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A PARTNERSHIP IN THE MAGHREB: THE FIRST TEN YEARS  
OF THE PEACE CORPS IN TUNISIA

By

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

A Partnership in the Maghreb: The First Ten Years of the Peace Corps in Tunisia

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In 1962, Tunisia became the first Arab country to receive Peace Corps volunteers. Traditional scholarship has focused on the Peace Corps as a uniquely American experience; volunteers' engagement with host country nationals is often reduced to a list of accomplishments and obstacles. Archival documents and volunteer testimony indicates, however, that the relationship between volunteer and host in the Tunisia Program's first ten years was both fluid and complex. Volunteers did not perform their work in a vacuum and the Peace Corps was far from a one-way experience. Tunisia was a newly post-colonial society and its citizens oftentimes had conflicting visions for their development. Volunteers had to work themselves into Tunisian life, and in doing so, found that they learned as much—if not more—than they had taught.

## Preface

Over two thousand Peace Corps volunteers served in Tunisia between 1962, and the office's closing in 1996. As individuals that brought unique histories and personalities to Tunisia, volunteers had widely varying experiences. Moreover, volunteer memories are not static; they have evolved with the intervening years. An attempt to offer a definitive account of the volunteer experience, therefore, would require an endless list of caveats and exceptions. In what way did Tunisia, and Tunisians, contribute to these dynamic and sometimes contradictory experiences? While this project seeks tackle this question by uncovering the complex partnerships between volunteer and host, its analysis is incomplete. Corresponding research must be conducted in the cities, towns and villages across Tunisia. What did Tunisians make of the volunteers and what physical, cultural and intellectual legacies of the Peace Corps remain?

## Acknowledgement

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## Table of Contents

|   |    |
|---|----|
| INTRODUCTION.....   | 1  |
| CHAPTER 1: HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE PEACE CORPS.....             | 10 |
| CHAPTER 2: DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS PRIOR TO THE PEACE CORPS..... | 23 |
| CHAPTER 3: STUMBLING OUT OF THE GATES.....                    | 34 |
| CHAPTER 4: THE SOLOS AND THE CHORUS.....                      | 51 |
| CHAPTER 5: LOOKING BACK ON THE PEACE CORPS.....               | 68 |
| CONCLUSION.....   | 81 |
| WORKS CITED.....  | 84 |

## INTRODUCTION

On Valentine's Day, 1967, Peace Corps volunteers Christine Passmore and Sabra Webber were dropped off on "the road to the beach" in Kelibia, Tunisia. A small town on the tip of the Cap Bon peninsula, Kelibia had fewer than five thousand residents; none of which were waiting to meet the young volunteers. Each girl was given a candy bar—*Hershey*, as Sabra remembered—and wished good luck with their project. With only a few months of Arabic they learned during training in Boston, their assignment was to transform an empty building in the center of town into a kindergarten.<sup>1</sup>

Word traveled of the strange Americans and Hamouda Gharbi, a member of a well placed family in Kelibia, invited them to stay the night at his mother's house while more permanent arrangements could be made with the town council. Christine recalled that the Kelibians did not quite know what to do with them.<sup>2</sup> After spending their second night at the Hotel Florida, a representative of the town took Christine and Sabra to find a place to rent. The first was a room in the home of an Italian woman, however as Peace Corps volunteers, Sabra recalled feeling uneasy about living with another foreigner. Next was an empty "mansion" on the outskirts of town; they would, however, have been completely isolated from the community. While neither remembers how, Christine and Sabra were finally put into contact with the Najar family whose patriarch, Mohammad, had recently suffered a stroke. The Najars lived in the center of Kelibia and offered their home to rent. Even though this involved them moving into their adjacent garage, they welcomed the supplemental income that would help offset Mohammad's lost earnings.

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<sup>1</sup> Sabra Webber, telephone interview with the author, 5 March 2013

<sup>2</sup> Christine Khoudja, telephone interview with the author, 15 February 2013

During their time in Kelibia, Christine and Sabra developed a special relationship with the Najar family and especially Mohammad's wife, Nesria. Both remember her as a maternal figure that looked after them as though they were her own. The volunteers would routinely return home to find a pot of food for them on their doorstep. What's more, Sabra expressed how Nesria "taught us how to be Kelibians." They learned everything from Tunisian history to town gossip. When the girls transgressed cultural expectations, usually by flirting too much Christine recalls, Nesria would playfully refer to them as "bint dar sghir"—girl from the small house. At the same time, however, Sabra recollected that Nisreya also "covered" for them when two male, Peace Corps architects came to visit for a few days. To interested neighbors, Nesria claimed that the men were Sabra's cousins.

Through the Najars, Christine and Sabra became deeply rooted in Kelibian life. They were introduced to numerous relatives and neighbors over traditional afternoon tea in the courtyard of their shared home. Because of Mohammad's stroke, the volunteers frequently took on family responsibilities such as shopping at the market or taking their youngest son Adel to the doctor. Their role as kindergarten teachers brought them into contact with many families throughout Kelibia. Such immersion in Tunisian life, moreover, hastened their fluency in Arabic. As months passed, they came to know, and be known, by ordinary Kelibians.

What began as a mutually beneficial financial relationship, evolved into a deep friendship that has spanned over forty-five years. Both have returned to Tunisia many times since first leaving in 1969; each time they are sure to visit Nesria. Webber did several years of research in Tunisia while writing a book on the nation's folklore.



Passmore married a Kelibian and built a home where her family would spend their summers. Like many volunteers, Tunisia and its people occupy a special place in their hearts.

Christine and Sabra's experience is in many ways illustrative of an often overlooked, yet essential component of the Peace Corps. My first chapter attempts to explore the tendency among scholars to neglect the formative role that host nations and their citizens played in shaping the Peace Corps experience. The Peace Corps has traditionally been framed as an American story in which energized volunteers acted as the agents of change and enlightenment; host nations were merely their passive recipients. This kind of narrative fails to appreciate that Tunisians may, and often did, have competing ambitions and interests in this relationship. More importantly, it does not acknowledge the intrinsic partnership between volunteer and host and presents a rather flat account of the Peace Corps. Each side both gave and received. From the outset, Tunisians contributed as much to the volunteers' struggles and success as any other factor. For Passmore and Webber, this mutual relationship began the moment they were plucked off the street by Hamouda Gharbi. My effort is not to supplant an America-centric story of the Peace Corps with a Tunisian one. Rather, to explore the multifaceted ways in which Tunisians played an active role in shaping the experience of the Peace Corps in their country.

Additionally, while the Peace Corps involved forging partnerships between nations, it did not mean that staffers, volunteers and host country nationals shared the same goals. As such, this project also seeks to establish the divergent criteria by which various groups evaluated the Peace Corps. A success for a staffer did not always translate

into a success for a volunteer. Likewise, projects considered meaningful by Tunisian officials were sometimes disenchanting to the Americans working in their communities.

The first years of the Tunisia program—when many volunteers struggled to find meaningful work—are rife with examples. The post-service feedback gathered by the Peace Corps indicates a noticeable gulf in expectations between volunteers and staff members. Brought on by the initial inability to secure meaningful jobs, volunteers frequently complained that staffers did not appreciate the feeling of uselessness among those in the field. According to one volunteer, staffers “didn’t seem to care if we accomplished next to nothing as long as we got along with everybody.”<sup>3</sup> Volunteers who went to Tunisia in hopes of making a tangible difference were not content to accept such limited objectives. As one mechanic responded, “getting to know Tunisians and learning a local language is not enough justification for being here.”<sup>4</sup> It is not unexpected that so many volunteers echoed these sentiments considering the early difficulties surrounding job placement in Tunisia. They were unsettled with the idea that simply interfacing with Tunisians was enough. It suggested, in their minds, that the Peace Corps was more about image than action.

This project takes a chronological approach to exploring these themes. Chapter 2 addresses the complex diplomatic relationship that existed between the United States and Tunisia prior to the Peace Corps’ arrival in 1962. I attempt to highlight how Bourbuiba aligned his nationalist cause with American interests without giving in to an asymmetrical power relationship; the new President of Tunisia would not subordinate his nation as an attendant of the United States. The establishment of the Peace Corps,

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<sup>3</sup> Dave Schimmel, “Completion of Service Report”, 18 December 1964, Country Training Case Files, 1961-1987, Record Group 490, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

therefore, occurred with both nations on equal footing and with intersecting political and economic ambitions. Chapter 3 therefore, attempts to account for the high level of frustration and disaffection that existed among the Peace Corps' first volunteers. As I will explain, agreements between governments—even those with mutual goals—were not so easily translated to achievements on the ground. Many of these early problems abated by the time successive waves of volunteers came to Tunisia in 1964. Volunteers settled into what some referred to as a “golden age” for the Peace Corps; they did not, however, share identical experiences. Chapter 4 examines how the nature of Tunisia itself shaped the experience of Peace Corps volunteers. Specifically, I focus on the differing obstacles and opportunities that existed for volunteers placed in Tunisia's urban cities as opposed to rural towns and villages. Since it cannot uniformly be said that where one lived dictated their experience, I look to assess the relationship between host communities and the degree to which volunteers were integrated or isolated from them. Finally, chapter 5 offers a retrospective look at how the Peace Corps influenced the lives of American volunteers. I try to make sense of how the volunteers' experience in Tunisia shaped their lives after returning home, as well as the familiar refrain: “I learned more from the Tunisians than they ever learned from me.”

While the Tunisia program remained until 1996, the parameters of this study have been confined to the years 1962-1972. This corresponds with not only the Peace Corps' first decade in Tunisia, but its first decade as an organization itself. On a practical level, this narrower scope allows for a more in-depth and manageable sphere of research. One can explore rich and textured relationships, whereas an examination of the full thirty-four year history might not be as flexible. More importantly, however, is that by the early

1970s the Peace Corps was experiencing fundamental changes to its structure and support.

With the election of Richard Nixon in 1968, the President set out to eliminate the organization developed and nurtured by his democratic predecessors. White House Chief of Staff H.R. Haldeman noted in his diary that Nixon intended to strip away the Peace Corps' funding "far enough to decimate them."<sup>5</sup> Although curbing appropriations severely diminished the Peace Corps' effectiveness, the most brutal blow was Nixon's decision in 1971 to restructure all federally funded volunteer programs under one umbrella organization: Action. The perception of the Peace Corps as independent of American foreign policy slowly disintegrated and its day-to-day operations "plunge[d] into organizational chaos."<sup>6</sup> Exacerbating these issues was the fact that volunteers became increasingly disenchanted with America's escalating involvement in Southeast Asia. Many could no longer reconcile the aims of the Peace Corps with U.S. actions in Vietnam. By 1970 the Peace Corps was receiving less than half the number of applications than it had in 1966.<sup>7</sup>

This study relies heavily on the memories of volunteers themselves. Phone, Skype and face-to-face interviews provided invaluable insights into the Peace Corps' first ten years. Almost all of the returned volunteers interviewed for this project nostalgically recalled their years in Tunisia as one of the best and influential times in their lives. Most also credited their experience with opening doors in both their professional and personal

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<sup>5</sup> P. David Searles, *The Peace Corps Experience: Challenge and Change 1969-1976* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1997), 21.

<sup>6</sup> Karen Schwarz, *What You Can Do for Your Country: An Oral History of the Peace Corps* (New York, NY: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1991), 162.

<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Cobbs Hoffman, *All You Need is Love: The Peace Corps and the Spirit of the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 205.

lives. Their recollections were rich in detail and demonstrated a deep affection for Tunisia and its people that remains some forty years later.

What accounts for such a consistently positive pool of responses? Surely the Peace Corps experience in Tunisia was a mixed bag. The approach undertaken to locate these individuals may, in part, provide an explanation. At the suggestion of George Entenman, (Gafsa 64-66) I posted the details of my project on the “Friends of Tunisia” listserv. Members of this group routinely discuss and exchange information about Tunisia, whether they are wistful recollections of Tunisian cuisine, or earnest conversations about the nation’s post-revolutionary struggles. Within hours I was happily besieged with a flurry emails from volunteers offering to help. Routinely, these individuals would end their emails by suggesting the names of others to whom I should reach out. As many returned volunteers remain friends and stay in close contact, my network of candidates grew steadily.

Not all volunteers interviewed for this project were found this way. David DeSelm (Sfax 68-70) was interviewed in a youtube video as a part of the “Peace Corps Family Album”—a project created by Ernie Zarembo (Tanzania 64-66) to facilitate communication between returned volunteers as well as host country nationals. From there, I reached out to Mr. DeSelm through his work at the Santa Barbara Peace Corps Association. Having lived in Tunis, Sfax and Kelibia during his service, he was able to provide incredibly interesting, nuanced insights.

