

This summer, I assisted Sewanee professor Shana Minkin with her research on death practices under empire, specifically during the French imperial presence in Alexandria, Egypt, of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. My principal responsibility was translation of documents from French to English. The translations are a part of a manuscript tentatively titled, “Life after Death: Diplomacy, Bureaucracy, and Community in Alexandria, Egypt, 1864-1914”. The nature of the documents varied; some were primary sources from the French Consulate in Alexandria located in the archives in Nantes, France, and others were secondary sources written about turn-of-the-century Alexandria.

This type of translation work helped me develop and refine my French language skills in a way that I have not had much opportunity to explore. I took a French-to-English translation course offered by Professor Ramsey in the French department here at Sewanee, but as there is only so much time in a single semester, we were only able to do a few different kinds of translation. The course did provide me with the basic translation skills needed to tackle the work I did this summer. I took these abilities and applied them in an archival research context, which I had not previously had the opportunity to do. Not only did this work allow me to practice these skills, but it also helped me expand on them and use them in new and interesting ways.

The archival documents included death declarations, hospital records, and letters between the consulates as well as professionals in Alexandria. I personally found the death declarations fascinating. These were records of people declaring a person’s death and some of their personal information to the French Consulate. I thought it was surprising that people from many different countries, including Switzerland, Turkey, and Algeria, declared deaths to the French imperial

presence instead of their own governments. For some of these nationalities, this practice makes sense: at the time, Algeria was under French power, so it is logical that those people would report to the French. However, Switzerland and Turkey were not, so why did people from these countries report deaths to a foreign government? I never found the answer to this question in the documents, but Professor Minkin and I did discuss it and decided to keep an eye out for any hints about an answer.

However, the letters between the consulates and other city officials were perhaps the most interesting. These documents covered all sorts of different topics, from statistics about the area schools and hospitals to pages upon pages teeming with drama, the likes of which I have not personally witnessed since high school. My favorite was a series of letters about a new eye doctor at a local convent's clinic. There were two candidates for the position, and the unfavored one seemed to be prone to arguing quite violently with the other doctor as well as consul officials. This same man also had a fiancée who followed him from their home country to Alexandria, but she ended up jumping off a bridge to her death. Stories like this are one reason why I loved this internship. Not only are they fascinating on their own, but they make me feel more connected to these people, even though they died long ago.

Throughout this internship, I accomplished quite a bit of work. I translated over 100 handwritten documents, including the aforementioned death certificates and letters. Some of the work was much easier than others. Once I became familiar with the death certificates, I noticed they were very formulaic in nature. If the handwriting was difficult, the formatting helped me piece together what type of information should come next. The letters were the most challenging

but the most interesting. Because the body of the text is freeform, I did not have any structure to give me clues about the content. I relied instead on the writing itself, and when the handwriting proved too difficult to read, I used French syntax and grammar rules instead. This knowledge helped me a lot and allowed me to work through and translate passages I previously thought were incomprehensible.

Over the course of this internship, I learned a lot about language and started thinking about it differently. When I started out learning French, the main goal was to learn how to communicate well in a foreign language and make sure that I expressed my own thoughts clearly. Translation is similar in that the goal is to communicate clearly, but the thoughts are not your own. The challenge was to read a text, understand the author's ideas, then express them in a different language, which can be more difficult than it sounds. Nothing is more frustrating than understanding a phrase or expression but having no idea how to say it in English. On the other hand, nothing is more satisfying than encountering this issue and playing with words and expressions until you find a phrase that fits perfectly. I also learned about the importance of syntax and grammar rules to understanding a text. As mentioned earlier, when I could not read a certain word, I used the sentence structure and the types of words around it to figure out what function it performed in the sentence. This formed the perfect starting point to determine what the word meant.

The internship and research work with Professor Minkin has greatly affected my career goals. After completing Professor Ramsey's course, I fell in love with translation and continued to translate different texts for fun, but I did not consider becoming a certified translator. After

spending the summer working with archival documents, I have started to seriously contemplate attending a certification program after graduating from Sewanee.