

Re-assessing My Peace Corps Experience
A Senior Volunteer Takes a Second Look Back

By

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Following my retirement as a psychotherapist I joined the Peace Corps looking for a late-life adventure. My two-year tour was spent teaching English in a high school in Poland from 1997 to 1999. After the collapse of the communist regime, the Polish Ministry of Education wanted to replace Russian with English as the primary foreign language required in the schools. To accomplish this, in 1990 the Ministry contracted with the Peace Corps to send teachers over the next decade. I was in the next to the last group.

At 67, I was among a handful of senior (over 50) volunteers in our class of fifty, most of whom were in their twenties and thirties. Of the more than 6,000 volunteers worldwide at the time, only 450 were seniors. The number has increased significantly since then as the Peace Corps has made a strong effort to recruit older volunteers.

Our eleven weeks of training were held in the city of Radom, a couple hours south of Warsaw. During this time we were introduced to the language, the culture, and the teaching of English. At the end of the summer was a formal swearing-in ceremony, with the American ambassador leading us in the oath of office, the same our president takes.

The next day we were sent to our respective teaching sites. I was assigned to a school in Swidnica (pronounced Shwidnitza), a city of 65,000 in southwest Poland, a region that until the end of World War II had belonged to Germany. The following two years would be far more challenging than I had anticipated.

For one, I had never been a classroom teacher. For another, Polish is an exceedingly difficult language. Though I didn't need it in my classes, it was essential for negotiating daily life outside of school. With the aid of a tutor I made slow progress, yet it was a struggle until the end, falling far short of the fluency I had achieved in German when I lived in Munch for two years in my mid-twenties. And not least, there were the initial months of feeling isolated and lonely. Adjusting to the Polish way of life and making new friends came slowly.

I lived in a small, two-room apartment on the top floor of my school. Conveniently, my classroom was just down the hall. Virtually all my students had already studied English for several years. Trying to keep my students from talking during lessons was my greatest aggravation at first. But aside from that and a few misbehaving boys, most of my students were respectful and motivated to improve their English.

By the time my tour was up I could list a few accomplishments: I had fulfilled my two-year obligation (25% of volunteers drop out along the way.). I learned what it meant to be a classroom teacher, a profession for which I have even greater respect. I was able to travel and learn about a different culture. Perhaps most important, I formed enduring friendships, both Polish and American. I have been back to Poland several times, twice to attend a wedding.

In 2008, I published a memoir about my late-life adventure, bringing a sense of closure. Yet since then hardly a day goes by that I don't think about my time in Poland. In my musings I find myself taking another look back.

Once we had arrived in Poland, our lives were organized out of the Peace Corps headquarters in Warsaw. During training we were housed with local families and came together each morning for classes. In spite of my difficulty with Polish, I thought the language instruction was excellent. Learning about Polish culture came from our host families, shop keepers, lectures and weekend trips. As for teaching English, my classes offered very little that would prepare me for what awaited me in Swidnica.

I arrived at my school three days before classes started. I assumed that I would be sharing teaching duties with a Polish counterpart, as is the Peace Corps policy, she teaching the grammar and I concentrating on speaking and written expression. Instead, to my shock and dismay, I was informed that I would be the only teacher for 125 third year students. My predecessor had been an experienced teacher and after one semester requested that she take over both roles. The training staff in Radom obviously didn't know that I would inherit this arrangement. However, once I overcame my initial panic, over time this approach turned out to be a proverbial blessing in disguise. I can see more clearly now that being on my own did a great deal to enhance my self confidence.

The following year, with a new group of students, I was told that my counterpart would teach the grammar. This left me free to explore whatever subjects I wanted. One of my regrets is that I had not been more generous in my grading of written assignments, giving more weight to content over grammatical errors. At the end of the year I gave my students an assignment to write a brief autobiography. Many of these were priceless stories that clearly deserved a higher mark.

I was considered one of the school faculty and lived modestly on the two hundred dollars monthly salary. Added to this was ninety dollars a month the Peace Corps

deposited in my local bank account for travel expenses to attend periodic meetings. In addition to end-of-semester reports, the Peace Corps required that we undertake one or two community projects. To give us time we had no Friday classes.

One of mine was associated with the Peace Church, a 17th century Protestant landmark in Swidnica and now a INESCO World Heritage Site that was built following the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia that ended the Thirty Years War. The church's distinctive architecture, artwork and colorful history make it a popular tourist destination. Cassette recordings are available to visitors in Polish, German and English. My contribution, after extensive research, was to make a new English recording. As far as I know, you can still hear my voice today.

When I joined the Peace Corps I had almost no idea what lay ahead. Yet that was part of the adventure. It was enough to trust the Peace Corps' offer of an opportunity to serve abroad in some useful way. My expectations for this unique life experience were more than amply fulfilled.

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