It is reasonable to assume that returned volunteers that remain so deeply connected to Tunisian life, and each other, had a positive experience during their time in the Peace Corps. As a result, this may have created an artificial consistency in how

volunteers remembered their experience. The use of these sources, however, does not mute the voices of those that were frustrated and disaffected during their time in Tunisia. The struggle of Peace Corps volunteers appear heavily throughout the archival material culled from the National Archives, John F. Kennedy Library, National Anthropological Archives and others. Letters, journals, staff meeting reports, issues of the Peace Corps *Volunteer* and post-service evaluation reports help balance the valuable contributions of returned volunteers. It should be remembered that inasmuch as volunteers' memories are sometimes colored by intervening years, the frustrations that appear in official documents are a snapshot in time.

The most obvious gap in this attempt to better draw Tunisians into the heart of the Peace Corps experience is the relative absence of Tunisian voices. The few archival documents that offer Tunisian perspectives are almost exclusively relayed through second hand American accounts. This is of course the case with the oral history interviews conducted with returned volunteers. The judgments and actions of Tunisians have been filtered through American eyes as well as the intervening years. Magnifying this problem is the fact that the Peace Corps closed its doors in Tunisia seventeen years ago; the experiences and memories of the Peace Corps have not been continually replenished or sustained in Tunisia. Larry Michalak, who served as both a volunteer and later a staff member, commented that “nowadays Tunisians don’t even know what the Peace Corps is.”<sup>8</sup>

Sylvia Whitman faced similar obstacles in her thesis *Peace Corps Tunisia: A Study in Cross-Cultural Encounters*. Whitman focuses on the early “performative encounters” that characterized the tremendous potential of the Peace Corps in Tunisia,

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<sup>8</sup> Larry Michalak, telephone interview by the author, 14 March 2013.

and ultimately how economic and political shifts compromised the organization's future. Whitman also relies heavily on volunteer interviews as she describes her efforts to find material through the Tunisian embassy and the Tunisian National Archives as largely unsuccessful. She notes that even the work of Nadia Berrejib, a Tunisian whose thesis on the Peace Corps she consults, lacks a uniquely Tunisian perspective. As a result, readers must rely on Tunisian voices that "peep through American accounts, both oral and written."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Sylvia Choate Whitman, "Peace Corps Tunisia: A Study in Cross-Cultural Encounters" (Thesis, Georgetown University, 2006), 44.

## CHAPTER I / *Historiography of the Peace Corps*

Published histories of the Peace Corps emerged almost as soon as the organization itself. As thousands of young men and women volunteered, there was keen public interest in an organization that sent American youths to some of the most remote towns and villages in the world. Their deployment was followed by various books that attempted to explore this ambitious and somewhat radical new dimension of American foreign policy. Many adopted a formulaic pattern that was heavily anchored in the domestic side of the Peace Corps. The various motivating forces behind the Corps and the political jockeying surrounding its establishment were frequent topics of inspection. Moreover, these works routinely situated the Peace Corps within a Cold War narrative.

Noticeably underrepresented was the role of the host nations; their relatively flat portrayal reinforces the notion that the Peace Corps is chiefly an American story in which Americans are the actors and the 'natives' are acted upon. One cannot overlook the circumstances by which the Peace Corps was created for it helps to establish the baggage volunteers brought with them overseas; it must be remembered, however, that their host communities had baggage too.

In the wake of World War II, the United States was uniquely positioned as a global leader to help uplift underdeveloped nations of the third world. America not only possessed unrivaled military and economic superiority, but also the moral imperative to support developing nations. Such responsibilities were deeply enshrined in the United Nations charter that Roosevelt so actively championed. While American efforts were



initially geared toward rebuilding post-war Europe, it became increasingly clear to US officials that the Third World could not be ignored.<sup>10</sup>

As political rhetoric ramped up leading into the 1960 presidential election, opponents of the Eisenhower administration challenged what they saw as feeble leadership on the international stage. Most notably, Massachusetts Senator John F. Kennedy loudly assailed Eisenhower's inadequate approach to foreign policy. Kennedy believed that since 1945 "no significant new policies had been undertaken toward the emerging nations."<sup>11</sup> During a campaign speech in San Francisco six days before the election, Kennedy sharply criticized the State Department for the fact that only 30% of service officers had language training and less than 1% of its officers were black.<sup>12</sup> Kennedy skewered the Republican appointments of Foreign Service representatives by saying that "men who lacked compassion for the needy here in the United States were sent abroad to represent us in countries which were marked by disease and poverty and illiteracy and ignorance."<sup>13</sup>

Kennedy's position on US foreign policy was particularly persuasive at a time when books like *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) and *The Affluent Society* (1958) warned citizens about the deterioration of American leadership and character. Nowhere could this lack of confidence been seen more than in Eugene Burdick and William Lederer's *The Ugly American* (1958). This book ridiculed American diplomacy through the fictional account of several "self-promoting, luxury-loving bureaucrats" in the nation of

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<sup>10</sup> Gerald Rice, *The Bold Experiment: JFK's Peace Corps* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), 8.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>12</sup> Hoffman, *All You Need is Love*, 29.

<sup>13</sup> Stanley Meisler, *When the World Calls: The Inside Story of the Peace Corps and its First Fifty Years* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), 8.

*Sarkhan*.<sup>14</sup> Their interest in living isolated, grandiose lifestyles came at the expense of truly understanding the local culture.

Inextricably bound to Kennedy's message were the Cold War anxieties of the late 1950s. Fears caused by the struggle in Berlin, launch of Sputnik and rise of Castro were skillfully exploited by the presidential candidate. To meet the Soviet challenge, Americans would need to think differently about international diplomacy. In the same campaign speech, Kennedy warned:

...teachers, doctors, technicians, and experts desperately needed in a dozen fields by underdeveloped nations are pouring forth from Moscow to advance the cause of world communism...I am convinced that our young men and women, dedicated to freedom, are fully capable of overcoming the efforts of Mr. Khrushchev's missionaries...<sup>15</sup>

The Peace Corps would become a new tool with which Americans would engage with the world. Its focus on people-to-people interaction would serve as a fundamental component, designed to "break the image of the so-called Ugly American [and] be far different from the aloof, isolated, and insensitive Americans that Kennedy had criticized."<sup>16</sup> At its center, the Peace Corps sought to strengthen underdeveloped nations and promote intercultural understanding.

Although not at the center of Kennedy's message, the Peace Corps also served as a tool to revitalize the American character. Many Americans in the 1950s—especially politicians—felt that the United States had abandoned its puritan ethic and was no longer the city upon a hill. They feared Americans had adopted a more comfortable, industrialized life at the expense of their frontier spirit.<sup>17</sup> The architect of the Peace

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<sup>14</sup> Hoffman, *All You Need is Love*, 21.

<sup>15</sup> Schwarz, *What You Can Do for Your Country*, 17.

<sup>16</sup> Meisler, *When the World Calls*, 34.

<sup>17</sup> Hoffman, 16-20.

Corps, Sargent Shriver, voiced these concerns in a 1963 article published in the *Foreign Affairs* journal. In it he questioned:

...whether our contemporary society, with its emphasis on the organizational man and the easy life, can continue to produce the self-reliance, initiative and independence that we consider to be part of our heritage. We are in danger of losing ourselves among the motorized toothbrushes, tranquilizers and television commercials.<sup>18</sup>

The Peace Corps would intervene in this crisis of national identity. Leaders throughout the United States “felt that such a cadre of new pioneers would help cure the malaise among the American youth of the 1960s.”<sup>19</sup> The image of thousands of American youths living and working throughout the third world evoked a natural sense of “ruggedness” in the American spirit. In this way, the Peace Corps had as much to do with reclaiming American exceptionalism as it did in uplifting the developing world.

President Kennedy officially established the Peace Corps on March 1, 1961, through Executive Order 10924. He appointed his brother-in-law, Sargent Shriver as its first director. While Shriver’s most immediate task was to help push an official bill through congress and secure appropriations, he had mounting concerns over Kennedy’s decision to subordinate the Peace Corps under the State Department’s Agency for International Development.<sup>20</sup> Shriver went to great lengths to secure maximum autonomy for the Peace Corps and warned that “it would lose its unique appeal to young people, become entangled in red tape, and end up nothing more than “just another box in an organization chart””<sup>21</sup> Even the perception of the Corps as just another federal agency

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<sup>18</sup> Sargent Shriver, “Two Years of the Peace Corps,” *Foreign Affairs* 41 (1963): 15. Reprinted copy from the Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University.

<sup>19</sup> Fritz Fischer, *Making Them Like Us: Peace Corps Volunteers in the 1960s* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998), 20.

<sup>20</sup> Hoffman, *All You Need is Love*, 49.

<sup>21</sup> Rice, *The Bold Experiment*, 65.

risked its politicization and certain association with past, misguided efforts in international diplomacy. On May 3, 1961, Kennedy relented and granted Shriver “semi-autonomous status” under the State Department. Three weeks later the Peace Corps began administering entrance tests for the thousands of men and women that would become the first Peace Corps volunteers.<sup>22</sup>

The earliest books on the Peace Corps frequently explored these political foundations. As a fledgling program, these works seemed to not only explain, but advocate for the Corps. With few exceptions these books were not scholarly in nature; indeed, many acted as mouthpieces for the organization. Books like Glenn Kittler’s *The Peace Corps* (1963), Charles Wingenbach’s *The Peace Corps: Who, How, and Where* (1963) and George Sullivan’s *The Story of the Peace Corps* (1964) were written with either the organization’s cooperation or endorsement, and each included introductory remarks from Sargent Shriver.

Moreover, these books often portrayed the Peace Corps as a uniquely American endeavor; this was not uncommon. According to Peace Corps staffer Robert Textor, a good deal of early scholarship “tend[ed] to deal primarily with the *domestic* side of the Peace Corps.”<sup>23</sup> Focus was routinely placed on the political mechanics of how the organization emerged, and would commonly include biographical portraits of key figures such as Kennedy, Shriver and Wofford. About the volunteers themselves, these books often highlighted their humanitarian motivations for joining, as well as the ‘pioneer’ qualities that made them suitable candidates for service. In crafting an essentially American story, these works have failed to realize that the heart of the Peace Corps

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<sup>22</sup> “Peace Corps Wins Fight for Autonomy,” *New York Times*, May 4 1961.

<sup>23</sup> Robert Textor, *Cultural Frontiers of the Peace Corps* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1966), xv.

story, according to David Searles, is found overseas. The author contends that “Many people who have written about the Peace Corps have yet to come to grips with this reality and as a result have overinterpreted Washington-centered activities and underinterpreted what happens abroad.”<sup>24</sup>

This does not highlight the only problem of early Peace Corps scholarship; when these authors did turn their attention overseas, they generally conveyed a tutelary relationship that outlined the accomplishments and struggles of Peace Corps volunteers. A disproportionately small amount of attention was paid to the varying motivations of the host nations—motivations that were not always aligned with those of the United States, Peace Corps or the volunteers.

The second half of Sullivan’s *The Story of the Peace Corps* begins to look overseas and chronicles Peace Corps missions in nine different nations. His analysis, however, remains firmly focused on the way in which *Americans* contributed to, struggled and experienced these cultures. This is done most obviously in the way in which Sullivan reduces the Peace Corps to the professional accomplishments of its volunteers. For example, his analysis of the Bolivia program underscores the work of James McTigue, a young pharmacist from Boston. About him, the author notes:

He organized three health clinics in outlying poorer areas so people could get free medicine and medical help. He got Bolivian medical students to help staff the dispensaries and began classes to educate Bolivian teachers and students take them over. He distributed milk to 2,000 people a day in the poor barrios outside Sucre.<sup>25</sup>

Sullivan goes on to discuss other achievements such as McTigue’s healthcare radio addresses, and his orchestration of Quecha translators for indigenous Indians.

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<sup>24</sup> Searles, *The Peace Corps Experience*, 39.

<sup>25</sup> George Sullivan, *The Story of the Peace Corps* (New York: Fleet Publishing Corporation, 1964), 100.

While Sullivan's enumeration of McTigue's (and others') achievements is instructive, it omits any serious analysis of how the host nation engaged with the Peace Corps. Although the author does suggest that Bolivians were reluctant to embrace a healthcare program, he fails pursue the issue. His analysis conveys the Peace Corps as a 'one-way' program in which America exported its *exceptional* cultural and technological capacities to needy third world nations. The fact that the Peace Corps was a partnership between nations is lost.

Although writing for a younger audience, Susan Whittlesey's *US Peace Corps: The Challenge of Good Will* (1963) treats the Peace Corps in much the same way. Whittlesey offers little more than an inventory of the various projects undertaken by American volunteers. Coupled with this, the author crafts a relationship in which Americans serve as the caretakers for both culturally and economically backwards nations. Whittlesey's description of Mark Himmelstein's work as a scientist conveys his struggle against the backwards nature of Ethiopian culture. She suggests that "The knowledge of young people in Africa and in underdeveloped lands elsewhere is full of strange gaps and contradictions."<sup>26</sup> In this way, the American volunteer is both a figurative and literal tutelary figure; the host nation does not stand on equal footing with the United States. Despite the fact that an underlying principle of the Peace Corps is to help Americans understand more about other cultures, it seems as though the volunteers had little to learn. Where Whittlesey discusses what Peace Corps volunteers gleaned from their experiences, it seems to only be how better to teach people of the Third World. The author cites how volunteers learned "Patience with a society slower-moving than

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<sup>26</sup> Susan Whittlesey, *U.S. Peace Corps: The Challenge of Good Will* ( New York: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1963), 35.

