

Peace Corps Volunteers come in all sizes, shapes and colors. They come in all faiths as well.

As a religious Jew, I knew that my Peace Corps experience might be a bit different than the experience of, say, a Roman Catholic Peace Corps Volunteer (PCV) as we rode out our service in Ecuador, a distinctly Catholic country. Indeed, my observance of Jewish dietary laws prevented me from so much as tasting the two “national dishes” of Ecuador: *fritada*, a pork dish, and *cebiche*, a seafood concoction. Despite my avoidance of such delicacies, I still managed, as did most female PCVs in Ecuador, to gain a good 15 pounds over my two-year service.

There was but one other Jewish trainee in our group who started out at the training center in Ponce, Puerto Rico in late August, 1971. When we arrived in Ecuador, we found only three other active Jewish PCVs. It was not enough for a Peace Corps *minyán*, but it was enough for the seasoned Volunteers to tip us off to a few foibles that we might encounter as Jews after being in Ecuador for a while. Indeed, although my experience may have differed but slightly from those of my gentile associates, I was amazed to find tremendous similarities between certain experiences I had and those of other Jewish Volunteers.

Having traveled the world since my two years in Ecuador, I know for certain that the humble *gentecita* there are among the most polite people in the world. They are also among the most curious. The Ecuadorian *peon* has the most polite way, it turns out, of extracting the most intimate information from total strangers.

As do most PCVs, I traveled widely in Ecuador on buses. Although I have dark hair and olive skin, I still was a stand-out as an American in such situations. Early in my service, I was on a bus, seated next to a small, poor Ecuadorian man, hunkered together for a trip of several hours to a common destination.

My companion introduced himself and shook hands, as is the Ecuadorian custom. Of course, I offered my hand and my name in return.

“Ah, and is the *senorita* a visitor to Ecuador?” my companion asked.

“*Si*,” I responded. “I’m an American.”

“And are you a tourist in Ecuador?” he probed further.

“No,” I replied, “I’m a Peace Corps Volunteer.”

I was not surprised that the man knew what a Peace Corps Volunteer was. At that time, there were nearly 200 PCVs in Ecuador, and there had been nearly that many in-country for quite a few years. Nearly every *campesino* had met a PCV or knew someone who had.

He inquired politely about my family and marital status. He asked if I was becoming accustomed to the life in Ecuador. And then came the show-stopper:

“And, of course, *senorita*, you are a Catholic?” he queried.

“No, *senor*,” I replied softly, but firmly. “I am a Jew.”

“A Jew?” The man rolled the word around on his tongue. It tasted strange.

“And what is a Jew?” he continued, curiously but politely.

“Well, *senor*, we believe only in God the Father,” I explained simply.

“Hmmm,” he murmured, considering the idea. “I understand. So you do not believe in Jesus Christ?”

I was pleased that he got it. “No, *senor*. Only in God the Father.”

Suddenly, his face grew agitated and worried. He turned to me and with a shaky voice pleaded, “But, certainly, *senorita*, you **must** believe in the Virgin!”

It broke my heart to tell him no.

The Ecuadorian *peon* is hopelessly devoted to the Virgin. She is the source of all kindness and solace to a people so desperately downtrodden by poverty, disease, and ignorance. She may not hold open heaven’s door, but she holds them in her comforting bosom in this life.

At this point, the conversation ended. It was not out of any outrage on his part that I didn’t love the Virgin; it was because my rejection of such a beloved figure created a complete emotional and intellectual divide – an unbridgeable chasm. It broke *his* heart for me that I did not share this most fundamental emotional experience in the faith and culture that formed him. It was the silence of grief.

After this first encounter, it occurred to me that one of my new Jewish PCV friends had told me that sooner or later I would have just such a conversation. In fact, the conversation unrolled almost word for word as I had been told it would.

What was amazing was that in the course of two years, I believe I must have had the exact conversation at least a dozen times. I was glad that I was a positive model of an American and a Jew for these people who were meeting an American or a Jew for the first time. But it made me sad to know the eventual outcome of the conversation as soon as it began.

Observing Jewish holidays and customs called for creativity and flexibility.

One year, Passover fell during Lent. I was invited to the home of a new friend in Quito for lunch. She was very proud to serve me the traditional Lenten meal, *fanesca*. I didn’t have to worry about having pork in the *fanesca*, since it is a vegetarian meal for the season.

The problem was that *fanesca* is made of numerous grains, and virtually all grains except wheat especially prepared for Passover *mazta* are forbidden. What could I do? How could I refuse this dish, prepared especially in honor of the *gringa*?

Thank goodness, I drew on lessons learned years before about the customs of the *Sephardic* (Spanish/North African) Jews, whose rules about what is kosher for Passover are far more liberal than those of my *Ashkenazic* (Eastern European) tradition. The *Sephardim* allow a greater variety of grains and legumes – virtually everything that was in the *fanesca*. So, for a day, I became a *Sephardi* Jew!

Hanukah in Cuenca, shared with two other Jewish PCVs and numerous non-Jewish ones, was a blast. Not only did we make the traditional *latkes* (pancakes) out of potatoes, but experimented with *latkes* of *yucca* and *papa china* (taro). Our *menorah* grew organically as each of the eight nights of the holiday progressed: We used an empty wine bottle to hold each candle, so each night we had to consume at least one bottle of wine in order to add another candle.

I never experienced anti-Semitism among anyone in Ecuador, Peace Corps or Ecuadorian, whereas I did encounter a small amount of anti-Americanism. I felt proud to be a double ambassador of peace and understanding as a Jewish American Peace Corps Volunteer.