An Unexpected Encounter in Shanghai
In the game of Jewish geography some moments are priceless, as they bring together not only people from very different backgrounds but also from different eras, seemingly allowing history and the present to converge. None was as gratifying as my connection to two elderly Shanghai residents, Pasha and Betty. Their personal stories are filled with the remarkable indeed.

It all started one afternoon when my roommate, an expat from San Francisco, was helping me connect to two local women as part of my work. He dialed a number and began speaking Chinese to the person on the other end of the phone. As it turned out, his translation wasn't necessary. Pasha, to our surprise, spoke perfect English.

I explained to her that I worked for the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) in Shanghai and was checking in on her as a long-time recipient of JDC aid. After several moments of conversation, Pasha excitedly asked us to visit her the next day.

With the invitation to visit in hand, we traveled through Shanghai’s Xujiahui district. The building was 20 stories tall and looked as if it were built in the 1960’s. Inside was Pasha and, in another wonderful twist, Betty, another recipient of JDC help, had joined her. On entering and reminding them of why I was in China, the ladies became elated and said, “Oh! That makes us so happy! We are so happy to see you!!! The Joint is amazing!”

To understand better why we visited these two ladies and how they came to receive JDC aid, a bit of history is in order: In the 1930’s, Jews from Europe fled Nazi terror and arrived in Shanghai. Without visa requirements, the city was a safe haven. As other countries closed their doors to Jews leading up to the Second World War, more than 16,000 Jewish refugees found asylum in Shanghai. They included many people who would go on to become famous: artist Peter Max, former U.S Treasury Secretary Michael Blumenthal, fashion designer Ilie Wacs, and San Francisco philanthropist Deborah Strobin.

The Jews lived harmoniously with the locals in the Hongkou Ghetto, originally a place where the city’s poorest people lived. But times were very hard for the refugees – they could not work, struggled to make ends meet, and relied on the local Jewish community and organizations like JDC to ensure they were cared for. During that time, JDC, known as “the Joint,” stepped in to provide food, education, vocational training, built hospitals, and set up an emigration office. This was in addition to the vibrant Jewish community life – theater, sports, and culture – that popped up as a result of the refugees’ need to create a space of their own.

As often happens, the Jewish refugees integrated into their neighborhood and often mixed with locals – from black-market business dealings … to shopping in the markets … to social encounters. And that’s where Pasha and Betty’s stories begin.

Betty was born on August 7, 1941 in the ghetto to a Jewish father who escaped from Austria and a Chinese mother. Having been born in Hongkou where all the Jewish refugees were living, she immediately recalled how “the Jewish community always took care of my family. The Jews always helped each other pass those difficult days when we were most desperate. I used to go to the
Joint office and meet with Mr. Levine who was the chairman. He left also– he was really a kind man,” said Betty.

In 1951 her father died and then in 1955 her mother also passed. Thus, Betty, at 14, and her sister, at 9, were left all alone.

“Luckily, the Jewish community took us in. Mr. Levine and his wife took good care of my sister and me. We would always go to their home, celebrate Shabbat, all the Jewish holidays. I remember eating matzah. Mr. Levine used to bring us to his office and since no one was able to take care of us, he did. What a generous and kind man. When Mr. Levine left, celebrating those Jewish rituals ceased since it wasn’t possible to carry them out.”

Today, Betty unfortunately suffers from hypertension and eye trouble. Though she has a hard time caring for herself, but short of a visit from her younger sister who resides in Australia, she does not see much of her family.

Pasha, on the other hand, was born in 1939 to a Jewish father who had fled Siberia and, like Betty, to a Chinese mother. Her father passed away in 1956 when she was 16 years old. She recalls, “Thanks to Mr. Levine who was the community leader, we were really cared for and they ensured we had everything we needed.”

Pasha discussed education with me at length and she mentioned how the Jewish community poured resources into guaranteeing her attendance at a very good school.

“I received a better education as the Jewish leaders in the community showed a lot of concern for me. I suffered from tuberculosis as a child and they cured me with medicine. They used to also give my family money for coal, milk, and other necessities,” she said. “After the war, when everyone started to leave, I was very eager to get away from China but unfortunately it was impossible.”

“Since I couldn’t leave, at the age of 14, I started to study Chinese,” Pasha continued. “I could speak a little bit of Hebrew too and I would follow prayers when attending services at the synagogue. I could recite the bible – I loved it. As I was very diligent and loved to study, the Jewish community paid my tuition to attend the Shanghai Private Business College.”

On the way home from my visit with Betty and Pasha, I realized that since the start
of my work as a JDC Entwine volunteer, I’ve been exceptionally fortunate to have witnessed firsthand the contribution of Jews and the Jewish people in diverse communities that are worlds apart. I have met people who are part of history and those that are changing the future, like Dr. Rick Hodes in Ethiopia. Now in my second year of service in Shanghai, sitting for an afternoon with two women whose lives have been inextricably tied up with history, the Jewish experience, and the caring hand of Jews around the world, I understood for the first time the dictum, kol yisrael arevim zeh la zeh – all Jews are responsible for one another. Pasha and Betty attest to the fact of the importance of each individual in our tradition; though time and place might have separated them from community, they were not forgotten.

Perhaps a little trite, but true, this encounter impacted me more than any other experience I have had in Shanghai – experiences that included a visit to the wonderful Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum or to the historic and awe-inspiring Ohel Moshe Synagogue or helping to organize the recent Destination Shanghai gathering that included more than 150 Jews celebrating emerging Jewish life in Asia. It somehow tied it all together for me.

Needless to say, these last two years have changed my life. My professional trajectory went from attending medical school to observing and helping Jewish and non-Jewish communities around the world with an organization recalled by many with pride, the Joint. That legacy, and my own contribution, is not just the stuff of dusty history books and twenty-something wanderlust. It’s a palpable responsibility to building, with my own hands, the future for a people that, however far apart, always seem to find one another. And in Jewish geography, that means I win.

Thank you to Betty and Pasha for sharing an afternoon and your stories.

Shaun Goldstone spent thirteen months in Ethiopia in the JDC Entwine Global Jewish Service Corp and most recently was awarded JDC’s Ralph I. Goldman Fellowship in international Jewish service where he served in St. Petersburg and Shanghai, and will soon be heading to the Baltics to engage further in Jewish community development work.