America's" and that "It takes time and tact to get things done in countries where the pace of life is slower than we are used to."<sup>27</sup> This was likely not the kind of intercultural understanding that Shriver had envisioned.

While certainly common, early published histories of the Peace Corps were not exclusively characterized by these kinds of books. Most notably, Robert Textor's 1966 work *Cultural Frontiers of the Peace Corps* provided a more nuanced and holistic analysis of Kennedy's program. For Textor, the real story of the Peace Corps could not be found in Washington, but in the cultural interactions overseas. Although he writes the preface and introduction, the subsequent chapters are contributed by fourteen different authors. Each was a social scientists or historians and had also worked for (or with) the Peace Corps in some capacity. Due to Textor's role as a cultural anthropological consultant to the Peace Corps in 1961-62 he appreciated the necessity of finding authors with deep understandings of both the Peace Corps as well as the nations they wrote about. The result is a more three dimensional view of the Peace Corps that is not exclusively defined or measured by what 'we' could teach 'them'. Instead, the authors make clear that volunteers engaged in negotiated partnerships with their host nations.

In his preface, Textor notes that each contributing author has "chosen to deal with what might be called a "cultural frontier" separating the Volunteer's American culture from that of the people in the host country—and with the communication and cooperation that pass, or should pass, back and forth across that frontier."<sup>28</sup> Rather than an enumerated list of what Peace Corps teachers accomplished in the Philippines, for example, George Guthrie explores the relationship between these volunteers and their

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<sup>27</sup> Whittlesey, *U.S. Peace Corps*, 49.

<sup>28</sup> Textor, *Cultural Frontier*, \_\_\_\_

Filipino counterparts. He highlights the subordinated role of American teachers in an oversaturated job market and reminds the reader that although the Philippine government may have requested Peace Corps assistance, it did not mean that Filipinos shared this sentiment. Guthrie adds that Filipino teachers “usually have *not* asked for his help...Indeed, many Philippine school teachers do *not* feel that they need help. And when they do feel a need, this need is not always the one that the Volunteers want to fill or is equipped to fill.”<sup>29</sup> This is not to suggest that Peace Corps volunteers were unable to offer valuable guidance and service—indeed they did. It does, however, demonstrate the more complex way in which Textor and others sought to analyze the Peace Corps.

Although unique for its time, *Cultural Frontiers of the Peace Corps* did not mark a permanent shift in Peace Corps scholarship. Many books continued to overlook the complex cultural relationships at the center of the Peace Corps in favor of a more “domestic” narrative. This is perhaps best seen in Gerard Rice’s 1985 book, *The Bold Experiment: JFK’s Peace Corps*. A quite positive review of his book in the “Library Journal” sheds light on Rice’s main focus. Charles DeBenedetti writes:

In this clear and comprehensive account of the Corps’s formative years, [Rice] surveys the origins of the Peace Corps idea and the political and bureaucratic considerations that shaped its development. Emphasizing the inspiring lead of John F. Kennedy and the practical drive of its first director, Sargent Shriver, Rice details the early structure, rules, and training of the Corps, as well as the kind of young Americans who rallied to it. Unfortunately, this work does not take the story far beyond the Kennedy years. But Rice well realizes his first purpose.<sup>30</sup>

While DeBenedetti clearly establishes what Rice accomplished in his book, it is equally clear what Rice abandoned. The Peace Corps is primarily an American story in which the

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<sup>29</sup> George Guthrie, “Cultural Preparation for the Philippines,” in Robert Textor, ed. *Cultural Frontier of the Peace Corps* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1966), 31.

<sup>30</sup> DeBenedetti, Charles, Review of Gerald Rice’s “The Bold Experiment,” *Library Journal* 110 (November 1985): 95.



host nations reside only in the margins. Although Rice's book is quite comprehensive and reveals tremendously nuanced elements of the Peace Corps, DeBenedetti's summary reveals precisely the shortcomings that Robert Textor sought to avoid.

The tendency to overlook the formative role that host nations and their citizens played in shaping the Peace Corps experience is reflected in the reductionist debate over its purpose. For some, the Peace Corps could only be understood through the lens of the Cold War. Owing in part to the Cuban Revolution a year prior to his election, President Kennedy was chiefly concerned about the growth of communism. The Peace Corps was therefore a tactical effort to capture the hearts and mind of millions of nonaligned persons throughout the world. Fritz Fischer's *Making Them Like Us* notes that "Most historians of American international relations have placed the Peace Corps firmly within the Cold War framework. When they have discussed the Peace Corps at all, they have usually stuffed it into traditional Cold War explanations of post-World War II foreign policy."<sup>31</sup>

Others have cultivated a more benign image of the organization in which altruistic volunteers worked to combat the ills of the third world. In this narrative, the Peace Corps worked alongside American foreign policy rather than a part of it. Its liberal humanitarian goals helped reassure Americans that during a time of tremendous social upheaval, "there was at least one aspect of their nation's policy that was indisputably good. It symbolized what America wanted to be, and what much of the world wanted America to be: superhero, protector of the disenfranchised, defender of the democratic faith."<sup>32</sup> However, defining the Peace Corps as either an effort to uplift the developing world, or a weapon in Kennedy's Cold War arsenal is to reduce the organization into unmanageable monoliths;

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<sup>31</sup> Fischer, *Making Them Like Us*, 2.

<sup>32</sup> Hoffman, *All You Need is Love*, 1.

without question it attempted to accomplish both. Moreover, enfranchising the third world from poverty and waging a war against communism were not necessarily mutually exclusive goals.

Whether an attempt to lure nations away from communism, a genuine effort of humanitarian good will, or a bid to reinvigorate the American spirit, such categorizations attempt to understand the Peace Corps in only macro, governmental terms. It does not take into account the various and sometimes divergent motivations of the organization leadership, staff members or actual volunteers on the ground.

The volunteers that answered Kennedy's call did so for a variety of reasons that also frequently did not coincide with either Cold War rationales or moral imperatives to assist the developing world. In conversations with many returned Peace Corps volunteers, they cited an array of reasons for joining the Corps. Whereas some sought an opportunity to explore the world, others saw the Peace Corps as an avenue to avoid the draft for Vietnam.

Even if these various motivations and goals behind the Peace Corps were meticulously parsed out, a critical hole in Peace Corps scholarship would remain. One would still be left with a relatively one-dimensional narrative in which the United States is the central figure. In short, Americans are the actors and host nations are acted upon. Situating the United States at the center of Peace Corps scholarship fails to appreciate the transnational nature of the organization and risks overlooking the substantial influence of the host nation itself.

More recent scholarship has placed host nations increasingly at the center of the Peace Corps story rather than on its peripheries. Several books effectively acknowledge

the deep role that host nations and their citizens have played—and continue to play—in shaping the Peace Corps experience. Fritz Fischer’s *Making Them Like Us* demonstrates that volunteers did not exist in a social or political vacuum. Instead, they arrived and engaged with societies that had their own history, needs and incentives. The failed attempt by Peace Corps volunteers at creating a credit cooperative in Ecuador is an instructive example. Fischer notes that “as community developers, they were supposed to convince the locals to organize themselves, adding structure to a chaotic society. But many of the societies were not chaotic.”<sup>33</sup> Such cooperatives did not succeed because the villagers were either too “fiercely individualistic” or that they struggled to find use for credit in a largely barter economy. Fischer maintains that while “working together to reach a common goal seemed like an important cultural value to impart to the local peasants...the peasants clung to a different value.”<sup>34</sup> Volunteers did not just experience the natural struggles that came with culture shock; they were met with competing cultural imperatives and had to negotiate complex class distinctions, racial tensions as well as deeply entrenched cultural and religious traditions.

While Fischer illustrates that volunteers had to manage their way around the multifaceted ambitions and concerns of their host communities, Elizabeth Cobbs Hoffman’s *All You Need is Love* goes further. The Peace Corps remains an instrument of change, however it is wielded as much by the host nations as by the volunteer. Her analysis of the first Peace Corps mission to Ghana highlights the way in which President Kwame Nkrumah appropriated American volunteers for his domestic agenda. In an attempt to create a modern state and diminish the kind of tribal rivalries that had

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<sup>33</sup> Fischer, *Making Them Like Us*, 138.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

destabilized so many African nations, President Nkrumah made education compulsory nationwide. This was no small task for the Minister of Education as Hoffman notes that “to find a place for every child over the age of five would require a thousand new schools.”<sup>35</sup> Even though Ghanaians felt an American education was inferior to their colonial British system, the prospect of volunteer teachers willing to work in the “untamed countryside” was eagerly welcomed. Inasmuch as Kennedy may have been exporting American principles, Nkrumah was importing the tools for national development. Hoffman emphasizes this partnership by stating that Americans “assumed that the inspired thinking that produced the idea of teachers for Africa was their nation’s own. Little did they realize that it was the point in the road where Ghana’s and American’s needs crossed.”<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Hoffman, *All You Need is Love*, 150.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

## **Chapter II / *Diplomatic Relations Prior to the Peace Corps***

Prior to the Peace Corps' arrival in 1962, the political interactions between Tunisia and the United States foreshadowed complex relationships forged between the volunteers and local citizens. While Cold War concerns pushed America to become increasingly involved in Tunisia's independence, Bourguiba's nationalist Néo-Destour party was never a puppet of the Eisenhower administration. Despite his great affinity for the United States, Bourguiba had his own ambitions; he was an equal and active player in the Cold War politics that surrounded the future of his country. President Bourguiba exploited America's political anxieties by making it clear that his allegiance would need to be won. To view Tunisia as chess piece—moved and manipulated at will by the United States—would be to overlook the active role Tunisians played in charting their own future. It was into this political framework that Peace Corps volunteers first arrived. In the same way that Tunisian officials maintained control over crafting their political future, so too would they help shape the nature and character of the Peace Corps in their country.

In the wake of World War II, and spurred on by witnessing the end of France's protectorate in Lebanon, Bourguiba's Néo-Destour party began in earnest to push for Tunisian statehood. The United States, however, was initially reticent to endorse this national movement. The Truman administration occupied an ambivalent middle ground between France's colonial ambitions in North Africa and Tunisia's right to self-governance. The United States initially backed their wartime ally at the expense of Tunisian nationalist demands. A 1952 memorandum from the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs to the State Department offered a clear appraisal of America's approach to North

Africa. Regional Planning Advisor Harold Hoskins noted “The primary objectives of US policy towards Libya, Morocco and Tunisia are the maintenance of political stability” and that the United States was “not advocating immediate independence for these countries.”<sup>37</sup> Such a position was in line with America’s broader Cold War approach to decolonization; a nation’s independence could not come at the expense of their political alignment with the West. America feared that “prematurely independent states would not be able to maintain internal order and that the resultant economic and political disorder could open them to Soviet influence.”<sup>38</sup> Secretary of State Acheson encouraged nationalists such as Bourguiba to take measured steps toward independence and work within a framework established by their colonial masters.<sup>39</sup>

American support for Tunisian nationhood shifted as Néo-Destour began to press their claims at the United Nations. Initially, the United States rejected the idea that Tunisian independence should be placed on the agenda of the Security Council. American officials favored, instead, a bilateral solution to the conflict in which France and Tunisian nationalists engaged in direct negotiations.<sup>40</sup> The United States held this position, however, with the assumption that France would institute reasonable reforms that provided for a greater degree of political and economic autonomy for Tunisians. Reforms in the past had been limited at best. Dean Acheson described French efforts as “window dressing” and cautioned that France “must realize [the] necessity for acting now

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<sup>37</sup> Memorandum by the Acting Regional Planning Advisor, Bureau of Near Eastern, South Asian, and African Affairs, Harold Hoskins, 7 April 1952, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1952-54 (Washington, 1952), 9:204.

<sup>38</sup> Egya N. Sangmuah, “Eisenhower and Containment in North Africa, 1956-1960,” *The Middle East Journal* 44:1 (Winter 1990), 78.

<sup>39</sup> Paul J. Zingg “The Cold War in North Africa: American Foreign Policy and Postwar Muslim Nationalism 1945–1962.” *The Historian* 39:1 (November 1976), 57.

