 1940s? And of course, how do we promote cooperation and understanding in our global community?