

Two closet doors slammed shut
Jeffrey Janis
RPCV Ukraine – 2004 – 2006

I think we all believe that we had a “unique” Peace Corps experience – different from all other Peace Corps Volunteers. In my case, my unique niche seems to be that I left for Ukraine at age 44 as an activist in both the LGBT community and in the Jewish community. Knowing I was going to a country that was part of the former Soviet Union, I suspected that I would have to go into the closet as a gay man. And I was placed in a country with one of the worst histories in terms of its treatment of Jews. A recent study by the Jewish Agency for Israel shows that from 2004 – 2005, there was a 50% increase in violent anti-Semitic attacks against individuals in Ukraine. And a 2006 study by the Kiev International Institute of Sociology found that 36% of Ukrainians do not want to see Jews as citizens. I realized that I might also have to go in the closet as a Jew.

Upon arrival it was clear to me what I felt I had to do. Being a gay and Jewish activist gave me the unique challenge of going back into the closet after a life and professional career dedicated to openness and reconciliation with identity. Although I came out of the closet more than 20 years ago, I didn’t struggle with the decision to go back into the closet as a gay man as I knew it was my only choice if I wanted to be accepted in Ukraine. And due to the rampant anti-Semitism, I knew I had no choice but to go in the closet about being Jewish. In fact, the Peace Corps advised me to not tell my host family that I was Jewish.

In Ukraine, being Jewish is a nationality or ethnic identification. Under the Soviet time, Jews had their passports stamped “Jewish” so I was not viewed as being a Jew, even by the Ukrainian Jews. I was the American. And my Ukrainian (non-Jewish) friends felt free to relate to me Jewish jokes, as for them I was not Jewish – I was the American. This made me question my own identity – was I an American or a Jew first?

Much of their homophobia is tied in with their sexist attitudes. I was appalled to see women often dress in clothing normally reserved for prostitutes walking the streets of Hollywood Boulevard with 5 inch stiletto heels, mini skirts showing their red thong underwear, and fishnet blouses. Many Ukrainians believe that women should not be paid the same amount as a man even for doing the exact same job. Signs on restaurants seeking “beautiful girls aged 20-27” are just the beginning of the discrimination that women there face. I was totally closeted to my Ukrainian friends and most of them told me they had never met a gay person before. Every Ukrainian I met asked me “Don’t you think Ukrainian women are the most beautiful in the world? When are you going to get married?”

I got so comfortable living in the closet that I sometimes forgot that I was gay. I will always remember when my close friend Rob came from America to visit me. He talked to my English Club about being in a 23 year relationship with another man. They were all not sure how to react to his stories. I looked at the group and said “Why should I care that Rob’s gay? It doesn’t impact me on any level.”

Upon arrival, I faced many of the same struggles that all Peace Corps Volunteers in Ukraine endure. The culture shock was so intense that I often slept 12 hours a night. I had to learn a complicated new language. I lived for three month intervals with two randomly selected host families. After more than 25 years of not eating red meat, I learned to subsist on pork and salo (raw pig fat). I learned how to drink multiple shots of homemade vodka and not get drunk. I lived through the Orange Revolution and secretly joined in when more than one million people were protesting in the streets in the dead of winter. I had to deal with the bird flu and the health implications of the fallout from Chernobyl. I lived on the average wage of most Ukrainians, less than \$200 a month. I took bucket baths and had to hand wash all my clothes in my bathtub. All of this made being a Peace Corps Volunteer difficult.

But I think what surprises people the most is when I tell them that none of that was very difficult. I am convinced that the one common thread that all share PCVs was dealing with the loneliness. In so many ways, our Peace Corps experiences are so incredibly parallel whether we served in Ukraine, Oman, or Somalia. We all left our comfortable surroundings and went to a foreign country – probably one we have never visited before, didn't know a single person, or speak a word of the language. We knew nothing about the culture or the people. And yet, most of us survived to come home and share our stories with our friends and families. And yes – it was hard to go back into the closet – but the truth is – it was harder for me to go in the closet as a Jew than it was as a gay man. I knew what it felt like to be in the closet as a gay man, yet I had no idea what it felt like to be a closeted Jew.

Now that I am home, my niche seems to be speaking about my Peace Corps experience at either gay and lesbian synagogues, or synagogues which are gay friendly. I have spoken at a few synagogues and people are amazed to hear my stories of dealing with the rampant anti-Semitism and homophobia. They are fascinated to hear how I lived and the work that I did. I can see them shifting uncomfortably in their seats when I talk about the widespread corruption and the mafia. Their eyes open wide when I talk about washing all my clothes in the tub and the brutally cold winters. And they love hearing stories about my secondary projects – especially my work teaching deaf Ukrainians American Sign Language.

There are aspects of my Peace Corps service that I loved, and aspects that I hated. The truth is – as much as I may have some issues with Peace Corps and how they dealt with certain situations, I also know that I am a better person because of my experience. I am more confident and resilient. I complain less and have more realistic expectations. And I am more content with life than ever before.

When I speak in synagogues, I certainly never bash Ukraine or the Peace Corps. Instead I tell my story and how it changed my life. I can not say that every Peace Corps Volunteer should go in the closet. But it was the right decision for me. I felt that if I came out – I would not be a successful volunteer and integrate into my community. I knew that every day I was having a tangible impact in other people lives. It's something

which got me out of bed every single day. Knowing I was needed and knowing I was also truly making a difference. Isn't that really what all of us want? To make a difference in this world. To be remembered. How often do we get the opportunity to see that we are making a tangible difference - and to feel that we are truly needed and have had an impact? And I talk about the importance of following your dream and doing something to make this world a better place.

Isn't that what life is all about?