<sup>40</sup> Telegram from the Secretary of State Dean Acheson to the United States Mission at the United Nations, 28 March 1952, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1952-54 (Washington, 1952), 11:703.

in imaginative way in Tunisia.”<sup>41</sup> France responded, however, with limited concessions which forced the United States to reconsider their position. Moreover, France began to violently put down political demonstrations and arrested key nationalist leaders. This prompted the US in the fall of 1952 to not only vote to inscribe the Tunisia issue on the agenda at the United Nations, but the following year, push for “graduated reforms...with internal autonomy as the ultimate end.”<sup>42</sup>

American support for Tunisian independence was rooted less in a desire to champion the self-determination of a colonized nation, than in a calculated shift driven by Cold War politics. Although the United States did not want to marginalize their longtime French allies, they viewed North Africa as a critical geopolitical chess piece in the Cold War. If Tunisia was unable to find political and economic support in the West, American officials feared they might look east. Compounding these anxieties was the fact that the Soviet Union was already spreading its influence by supporting underdeveloped nations throughout the world. These stark realities increased American involvement, according to Paul Zingg, in “the intense nationalist upheavals throughout the Third World and elevated even America’s most limited interest to a plane of impassioned involvement and defense.”<sup>43</sup>

As the Tunisian nationalist movement marched on, it became increasingly clear that their eventual independence was all but assured. France had lost control of Indochina, was embroiled in a bloody war in Algeria, and under the more moderate leadership of Pierre Mendès France, placed Morocco on the path to statehood. If Tunisia

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<sup>41</sup> Telegram from Secretary of State Dean Acheson to the US Embassy in France, 6 March 1952, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1952-54 (Washington, 1952), 11:686.

<sup>42</sup> Sangmuah, 79.

<sup>43</sup> Zingg, 50.

was to be next, the United States needed to position itself as their ally. The United States could ill afford to be a passive observer as French-Tunisian relations became progressively unmanageable. In a memorandum to President Truman, Dean Acheson cautioned that “Our own national security demands that we do everything humanly possible to avoid exacerbating our relations with the French, while at the same time seeking to persuade them that in their long-run interest they must satisfy legitimate claims made by the Tunisians.”<sup>44</sup> American ambassador Chester Bowles offered an even more direct rationale for why the United States should support Tunisia’s independence. The ambassador cautioned that the “Only alternative seems [to] be bloody riots and wrangling ending eventually in Fr[ench] defeat and profitable only to [the] Soviet Union.”<sup>45</sup> Coupled with the prospect of Soviet advances in North Africa, it should be remembered that American officials also feared the “younger hotheads of Néo-Destour,” “strongly religious and conservative groups” as well as those inspired by Nasser’s pan-Arab movement. These forces might well have been able to take advantage of the political instability brought on by Tunisia’s fight for independence.<sup>46</sup>

Although sometimes strained, Bourguiba maintained a strong relationship with the United States. As a moderate, pro-Western leader, the United States had additional incentive to support his nationalist cause. Bourguiba consistently endorsed American foreign policy in the region despite the fact that such allegiances ostracized him from

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<sup>44</sup> Telegram from Secretary of State Dean Acheson to President Eisenhower, 9 April 1952, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1952-54 (Washington, 1952), 11:726.

<sup>45</sup> Telegram from US Ambassador Chester Bowles to State Department, 18 August 1952, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1952-54 (Washington, 1952), 11:798.

<sup>46</sup> John P. Entelis, Mark A. Tessler, Gregory W. White, *The Government and Politics of the Middle East and North Africa*, ed. David E. Long and Bernard Reich (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995), 425. *FRUS* 1958-60 13:826.



other Arab leaders.<sup>47</sup> Tunisia's future, he wagered, lay with the West. Understanding the need for a strong foreign ally, Bourguiba took care to underscore Tunisian's inherent bond with Western principles. About the independence movement, Bourguiba wrote that the Tunisian "frame of mind is like that of the European and American peoples in the time of their national revolutions; it is characterized by the same uncompromising patriotism, the same thirst for liberty."<sup>48</sup>

Interestingly, other Tunisian nationalists used these same Western principles to criticize the somewhat ambivalent position American officials had taken up to this point. Salah Ben Youssef, who led Néo-Destour during Bourguiba's temporary imprisonment by the French, blasted US policy as being incompatible with American values. For Ben Youssef, the United States supported the "assassination, pillage, plunder and rape" of Tunisians that routinely occurred under French occupation. He charged:

The United States Government, which is providing France with the means of exterminating these people, placed under French domination, is responsible for the maintenance of this colonialism throughout the world. Despite the loud declarations of anti-colonialism put forward by Mr. Dulles, the U.S. Secretary of State, all men, who believe in liberty and are fighting for it today, rise in indignation against this violation by the United States of the principles of liberty and justice—those very principles which were, at the beginning of their history, the glory and the proud inspiration of the American people.<sup>49</sup>

After Bourguiba's release from prison, his relationship with Ben Youssef soured and Néo-Destour broke into "Youssefist" and "Bourguibist" camps. Whereas the former adopted a hard-line policy, inspired by Nasser's pan-Arab movement, the latter championed a more gradualist approach to independence that courted Western assistance.

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<sup>47</sup> Sangmuah, 90.

<sup>48</sup> Habib Bourguiba, "Nationalism: Antidote to Communism," *Foreign Affairs* 35:4 (July 1957): 648.

<sup>49</sup> Salah Ben Youssef, "Tunisia's Struggle for Independence," *Pakistan Horizon* 7:2 (June 1954): 61.

As Bourguiba's faction grew in strength, Ben Youssef was exiled to Egypt and the Tunisian nationalist movement retained its moderate, pro-Western character.<sup>50</sup>

In crafting a common history and aligning Tunisia with the West, Bourguiba distanced himself from the Communist bloc. He did not, however, sever ties to the East. While always maintaining a strong relationship with the United States, Bourguiba simultaneously courted the assistance of communist nations. Egey Sangmuah notes that "Between 1960 and 1962, Tunisia signed trade agreements with the Soviet Union, Poland, Bulgaria, East Germany and Hungary."<sup>51</sup> In the same way that Hoffman argues "decolonizing and developing countries used the threat of communism to gain political and economic support from the West," Bourguiba leveraged Cold War anxieties against the United States.<sup>52</sup> He not only understood the geopolitical value of the Maghrib, but knew how to exploit it. This would be increasingly important as Tunisia struggled for stability in its first years of independence.

Bourguiba exploited American concerns in the Cold War. He dangled the fear of communism over Eisenhower's head to not only gain support for Tunisian independence—which was eventually achieved in 1956—but also to procure critical economic aid for his nascent state. Egey Sangmuah notes that "Bourguiba shrewdly tried to get more aid from the West by lamenting that pro-Western countries were ignored when it came to financial assistance and by pointing to the generous help the Soviet Union gave to nonaligned countries."<sup>53</sup> In a 1957 essay, Bourguiba implored the West to

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<sup>50</sup> Christopher Alexander, *Tunisia: Stability and Reform in the Modern Maghreb* (London: Routledge, 2010), 33.

<sup>51</sup> Sangmuah, 83.

<sup>52</sup> Elizabeth Cobbs Hoffman, "Decolonization, the Cold War, and the Foreign Policy of the Peace Corps," *Diplomatic History* 20: 1 (Winter 1996): 79.

<sup>53</sup> Sangmuah, 82.

assist newly independent African nations, and warned what might happen if they didn't.

He wrote:

Their spiritual independence is still fragile; it hinges upon their political independence and on the West's willingness to help them improve economic conditions. The Western Powers therefore have an important role to play in keeping the Arab and African countries out of Communist hands.<sup>54</sup>

By the time of Tunisia's independence, the Soviets were already offering technical assistance to poorer nations of Latin America, and trade between the two had increased by 34%. Such communist activity in America's "backyard" no doubt heightened concerns about Russian advances in other areas around the world.<sup>55</sup>

President Bourguiba employed this same tactic in order to secure US military equipment that would help stabilize the nation. Although France had promised to provide Tunisia with such equipment in its first years of independence, they refused to follow through for fear that these weapons would end up in the hands of neighboring Algerian revolutionaries. Following an incident in which five Tunisians living near the Algerian border were killed by the French army, Bourguiba publically cautioned the United States of his waning allegiance. As reported by the *New York Times*, Bourguiba suggested that Tunisia "would be forced into a policy of neutrality" if the United States failed to provide military support. The President further warned that "A change in the direction of Tunisia's policy would mean a change for all of North Africa."<sup>56</sup> It is clear that these words resonated in Washington. Secretary of State Dulles expressed to the US embassy in Tunis that he hoped Bourguiba would "ponder carefully his remarks...even talk of this

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<sup>54</sup> Bourguiba, "Antidote," 650.

<sup>55</sup> Hoffman, "Decolonization," 93.

<sup>56</sup> "Tunisia Says Need For Arms Is Vital," *New York Times*, 12 September 1957.

kind if publically known can encourage Soviet interventions.”<sup>57</sup> By late 1957, Dulles authorized an arms shipment to Tunisia in order to preserve Tunisian support and check encroaching communist influences.

Tunisian-American relations were severely tested in 1961 as Bourguiba pressed France to abandon their last military base in the northern coastal city of Bizerte. In response to a Tunisian military advance on the base, France retaliated with what Dwight Ling described as “a wholesale butchery of Tunisian soldiers and civilians.”<sup>58</sup> The American response to the incident at the United Nations was tepid as they refused to endorse a resolution that called for France’s withdrawal from Bizerte. Bourguiba would again attempt to use the Cold War to his advantage. “I suggest the free world act before another world does” proclaimed Bourguiba according to the *New York Times*.<sup>59</sup> Although the United States—not wanting to agitate their French allies while tensions were mounting in Berlin—abstained from voting at the United Nations, they privately applied pressure on the French government to withdraw.<sup>60</sup>

Ironically, private negotiations to bring Peace Corps volunteers to Tunisia began while the Bizerte crisis was still unfolding. This was possible because although Bourguiba criticized America’s inaction, he never split from their camp. Bourguiba chided Kennedy for failing to intervene more vigorously, yet was acutely aware of Tunisia’s reliance on American aid. US assistance topped \$100 million in 1960 and Tunisia’s struggling economy could ill afford a souring of their relationship.<sup>61</sup> Bourguiba,

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<sup>57</sup> Telegram from Secretary of State Dulles to US Embassy in Tunisia, 11 September 1957, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955-57* (Washington, 1957), 18:684.

<sup>58</sup> Dwight L. Ling, *Tunisia: From Protectorate to Republic* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967) 199.

<sup>59</sup> “Tunisia Challenges West To Help Before Reds Do,” *New York Times*, 25 July 1961.

<sup>60</sup> Ling, 201.

<sup>61</sup> Sangmuah, 82.

therefore, frequently and publically praised American leadership “by thanking the United States in radio broadcasts and emphasizing that US aid was humanitarian and came without strings attached.”<sup>62</sup> In this way, he maintained his credibility amongst the Tunisian masses without sacrificing his relationship with the West.

The Peace Corps would also help mitigate a host of economic problems brought on by the situation in Bizerte. A 1963 article in the *Wall Street Journal* reveals that beyond the hundreds of lives lost, Tunisia experienced a marked drop in foreign investments, tourism as well as industrial and agricultural production. Their trade deficit jumped by over \$50 million and price controls were implemented to control inflation. Most problematic, the article suggests, was the renewed exodus of skilled foreign workers. While 125,000 Europeans had already left by 1961, the Bizerte crisis precipitated the flight of an additional 30,000 workers who accounted for a substantial portion of Tunisia’s professional class.<sup>63</sup> Among them were teachers, doctors and mechanics; it is likely not a coincidence that many of the first American volunteers worked in these fields. For the Peace Corps, the door to Tunisia remained open despite—and perhaps because of—the crisis in Bizerte.

In June, 1961 US embassy officials in Tunis met with representatives of Tunisia’s Foreign Office. Though described only as “exploratory” in nature, a memo to the State Department chronicling the meeting clearly indicated Tunisian interests in what the Peace Corps could offer.<sup>64</sup> Within two months, the Tunisian Secretariat of State for Foreign Affairs had sent a formal request for sixty Peace Corps “technicians” to assist in their national development.

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>63</sup> “Tunisia’s Troubles,” *Wall Street Journal*, 16 May 1962.

<sup>64</sup> Washington, D.C., National Archives, Records Relating to the Peace Corps; 1961-1964, RG 0306.

Tunisian officials moved cautiously in these negotiations as they were concerned about how such a program might be perceived by the Arab world—specifically Egypt. Bourguiba’s “distaste for Nasser’s pan-Arab rhetoric and for the Egyptian leader’s domination of the League of Arab States” culminated in Tunisia breaking relations with Egypt in 1958.<sup>65</sup> (Perkins 142) Despite a rapprochement in the early 1960s, relations between the two nations had cooled significantly.<sup>66</sup> As a result, Bourguiba wished to avoid an overly conspicuous broadcasting of this new partnership with the United States. According to a memo from the US embassy in Tunis, officials from Tunisia’s Foreign Office were quite “sensitive [regarding] their position in the Arab world,” and recognized that accepting Peace Corps volunteers would “undoubtedly open GOT to further castigation from that quarter.”<sup>67</sup> Consequently, Bourguiba requested that there be no public statement issued about the Tunisia program. The Peace Corps, eager to open its first office in the Middle East, complied with his request.

On August 29, 1962, Tunisia’s daily newspaper *La Presse* along with members of Tunisia’s government controlled radio station jointly conducted an interview with Peace Corps country representative Reuben Simmons as well as other volunteers. While the interview was quite positive, it was nonetheless in direct contrast to Bourguiba’s prior request to minimize publicity of the Peace Corps. Representative of the US embassy in Tunis speculated that perhaps the Tunisian government “realized the disadvantages in assuming a defensive posture because of the fact that Tunisia is the only Arab country so far to have signed a Peace Corps agreement and decided to drop any self-consciousness

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<sup>65</sup> Kenneth J. Perkins, *A History of Modern Tunisia* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 142

<sup>66</sup> Sangmuah, 91.

<sup>67</sup> Washington, D.C., National Archives, Records Relating to the Peace Corps; 1961-1964, RG 0306.

about it.”<sup>68</sup> Embassy officials also considered that the government of Tunisia may have realized the necessity to educate its citizens about the Peace Corps in order to ensure its success. The motivation behind the interview is perhaps less important than the terms by which it was conducted. The Peace Corps was rolled out on a Tunisian timeline, and in a manner that best suited their political and economic goals. Tunisians were not passive recipients of American assistance, and did not relinquish their rights to craft the image of this new partnership. From its earliest negotiations, the government of Tunisia positioned itself on equal footing with the United States; this relationship would continue with the arrival of the first Peace Corps volunteers.

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<sup>68</sup> Washington, D.C., National Archives, Records Relating to the Peace Corps; 1961-1964, RG 0306.

### CHAPTER III / *Stumbling Out of the Gates*

Peace Corps evaluator Kennett Love began his November, 1963 report on the Tunisia program with a quote from a volunteer serving there: “If Shriver had gone through the first three months here, he’d have quit the Peace Corps himself.”<sup>69</sup> This echoed the frustration and disenchantment felt by many volunteers as they stumbled out of the gate in North Africa. The Tunisia program limped through its first years as volunteers struggled to make meaningful contributions to their host communities. Indeed, Love described the Tunisia program as “the floundering problem child of the Peace Corps.”<sup>70</sup> Much of this was the result of trying to do too much, too quickly. Within months of the establishment of the Peace Corps, volunteers had been dropped into various nations with minimal training, and without clearly defined projects. Many in the Tunisia program languished for months without meaningful jobs; their commitment to the ideals of the Peace Corps suffered in kind. However, it is important to look beyond the American boundaries of the Peace Corps to explain these early struggles. After all, the Peace Corps was a partnership. The volunteers’ experiences were shaped as much by the Tunisians as they were by the administrative shortcomings and miscalculations of the organization.

The sheer size of the Peace Corps and the speed at which it was mobilized contributed to many of the struggles experienced by the first waves of volunteers. Shriver sought to muster tens of thousands of volunteers into service; he felt a more cautious approach would “get lost in the bureaucratic wasteland of Washington” or fail to

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<sup>69</sup> Kennett Love, “Peace Corps Briefing Booklet,” July 1963, Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.



command the necessary respect and attention, of foreign governments.<sup>71</sup> Application procedures were “thrown together” in a matter of weeks as Shriver did not want to miss out on the new crop of college graduates.<sup>72</sup> In July, 1961, training programs at Berkeley began preparing the initial group for their two-year assignment in West Africa. On August 30—only six months after Kennedy’s executive order establishing the Peace Corps—the first volunteers had touched down in Accra, Ghana. By the following summer, programs had been initiated in over 25 host nations. Tunisia received its first 65 volunteers on August 14, 1962; among them were architects, town planners, mechanics, construction supervisors and physical education teachers. Taking note of such an ambitious plan, Coates Redmon suggested that “The astonishing diversity of skills, levels of education, social status, ethnic background, and age in this group guaranteed that it would present management problems galore.”<sup>73</sup> Although admirable, according to Elizabeth Cobbs Hoffman the speed in which the Peace Corps was established highlights its early naïveté. She argues that the Peace Corps “threw young volunteers at the third world in the way the United States Army threw draftees at the Vietnam War—with approximately the same effectiveness at times.”<sup>74</sup> This accelerated establishment of the Peace Corps precipitated a host of organizational problems in Tunisia and elsewhere.

Chief among the frustrations in the Tunisia program was the lack of job clarity and organization. Karen Schwarz contends that “the urgency of getting the program on its feet left Shriver’s aides and field representatives little time to develop the jobs in which

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<sup>71</sup> Fischer, 24.

<sup>72</sup> Schwarz, 31.

<sup>73</sup> Coates Redmon, *Come as You Are: The Peace Corps Story* (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1986), 181.

<sup>74</sup> Hoffman, *All You Need is Love*, 10.

volunteers could perform.”<sup>75</sup> Many volunteers arrived in North Africa only to struggle with poorly defined job descriptions, or found that there were no jobs at all. Kurt Liske recalled arriving at the small town of Zaghouan to teach physical education; the school, he discovered, was already fully staffed with Tunisians. Liske estimated that “For several months, I did only four hours a week of real work.”<sup>76</sup> Many of the first architects and agricultural workers had similar experiences and were often given “phony” jobs to placate them. One volunteer bristled that “We came here because we thought we were needed to do a job, but they gave us jobs they wouldn’t have paid a Tunisian five dinars (\$10) a month to do.”<sup>77</sup>

The idealism and enthusiasm of many of these first volunteers quickly deteriorated due to the lack of meaningful work projects. Volunteers questioned their contributions and commitment to the Peace Corps. Some abandoned it altogether. A 1964 Completion of Service Report noted that five months into their service, building construction volunteers in Tunisia met “to consider resigning ‘en masse’” due to unemployment or unsatisfactory employment.<sup>78</sup> The report noted that nine or ten volunteers ultimately quit the program. Subsequent reports show that architects and teachers shared similar frustrations. Of the twenty-six RPCVs polled, twenty-three of them described experiencing “low points” in their first months of service; the report noted that almost all “center[ed] around the problems of getting started in assignments.”<sup>79</sup>

When polled about how satisfied they were with their service in Tunisia, only one of

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<sup>75</sup> Schwarz, 31.

<sup>76</sup> Edna McGuire, *The Peace Corps: Kindlers of the Spark* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1966), 137.

<sup>77</sup> Dave Schimmel, “Completion of Service Report,” 18 December 1964, Country Training Case Files, 1961-1987, Record Group 490, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

<sup>78</sup> Warren Graham Fuller, “Completion of Service Report,” 22 April 1964, Country Training Case Files, 1961-1987, Record Group 490, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

thirty-three nurses and agricultural workers checked “very satisfied”. Such disillusionment can clearly be seen in a conversation between Peace Corps evaluator Kennett Love and a nurse in the Tunisia II program. Nancy Biddinger commented that it took “three months before they allowed me to do anything. All my big ideals were shot to pieces too and I still haven’t picked them up. I think it’s a damn shame to waste so many nurses here.”<sup>80</sup>

The failure to secure meaningful positions for volunteers, and the disaffection that followed, was not a phenomenon unique to the Peace Corps in Tunisia. Numerous programs throughout the world struggled with volunteers that were either unemployed or underemployed. Referring to these situations as “inexcusable administrative foul-ups,” *Time Magazine* chronicled the experience of a group of volunteers assigned to a “scruffy” Nepalese village. Upon arriving they discovered that “no one knew they were coming, who they were or what they were supposed to do. They spend the night huddled grimly beneath flimsy blankets in a bare, cold house.”<sup>81</sup> The kind of experience highlighted by *Time* was by no means anecdotal. Volunteers in Peru earned the nickname *vago* (vagabond) from local leaders that tried to understand what to make of these unemployed newcomers.<sup>82</sup> In Pakistan, most notably, evaluator Charles Peters found only a quarter of the volunteers assigned to work projects. In his report he lamented how painful it was “to see the idealism of the Volunteers squandered as they sat there with nothing to do.”<sup>83</sup> This scenario was repeated in the Philippines where the first group of 123 teachers was

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<sup>80</sup> Love, 1963.

<sup>81</sup> “The Peace Corps: It is Almost as Good as its Intentions,” *Time Magazine*, 5 July 1963, 17.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Meisler, 46.

forced to settle for “half-baked” jobs under the nebulous title of “teacher aides.”<sup>84</sup>

Nonetheless, by the end of 1963 the number of Peace Corps teachers had quadrupled to 572; the Philippines simply could not absorb volunteers at the rate American officials wanted the program to expand.<sup>85</sup>

While many volunteers found it difficult to make serious contributions to their host communities, it may not have been exclusively due to the hurried establishment of the Peace Corps. Many programs deliberately lacked a fleshed out structure. As the Peace Corps was designed, in part, to encourage American youths to reconnect with their pioneer roots, volunteers were expected to use their natural resourcefulness to craft their own experience. This highlights the organization’s “ideological commitment to a rugged individualism which called on volunteer to figure out, along with peasants of a country, what they should do.”<sup>86</sup> Perhaps this is what the Peace Corps had in mind when dropping Christine and Sabra off on the “road to the beach” armed with only two candy bars and their American ingenuity.<sup>87</sup> While it may have been a noble principle, Hoffman makes the salient point that the Peace Corps leadership “were not the ones stuck on a mountaintop or in a swamp for two years without clear objectives.”<sup>88</sup>

As the Tunisia program was exceptionally diverse, not all volunteers arrived with nothing to do. Many of the architects serving in the south, for example, began construction projects without delay. Working with the Tunisian *Travaux Public*, Don Watson collaborated with local mayors to develop schools and municipal centers in

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<sup>84</sup> Schwarz, 34.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Hoffman, 61.

<sup>87</sup> Sabra J. Webber, *Romancing the Real: Folklore and Ethnographic Representations in North Africa* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), xiv.

<sup>88</sup> Hoffman, 61.

various villages outside the southern city of Sfax. Watson recalled that being so far removed from the bureaucracy of Tunis afforded him the ability to immediately undertake projects that his counterparts in the north would wait a year for.<sup>89</sup> After his two years in Tunisia came to a close, Watson actually extended his service to complete a dozen projects still in progress. Also, despite the relatively bleak Completion of Service Report of Peace Corps mechanics, Glen Wilson seemed to have no trouble finding work. In a letter home, Wilson described how “all of the machine operators have something for us to repair.”<sup>90</sup> Bourguiba’s development plans in El-Aouareb, coupled with the relative absence of preventative maintenance by Tunisian mechanics, kept Wilson “busy from 7 a.m. until 4 p.m., 7 days a week.”<sup>91</sup>

Some members of the Tunisia program sought out alternative work opportunities when their original projects did not pan out. Volunteers that sought out these “spin-off” assignments were able to make more meaningful use of their time instead of trudging through months of peripheral busy work. Alan Jones abandoned his job as a construction supervisor to teach English to airport personnel in Tunis; there was such little demand for construction supervisors that Tunisians already serving in this capacity had been laid off to make room for the volunteers.<sup>92</sup> Mel Manthey, also a construction supervisor, became a horticulturist in Tunis as he “found a personal niche among the potted plants and glass frames of Belvedere Gardens.”<sup>93</sup> Much in the way that the Peace Corps wanted volunteers to exercise the inherent ingenuity and resourcefulness of their pioneer

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<sup>89</sup> Don Watson, telephone interview by the author, 23 February 2013.

<sup>90</sup> Glen Wilson, “Letter” U.S. Peace Corps Records, RG 490, JFK Library, Boston, Massachusetts.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Love, 1963.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

forbearers, Don Watson remarked that sometimes finding work “depended on your individual initiative.”<sup>94</sup>

The presence of volunteers reaching beyond their specified assignments was not confined to the Peace Corps in Tunisia. In the same way that a dearth in serious job opportunities could be found throughout the Peace Corps, so too could one find imaginative and proactive volunteers. Many of the “teacher aides” in the Philippines participated in a variety of community projects in the *barrios*.<sup>95</sup> Also, a Peace Corps report on India noted that while “A number of Volunteers did nothing for the first three months...Some have acquired lots of small jobs that add up to full employment.”<sup>96</sup>

Compounding these issues, the first volunteers to serve in Tunisia were frequently encumbered by strained relationships with their administrative staffers. Principally, the Tunisia program lacked stable leadership until the appointment of Dick Graham as the country ‘Rep’ in May, 1963. Prior to Graham’s arrival, evaluator Kennett Love noted that “the Tunisia program suffered the disorganizing and demoralizing effects of five changes in leadership in its first nine months.”<sup>97</sup> The musical chairs of Peace Corps representatives prevented the continuity necessary for officials to understand their Tunisian counterparts, job descriptions, or even the volunteers themselves. This reinforced the notion that staff members—that were not living in the field—did not fully appreciate the conditions or complexities of the volunteers’ jobs. Gerard Rice argues that “Volunteers detested the manner in which Peace Corps officials paid flying visits to their projects, asked some elementary questions, and then sped off with reports back to

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<sup>94</sup> Don Watson, interview, 23 February 2013.

<sup>95</sup> Rice, 195.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 212.

<sup>97</sup> Love, 1963.

Washington.”<sup>98</sup> Many volunteers were left bewildered and frustrated with a program that seemed more about publicity than getting something accomplished. Increasingly, meetings between volunteers and staffers devolved into arguments as a “we and they” dynamic was forged.<sup>99</sup>

Such frustrations were voiced by many early Peace Corps volunteers in surveys given to them at the end of their service. Of the twenty-five returning mechanics and construction supervisors, more than a quarter indicated that “Support from Peace Corps Officials” was a “serious problem”. Among the thirty-three nurses and agricultural workers, the figure reached two-thirds. Dissatisfaction with Peace Corps staff generally stemmed from their perceived lack of engagement with the real experiences of volunteers on the ground. Returned volunteers launched a salvo of criticism toward staffers that included “Field reps should be in the field.” “Too much advice along the lines of take it easy, you can’t change Tunisia.” and “Reps don’t know what the Peace Corps Volunteers are really doing—they only visit with lots of officialdom around.”<sup>100</sup> Further, many returned volunteers objected to being treated like children from the Peace Corps staff. Various administrative regulations that sought to govern, for example, where they should live, how they should behave and with whom they should fraternize was not welcomed. In part, Love seemed to agree. In response to a proposed ban on the use of motorcycles, Love suggested: “We make too many c.....h s..t rules.”<sup>101</sup> Volunteers found it difficult to reconcile these rules with the Peace Corps’ ideology of self-reliance.

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<sup>98</sup> Rice, 223.

<sup>99</sup> Warren Graham Fuller. “Completion of Service Report,” 22 April 1964, Country Training Case Files, 1961-1987, Record Group 490, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Love, 1963

Perhaps the biggest obstacle experienced by the first Peace Corps volunteers was their inability to effectively communicate with everyday Tunisians. Although the country was transitioning out of its colonial past, Peace Corps officials selected French as the primary language of communication. The ability to communicate in Arabic was seen only as an extraneous benefit. The Peace Corps program description for Tunisia went only as far as to suggest that “some training in Arabic salutations and useful expressions should be included in the overall training phase.”<sup>102</sup> This proved to be woefully insufficient for the volunteers on the ground. Not only would they be speaking the language of Tunisia’s colonial occupiers, but it almost guaranteed a disproportionate level of interaction with Tunisian elites. Evaluator Kennett Love identified this shortcoming immediately, causing him to remark “let us have enough guts to teach Arabic exclusively to all trainees for Tunisia...Have we a policy that rules out some languages as too hard for us? Allah forbid.”<sup>103</sup>

Physical education teachers frequently were assigned to the Bourguiba Children’s Villages as they were under the direction of the Tunisian Department of Youth and Sport. Created in 1956, these Villages were established to care for orphans and children from underprivileged families; the children often came from the Tunisian underclass and spoke little French. Peace Corps teachers expressed that they felt “severely handicapped by not having been taught Arabic.”<sup>104</sup> The same was true for volunteers that served as mechanics and construction supervisors as they frequently dealt with laborers that spoke only Arabic. Although this proved to be less of a problem on large construction projects where a greater number of workers spoke French, as the size of the job decreased, “the number

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<sup>102</sup> Harris L. Wofford Jr. “Peace Corps Project Description,” Box 7, JFK Library, Boston, Massachusetts.

<sup>103</sup> Love, 1963.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.



of French speaking workers decrease[d] proportionally until it is almost a necessity to speak Arabic.”<sup>105</sup>

The inability to speak Arabic, however, did not uniformly impact the Tunisia volunteers. Because Peace Corps architects occupied a more “professional” position, Don Watson recalled that “French was more than enough for what we were there to do”.<sup>106</sup> Although some Arabic was needed to communicate with laborers “on-site,” much of their time was spend in their Sfax offices interacting with Italian and Bulgarian counterparts—Watson remembers there being “zero” Tunisian architects. A 1964 interview with twelve of the first Tunisian architects reported that knowledge of Arabic was “desirable but not essential” to their experience. Similar sentiments were expressed by returned nurses who said “it was “nice” to know Arabic to communicate with the uneducated Tunisians but “essential” to know French to talk with foreign supervisors and read technical manuals and instructions.”<sup>107</sup>

To focus exclusively on the administrative weaknesses of the Peace Corps, however, would be to frame Tunisians as passive witnesses to a strictly American endeavor. Tunisians certainly played their part in contributing the volunteers’ early struggles. From the outset, many Tunisians had difficulty grappling with what exactly the Peace Corps was. It should be remembered that the men and women of the Peace Corps were not the only Americans in Tunisia, nor were they the only volunteer organizations. Moreover, Peace Corps volunteers regularly worked with other groups such as UN’s Food and Agriculture Organization. While the Peace Corps was certainly a unique

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<sup>105</sup> Harris L. Wofford Jr. “Construction Report,” Box 7, JFK Library, Boston, Massachusetts.

<sup>106</sup> Don Watson, Interview, 23 February 2013.

<sup>107</sup> Robert L. Leopold. “Completion of Service Report” 16 March 1964, Country Training Case Files, 1961-1987, Record Group 490, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

program, the volunteers' identities were nonetheless blurred in the minds of many Tunisians. Although officials in the various government ministries could certainly make these distinctions, this did nothing to forge interpersonal relationships with ordinary Tunisians in their host communities. Their reactions ranged from mild curiosity of these strangers to overt suspicions that they were operatives of the CIA.

Physical Education teacher, Ross Burkhardt wrote in *The Volunteer* that many Tunisians "have never heard of the Peace Corps; to them we are just two Americans who give out stamps and ping-pong balls."<sup>108</sup> For Burkhardt, this lack of understanding kept him on the peripheries of his host community; many of his contributions to the newsletter lamented about his inability to connect with the townspeople of Zaghouan. Working at a Bourguiba Village on Cap Bon, Charlie Cohen's difficulties in receiving cooperation from Tunisian staff members was due to the fact that the Peace Corps program had not been sufficiently communicated from Tunis to the more remote areas of the country. (KLP743) Beyond those that misunderstood the Peace Corps, there were others that completely mistook it. Agricultural workers reported that "The Tunisians were completely cynical about the PCVs, insisting they were foisted on Tunisia to help solve the US unemployment problem, or else that the Tunisian government was very clever to trick America into sending cheap workers to do the stoop labor."<sup>109</sup>

Even Tunisians that well understood the goals of the Peace Corps were unconvinced that the volunteers were qualified to carry them out. Being that their competence and effectiveness had been openly questioned by voices at home, it instilled

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<sup>108</sup> Ross Burkhardt, "The Volunteer," Box 7, June 1963, JFK Library, Boston, Massachusetts.

<sup>109</sup> Dave Schimmel, "Completion of Service Report", 18 December 1964, Country Training Case Files, 1961-1987, Record Group 490, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

little confidence among Tunisians abroad. Politicians such as Senator J. William Fulbright and—perhaps even more damaging—former President Eisenhower, had serious doubts about a largely untrained and untested group of men and women.<sup>110 111</sup> Critics assailed the fact that the bulk of the Peace Corps was comprised of young, inexperienced volunteers; the organization was nicknamed “a second children’s crusade,” and “Kennedy’s Kiddie Korps.”<sup>112</sup> These sentiments were mirrored by *The Wall Street Journal* which bitinglly questioned “Who but the very young themselves can really believe that an Africa aflame with violence will have its fires quenched because some Harvard boy or Vassar girl lives in a mud hut and speaks Swahili?”<sup>113</sup>

This skepticism, if not transferred, certainly was echoed by Tunisian officials. According to Sylvia Choate Whitman, “held against the PCVs was their youth; as a cultural generalization, Americans worship the energy of the young while the Arabs respect the wisdom of the old.”<sup>114</sup> Regarding the architecture program, Kennett Love reported that compared to the older Bulgarian and Italian architects that had been hired by the Tunisian government, the volunteers were seen as little more than school children. He noted that “Tunisians were reluctant to entrust major responsibility to the Volunteers. They gave them make-work projects to keep them busy and test their ability.”<sup>115</sup> Moreover, Tunisians frequently conflated one’s ability with their material possessions. A Bulgarian architect with a car and a hefty salary, therefore, was seen as far more capable than a young American volunteer who worked for free and walked to work.

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<sup>110</sup> Searles, 6.

<sup>111</sup> Harris Wofford, *Making a Difference: The Peace Corps at Twenty-Five*, ed. Milton Viorst (New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1986), 33.

<sup>112</sup> Sullivan, 34.

<sup>113</sup> Schwarz, 29.

<sup>114</sup> Whitman, 52.

<sup>115</sup> Love, 1963.

While one might expect that the volunteers' youth would have been considered an asset for physical education programs, Tunisians officials remained dubious. Ross Burkhardt worried that the intramural sports project he developed in Zaghouan would be discarded after he left; his Tunisian "dorm monitors" that were to continue on with the program were too doubtful of its usefulness.<sup>116</sup> Kennett Love captured this kind of skepticism by relaying the initial interaction between Peace Corps physical education teachers and government minister Mohammad Mzali. Love reported:

The whole project lost face at the outset when an assembly of the Volunteers was asked by Mzali, Tunisia's government sports czar, how many had specialized in physical education in college. Only four hands went up...As a result, most of them are working as recreational directors rather than as coaches and improvising equipment rather than having it supplied...The concept of recreational director as outlined by the Volunteers ranges from somebody who can amuse small children on a rainy day.<sup>117</sup>

The volunteers, therefore, were not placidly absorbed into their positions; they would need to prove themselves. This would be especially difficult considering the Francophile culture that still existed in Tunisia.

Despite their colonial past, Tunisians did not wholly reject French influences after achieving independence. From education to healthcare, Tunisians adopted longstanding French institutions and thousands of French nationals remained working in them. Moreover, Tunisian officials envisioned national development through a distinctly French lens. As Whitman describes, "they expected their civilizing *à la française*". Peace Corps volunteers were routinely compared against what was thought to be a superior French

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<sup>116</sup> Burkhardt, "The Volunteer," June 1963.

<sup>117</sup> Love, 1963.

standard. According to Charles Gallagher, “the Corpsman [was] forced into competition and rivalry, both conscious and unconscious” with French norms.<sup>118</sup>

American agricultural workers complained that Tunisians considered them uneducated because they lacked proficiency in French. Moreover, according to Peace Corps staffer David Schimmel, this “intensified the Tunisian belief that French degrees and French technology are superior to the U.S. equivalent.”<sup>119</sup> Volunteer nurses in Tunisian hospitals were judged by similar standards. Tunisian nurses that had been educated in the French system saw no need to take seriously the advice, methods and techniques of young American nurses. Edna McGuire noted that Tunisians “had little confidence in American medical and nursing practices because they considered the American system of medicine inferior to the French system.”<sup>120</sup> Interestingly, an American nurse offered a differing interpretation of why volunteers may have been snubbed by their Tunisian counterparts. According to Kennett Love’s handwritten notes, “Betty” expressed that “[Tunisians] have been told so long by France how to do things that they don’t want to be told anymore.”<sup>121</sup> Whatever the motive, it is clear that the men and women of the Peace Corps had to wade through pre-existing cultural assumptions before they could gain a foothold in Tunisian life.

The nurses of the Tunisia II program also struggled for respect in a male-dominated profession, situated within a largely patriarchal culture. Beyond not being respected as American practitioners in a French system, the nurses denounced what they

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<sup>118</sup> Charles F. Gallagher, “Programs in Tunisia and Morocco,” in Robert Textor, ed. *Cultural Frontiers of the Peace Corps* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1966), 195.

<sup>119</sup> Schimmel, “Completion of Service Report,” 18 December 1964.

<sup>120</sup> McGuire, 131.

<sup>121</sup> Love, 131.

felt was a “Muslim contempt for women.”<sup>122</sup> They were not valued by their male colleagues and often treated “like lazy servants rather than like respected assistants.”<sup>123</sup> Even with significant changes to the program’s organizational structure, only a quarter of the nurses felt it should continue; without any changes, the nurses unanimously supported its end.<sup>124</sup> By far, these women had the most negative interactions with their Tunisian counterparts. What’s more, this experience seems to have, in part, colored their view of Tunisian culture at large. In his interviews with twenty-three nurses, staffer David Schimmel noted that at the completion of their service they “felt little affection for the people of Tunisia or their values.”<sup>125</sup>

This confrontation with seemingly incompatible cultural values extended to conflicting visions of patient care. Tunisian doctors and nurses, according to their counterparts in the Peace Corps, viewed their profession as nothing more than a job—no different than any other. As such, there seemed to be little compassion or concern in what they did. Kennett Love described the view of Tunisian nurses toward their patients as “a troublesome commodity to be kept in line with firm discipline instead of tender loving care.”<sup>126</sup> This cultural divide came to a head when Nancy Biddinger went so far as to hit a Tunisian nurse who had slapped a female patient “still groggy after a caesarian section to make her turn over for a shot.”<sup>127</sup> The degree to which these experiences represented Tunisian nurses, or the culture at large, is difficult to ascertain. Many Peace Corps nurses quite paradoxically recalled having strong relationships in their host communities.

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<sup>122</sup> Schimmel, “Completion of Service Report,” 18 December 1964.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Love, 1963.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

Moreover, while being debrief after their service in 1964, they admitted to feeling guilty about their negative attitudes and claimed “we’re all friendly with Tunisians and we’re sure they like us.”<sup>128</sup> What this does reveal, however, is that one cannot skip over the volunteers themselves when attempting to make sense of the Peace Corps’ early struggles in Tunisia.

While volunteers were often selected based on their spirit, once overseas, not everyone proved to be as extroverted, motivated or culturally embracing as the Peace Corps had hoped. Love’s evaluation in 1963 included rather stinging criticisms of various volunteers as being “touchy, defensive, pessimistic, [and] fitful of mood and purpose.” One in particular was described as “a lumpish, bovine young man who thinks little of Tunisians and much of himself.”<sup>129</sup> David Schimmel echoed many of these sentiments in his evaluation report of returned volunteers. In it he state that most “were more interested in fixing blame on others than in examining their own actions and attitudes. Angry and unself critical, they almost never blamed themselves for any of their problems.”<sup>130</sup> Some volunteers, if not carried with them, developed rather prejudiced opinions of Tunisians as well. Larry Michalak, who served as both a volunteer and later a staff member, was dejected to encounter “racist” volunteers; he recalled how some disparagingly referred to Tunisian women as “sheets”.<sup>131</sup> For volunteers such as these, it is likely that they themselves were their own greatest challenge.

The first years of the Peace Corps were by no means devoid of any successes. The many projects undertaken by Don Watson stand as a testament to how, despite significant

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<sup>128</sup> Schimmel, “Completion of Service Report,” 18 December 1964.

<sup>129</sup> Love, 1963.

<sup>130</sup> Schimmel, “Completion of Service Report,” 18 December 1964.

<sup>131</sup> Larry Michalak, telephone interview by author, 14 March 2013.

obstacles, Peace Corps volunteers made headway in Tunisia. Further, not all Tunisians stayed at a distance from their American neighbors. The kind words, letters and food that appeared on the doorsteps' of many volunteers in the days after Kennedy's assassination highlights a genuine tenderness that existed. Because vision of what role the Peace Corps would serve—as hammered out between representatives in Washington and those in the Tunisian government—was not immediately or uniformly absorbed by those actually engaged in these relationships, their struggles were necessary steps in the process of negotiating a complex partnership.



#### CHAPTER IV / *The Solos and the Chorus*

As the Peace Corps expanded in Tunisia, volunteers could be found throughout the country. From the bustling cities of Tunis and Sfax, to the beach towns of the Cap Bon and the southern rural villages of Gafsa and Gabes, the Peace Corps experience was substantially influenced by the nature of the country and the communities in which volunteers served. Although surrounded by Tunisians, volunteers stationed in large cities lived relatively insulated lives. Having a large network of Americans with which to socialize, many were not forced to engage with their host communities. While their jobs brought many into greater contact with Tunisians, frequently it was the social elites with whom they interacted. Their counterparts living in small, rural villages like Kelibia often had few other volunteers in which to turn and connected more deeply with ordinary Tunisians. Irrespective of where they served, however, the process of understanding and negotiating cultural differences considerably influenced the volunteers' experiences.

"After a difficult year of adjustment, the project is out of its doldrums" reported the *New York Times* in December, 1963.<sup>132</sup> The article lauded the work of two Peace Corps architects in Tunisia that headed a 350 unit housing project across the country. The work of Neil Lang and Roger Wolf, according to the article, was indicative of a larger breakthrough for the Tunisia program. Peace Corps volunteers seemed to overcome many of their early struggles and settled into their host communities. No longer considered the "problem child" of the Peace Corps, the Tunisia program was quickly being touted as an unequivocal success. Much of the credit was given to country representative Richard Graham who transformed the program "from a mess to a mission."<sup>133</sup> Graham not only

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<sup>132</sup> "Peace Corps Aids Tunisian Housing," *New York Times*, 28 December 1963.

<sup>133</sup> Love, 1963.

brought stability to the revolving door of representatives in Tunisia, but also stirred a renewed enthusiasm among many of the volunteers that had grown cynical. He encouraged volunteers to study Arabic and engage more closely with their communities. Volunteers Judy Dwan and Stanley Hallet (Tunis, 64-66) both recalled Graham being instrumental in encouraging them to pursue side projects that would propel their later careers in documentary filmmaking and architecture.<sup>134</sup> Evaluator Kennett Love's suggestion to Washington echoes the confidence he had in Graham's leadership: "If I had only one recommendation, it would be: Leave it alone, unless Dick Graham asks for something."<sup>135</sup>

At the same time, Tunisians—especially those in supervisory positions—were growing more convinced at what the Peace Corps could achieve. Despite early skepticism, many of the young volunteers managed to prove themselves as valuable assets to Tunisia's social and economic transformation. As noted in a 1964 issue of *The Volunteer*, architects "first drew plans for buildings they were sure were never to be built. But as they gained the confidence of their superiors, they began to get jobs that meant something."<sup>136</sup> The Peace Corps received ever increasing requests to send more volunteers, especially those that could serve in English education programs. The *New York Times* reported that Tunisian authorities were so satisfied with the first wave of volunteers that they sought triple the numbers in the second contingent.<sup>137</sup> That same year, an article in the Tunisian newspaper *Al-Amal* expressed that "The effort made by President Kennedy to create this army of peace—a contingent of which we have seen

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<sup>134</sup> Judy Dwan and Stanley Hallet, interview with the author, 1 September 2012.

<sup>135</sup> Love, 1963.

<sup>136</sup> "Tunisia: Work Takes New Directions in Ancient Land," *The Volunteer*, Volume 2, no. 7, May 1964, 10.

<sup>137</sup> "Peace Corps Aids Tunisia Projects," *New York Times*, 27 December 1964.

working seriously and sincerely here in Tunisia—was successful and appropriate.”<sup>138</sup> The partnership between the volunteers and the Tunisians with whom they interacted was slow (and sometimes painfully) forged over the first two years of service; this process helped pave the way for what Roger Lewis (Nabeul, 64-66) described as a “golden age” for the Peace Corps in Tunisia.<sup>139</sup>

Since coming to power in 1957, Bourguiba worked to craft a progressive, liberal Arab state. He challenged the political and cultural traditions that he perceived to be impediments to social progress. Tunisians, Bourguiba felt, needed to adopt a more modern psychology in order for the nation to advance. He encouraged Tunisians “to conquer apprehensions, superstitions and social constraint.”<sup>140</sup> Frequently, religious institutions and the elites that occupied them fell between Bourguiba’s crosshairs. The President nationalized over 150,000 hectares of religious estates, abolished polygamy and encouraged Tunisian women to abandon the “sinister shroud.”<sup>141</sup> <sup>142</sup> On Tunisian television Bourguiba famously drank a glass of orange juice during Ramadan; a month of fasting, he contended, would hamper economic productivity. In essence, Bourguiba initiated a second revolution that sought to shift the nation “from its traditional Arab and Islamic model to one of his own design: secular, rational, and non-ideological.”<sup>143</sup>

As a consequence of this push toward modernity, Peace Corps volunteers serving in Tunisia’s larger cities entered a society that was substantively more cosmopolitan than

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<sup>138</sup> “Tunisia: Work Takes New Directions in Ancient Land,” *The Volunteer*, Volume 2, no.7, May 1964, 15.

<sup>139</sup> Roger Lewis, interview with the author, 1 September 2012.

<sup>140</sup> Ling, 213.

<sup>141</sup> Clement Henry Moore, *Tunisia Since Independence: The Dynamics of One-Party Government* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965), 50.

<sup>142</sup> Georgie Anne Geyer, *Tunisia: A Journey Through a Country that Works* (London: Stacey International, 2003), 81.

<sup>143</sup> James Rupert, “Tunisia: Testing America’s Third World Diplomacy,” *World Policy Journal* 4:1 (Winter 1986/1987): 139.

they had anticipated. A 1964 Completion of Service Report noted that volunteers voiced that “they were prepared for hardship and not for sophisticated Tunis.”<sup>144</sup> In an interview with Sylvia Whitman, Lewis Ware described the energy of Tunis in the sixties:

And it was lively because it was the first decade after independence: people were open to new ideas, people were full of enthusiasm, people thought that the country had someplace to go, and that they had someplace to go with it... You know, the sky was the limit. And it was a place with a lot of movement. And a very interesting intellectual life.<sup>145</sup>

After overcoming an initial bout of culture shock, Stanley Hallet remembered “street scenes” in the capital that rivaled Paris. Moreover, city life was not prohibitively expensive, even for a volunteer. Hallet—who described himself as coming from a lower-middle class background—was able “to live like he had never lived before” on his stipend of 60 Dinars a month. Tunisian women were just as chic as their Parisian counterparts according to Judy Dwan. Hallet recalled how volunteers “became experts in crème caramel and mouse au chocolat” in Tunis’ vibrant city life that included a complex mixture of French expatriates and Coopérants, a modern Jewish community as well as upwardly mobile Tunisians.<sup>146</sup> Garry Garrison (Sfax 66-68) also described a country growing with tourists and hotels where alcohol was far from taboo and could be found in almost any restaurant or café.<sup>147</sup>

The living conditions of many volunteers echoed the modernity they felt in Tunisian cities. Far from the threadbare shacks and dirt floors of Peace Corps lore, many volunteers experienced relatively high living standards. As a trainer for the Tunisia program, Charles Gallagher noted that conditions would have been considered

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<sup>144</sup> Robert L. Leopold. “Completion of Service Report” 16 March 1964, Country Training Case Files, 1961-1987, Record Group 490, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

<sup>145</sup> Whitman, 4.

<sup>146</sup> Judy Dwan and Stanley Hallet, interview with author, 1 September 2012.

<sup>147</sup> Gary Garrison, skype interview with author, 8 March 2013.

“romantically enviable” by volunteers in many other Peace Corps programs. According to Gallagher, “the recent massive growth of tourism shows that many people would consider it a pleasure to be paid to “rough it” in many parts of the area.”<sup>148</sup> Robert Marshall’s description of his life in Tunisia as “luxurious” was more the rule than the exception. He recalled a friend and fellow volunteer living in Tunis having “a nice house and a housekeeper who came in every day to clean and cook his dinner. He taught English at an adult school to very wealthy people and he spent his free time reading and sitting in a café. His life there was such that he could have been in Paris.”<sup>149</sup> Don Watson lived in a four story building near his architectural office in Sfax; he equated it to “moving into an apartment in Miami”.<sup>150</sup> Similarly, Lucinda Pearlman described her “neat little apartment” in Sousse as having hot water, a dining room, and even a guest room that she would sometimes make available to other volunteers that were travelling through.<sup>151</sup>

The Tunisia program was not the only arm of the Peace Corps whose volunteers lived in unexpectedly comfortable conditions. Fritz Fischer’s *Making Them Like Us* notes that many volunteers “landed in the lap of luxury rather than in a mud hut.”<sup>152</sup> This seemed to be the case even in the Peace Corps’ inaugural program in Ghana. Fears of the “dark continent” proved unfounded as the volunteers were housed in rooms complete with mosquito netting and gas-powered refrigerators. Upon visiting this group in 1962, Sargent Shriver challenged the volunteers to live a more Spartan lifestyle.<sup>153</sup> Moreover, a

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<sup>148</sup> Gallagher, 192.

<sup>149</sup> Schwarz, 118.

<sup>150</sup> Don Watson, telephone interview with author, 23 February 2013.

<sup>151</sup> Lucinda Pearlman, telephone interview with author, 25 February 2013.

<sup>152</sup> Fischer, 119.

<sup>153</sup> Hoffman, 167.

large number of volunteers actually felt as though they lived better in their host country than they had in the United States. With volunteers frequently splitting the rent on apartments, Peace Corps stipends allowed many to live quite well. Although quite incongruous with the foundation of the Peace Corps, many volunteers even employed host country nationals as housekeepers during their service. For only a few dollars a month, volunteers were able to hire “native stewards, houseboys, and cleaners” to take care of the daily chores.<sup>154</sup>

It should be remembered that Peace Corps volunteers were oftentimes the most critical of these conditions. While some were relieved to be confronted with such comfortable living standards, many grudgingly accepted them. Such was the case with the first volunteers in Ghana whose physical comforts were “tinged with guilt or at least uneasiness” for not living a “real” Peace Corps experience.<sup>155</sup> At the same time, some justified the employment of housekeepers as alike as it not only allowed volunteers greater time to focus greater on their job, but provided much needed income to host country nationals.<sup>156</sup>

Despite their conveniences—or perhaps because of them—volunteers serving in major cities sometimes became quite insulated from Tunisian life. Members of the Peace Corps often spent their free time with each other rather than exploring and interacting with their host communities. As Tunisia was emerging as a new tourist destination, volunteers made use of the growing number of restaurants, hotels and cinemas. This issue was magnified by the fact that major cities were naturally home to a larger network of volunteers with which to socialize. In describing what he generally did with his free time,

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<sup>154</sup> Rice, 227.

<sup>155</sup> Hoffman, 168.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 169.

Phil Jones (Tunis 66-68) responded that he rarely spent any time with Tunisians; he instead visited with other volunteers. He recalled that “There were a lot of PCVs in Tunis, making it (too) easy to have just American friends.”<sup>157</sup> When asked to what degree he forged interpersonal relationships with average Tunisians, Jones responded: “Virtually nil.”<sup>158</sup>

In *The Bold Experiment*, Gerard Rice explored such isolation in urban areas; he noted that although volunteers “had the company of each other in the city, there was the danger of social clannishness and that contacts with their hosts would become limited. Volunteers could congregate for “bull” sessions where they could gripe, gossip, and generally waste time.”<sup>159</sup> While this certainly did not describe every volunteer, nor was it exclusively characteristic of city life, many remember socializing predominantly in Peace Corps circles.

Lucinda Pearlman described being part of a fraternity of girlfriends that would spend much of their time with a volunteer whose house was on the beach. She admitted that she “certainly could have done a better job mingling with Tunisians.”<sup>160</sup> Likewise, Gary Garrison was similarly disconnected from Tunisian life. With approximately thirty other men and women of the Peace Corps serving in Sfax, Garrison recalled only having “occasional conversations with Tunisians at a café.”<sup>161</sup> Most of the time, he estimated, volunteers socialized with each other. Moreover, despite living in an apartment building surrounded by Tunisians, Garrison only really interacted with his landlord. He never got to know his neighbors who, he recollected, used a separate entrance from him. This was

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<sup>157</sup> Phil Jones, email interview with author, 13 August 2012.

<sup>158</sup> Phil Jones, follow-up email interview with author, 9 November 2012.

<sup>159</sup> Rice, 229.

<sup>160</sup> Lucinda Pearlman, telephone interview with author, 25 February 2013.

<sup>161</sup> Gary Garrison, skype interview with author, 8 March 2013.

not entirely surprising for a predominantly young group of volunteers living in a foreign country. It was also not uncommon in the Peace Corps as a whole. Franz Fischer's *Making Them Like Us* explored how volunteers often "retreated into cultural isolation" and how "parties, eating and drinking were more important to the lives of most volunteers than they had been in the United States."<sup>162</sup>

Upon hearing of a Peace Corps "ghetto" of fourteen volunteers living in the upscale Al Menzah apartments in Tunis, Richard Graham was determined to institute fundamental changes. He cut volunteer stipends by 23% in an effort to induce a more humble lifestyle. Graham further introduced a policy of "Medinization" or "Getting-them-into-the-Casbahs" that attempted to shift volunteer housing toward the heart of the city. This was not always possible as oftentimes project agreements established that Tunisians would provide housing for the volunteers. Peace Corps nurses, for example, were assigned homes by the hospitals in which they worked. Often they were placed in dormitory style housing "a stones throw from their jobs but utterly cut off from their life in the city."<sup>163</sup> Graham's "Medinization" campaign was also not compulsory. Many volunteers were quite content to remain isolated within Peace Corps circles.

Richard Graham also recognized that volunteers too often relied on the Peace Corps staff to provide them with "settling in" items such as furniture and appliances. In this way, the Peace Corps staff was an unnecessary intermediary that obstructed relationships between volunteers and their host communities. A better solution, Graham felt, would be to provide them with stipends that could be used to purchase these items

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<sup>162</sup> Fischer, 125.

<sup>163</sup> Love, 1963.



directly from Tunisians vendors. This would “help volunteers swim like fish in the local population rather than remain attached by a golden cord to our cornucopia.”<sup>164</sup>

While some volunteers were provided with housing, the Peace Corps frequently did not make such arrangements; officials in Washington felt that it would run counter to the pioneering nature of the organization. Volunteers would instead be required to resourcefully establish their own living arrangements. Many of them were indeed resourceful, yet likely not in the way the Peace Corps had envisioned. Many simply “recycled” their apartments at the end of their service by passing them on to the next crop of volunteers. Lucinda Pearlman’s “neat little apartment” in Sousse was inherited from some departing Peace Corps architects, and Larry Michalak’s first home in Tunis was passed on to him by a Peace Corps nurse. In this way, volunteers were often funneled into isolated domestic lives from the outset.

Michalak’s time in Tunisia highlights, however, that the volunteers’ living conditions in the cities were far from uniform. In his second year, Michalak lived with a Tunisian family in the Medina in a house with no kitchen or bathroom. He shared a room with the eldest of ten children but looks back on it as an overwhelmingly positive experience for which he credits his fluency in Arabic and his deep integration into Tunisian life.<sup>165</sup>

The isolation of Peace Corps volunteers was not always self-imposed as divergent cultural norms also prevented greater interactions with their host communities.

Volunteers—particularly men—rarely had access to more domestic spheres of Tunisian life. A Completion of Service Conference held at the Tunis Normal School revealed how

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<sup>164</sup> Love, 1963.

<sup>165</sup> Larry Michalak, telephone interview with author, 14 March 2013.

Peace Corps mechanics struggled with the “closed nature” of Tunisian society. Filing the report was staffer Warren Fuller who made note of the isolation volunteers felt after work, “particularly in the cities.” He also recorded volunteer sentiments that “it’s rarely that you’re invited into a Tunisian home” and “if it weren’t for the expatriates there would be no dating.”<sup>166</sup> While Don Watson was invited into the homes of many of his Tunisian colleagues, he recalled not socializing with any of the families. Despite the cosmopolitan feel of many Tunisian cities, the ability of volunteers to form interpersonal relationships had its limits.

These divisions were even more deeply entrenched in Tunisia’s rural towns and villages. Serving in Gafsa, Roger Lewis became very friendly with colleagues at the *Ministère des Travaux Public*, however after work he remembered how the female secretary would not walk down the street with him.<sup>167</sup> Looking back on her years in Kelibia, Sabra Webber acknowledged that women had a much easier time making connections with local families; “men had to try a lot harder” she recalled.<sup>168</sup> Her judgments seem to be echoed in Kennett Love’s evaluation in which he noted that “married Volunteers have a degree of access to Tunisians and Tunisian family life that single Volunteers rarely achieve.”<sup>169</sup>

Single men, were not the only volunteers to struggle with the barriers of cultural traditions. Especially in rural areas where traditions were more firmly entrenched, American women in the Peace Corps had little contact with de facto males spheres of life. While men could easily spend time with local Tunisians at a café without causing a stir,

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<sup>166</sup> Warren Graham Fuller. “Completion of Service Report,” 22 April 1964, Country Training Case Files, 1961-1987, Record Group 490, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

<sup>167</sup> Roger Lewis, interview with the author, 1 September 2012.

<sup>168</sup> Sabra Webber, telephone interview with the author, 5 March 2013.

<sup>169</sup> Love, 1963.

women often did not enjoy such advantages. Christine Passmore seldom went to the local fish market in Kelibia as the route took her by a local café; whether justified or not, she recalled feeling quite uncomfortable walking past the men sitting outside.<sup>170</sup>

When invited to attend social functions, Tunisians sometimes hesitated to mingle with volunteers if the setting was *une soirée américaine*. According to Gary Garrison, Peace Corps get-togethers that were gender-mixed or involved drinking alcohol were not unusual in Tunisia. In fact, he likened his two years in Sfax to “an extension of undergraduate school.”<sup>171</sup> Moreover, this was not atypical for the Peace Corps at large. Franz Fischer contends that “Many volunteers did not give up the fast-paced social life traditional among Americans of their age.”<sup>172</sup> In these situations, however, Tunisians tended to shy away.

While Eileen Davis and Carol Bryan (Tunis 1966) became quite close with a Tunisian family with which they shared a “double-house,” the parents, Fraaj and Souade usually kept their distance when the volunteers would host Peace Corps parties. The courtyard of the house was a shared space, yet Davis remembers how the family remained as spectators.

Carol and I gave occasional parties for our PC and other friends...and these parties would spill over into the courtyard. We played Beatles, French music, drank Celtia beer, talked and danced (nothing more at least on the premises). We always invited Souade and [Fraaj] to join us, but they never did. But Souade and her mother would sit on their porch and watch the party --- I think we were very amusing to them!<sup>173</sup>

This did not mean that Peace Corps volunteers and Tunisians did not develop strong social relationships. Many, in fact, remember becoming great friends with

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<sup>170</sup> Christine Passmore, interview with the author, 2 February 2013.

<sup>171</sup> Gary Garrison, skype interview with author, 8 March 2013.

<sup>172</sup> Fischer, 126.

<sup>173</sup> Eileen Davis, email interview with the author, 11 November 2012.

Tunisians in their communities. Larry Michalak—no doubt aided by his strong command of Arabic and French—had a “network” of Tunisian friends with whom he became particularly close. Also, Mary Pendleton described a very active social life in which volunteers and Tunisians were deeply intertwined:

We hung out with a group of young Tunisians with whom we would go dancing, to the movies, to the beach in summer, to their homes, homes of other friends of theirs and so on. One or two of the boys had access to a car from time to time and would take us to visit archeological sites outside of Tunis. The girls introduced us to the culture of the public baths, henna, how to make couscous, brik and other Tunisian specialties.<sup>174</sup>

The interest in food seems to have been reciprocal. As an English teacher she also became close with several women in her class who invited her into their homes where she taught them how to make typical American food such as pancakes and pumpkin pie.

Likewise, it should be remembered that Tunisians were not motionless observers while volunteers settled their living arrangements. Much like Passmore and Webber’s experience in Kelibia, some even came to the aid of volunteers who struggled to locate housing. After arriving in Tunis to find she had nowhere to live, Eileen Davis was frightened to think that the Peace Corps had somehow forgotten about her. She felt as though she had “somehow fallen through the cracks of the system.”<sup>175</sup> She remembers being assisted by a young, well educated Tunisian named Raouf Ben Zakour, about whom she recounted:

He worked for Pan Am and he liked Americans. He offered me a place to stay in his apartment for a week or two while I looked for a home. He is still a friend to this day. I always remind him that he was my knight in shining armor when I needed a friend.<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> Mary Pendleton, email interview with the author, 19 January 2013.

<sup>175</sup> Eileen Davis, email interview with the author, 11 November 2012.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

Such encounters were not unusual. Because the rent in Mary Pendleton's apartment near the beach in Carthage Salambo increased during the summer months, she set out to find new accommodations in Tunis. She recalls several Tunisians who befriended her and assisted in finding her an apartment. As her new home's bathroom only contained a toilet and sink, these Tunisians also helped to install a shower. Although Tunisians at times have kept a cautious distance from volunteers, they were nonetheless a significant part of their domestic experience. Tunisians were landlords, neighbors, and sometimes roommates that regularly entered into complex social relationships with volunteers.

To be certain, the volunteers' official assignments helped bring them into closer contact with Tunisians. It was not unusual for Tunisian co-workers to spend leisure time with volunteers or invite them into their homes for tea. Many friendships were forged in professional spaces and strengthened in more social settings. However, these relationships were often built with Tunisian elites. This was especially true among Peace Corps architects who were almost exclusively in contact with Tunisia's educated professionals. Don Watson considered the source of social division to be far more rooted in one's "professional status" than in one's culture.<sup>177</sup> This was also true for volunteers teaching English at the more prestigious "Bourgubia Schools" where both their students and Tunisian colleagues came from the more privileged classes. Judy Dwan taught English principally to men in their twenties who had already received scholarships to study banking and aeronautics in the United States. They were already educated and extraordinarily motivated to learn English. Although she tried to meet ordinary Tunisians,

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<sup>177</sup> Don Watson, telephone interview with the author, 23 February 2013.

Judy recollects having “an upper class Tunisian experience” in which she interacted predominantly with intellectuals.<sup>178</sup>

For volunteers serving in more rural towns and villages across Tunisia, their experience was markedly different. Many developed very close relationships with ordinary Tunisians and interacted more meaningfully with their communities. To a large extent, this was a natural consequence of their circumstances and occurred in rural settings throughout the Peace Corps. Gerard Rice maintained that “Up country assignments lacked social amenities and conversation with Americans, but they held the attractions of a freer, more informal style of life, increased contact with the local folk, and greater opportunities to make a personal impact.”<sup>179</sup> Smaller towns did not host a large number of volunteers; unlike the larger cities, they lacked a network of Americans to which volunteers could turn. Many, therefore, were forced to interact with locals to a greater extent. In 1967, Sabra Webber and Christine Passmore were the only two volunteers serving in Kelibia. Coupled with the fact that they lived with the Najar family, they became quickly and deeply entrenched in Tunisian life.

For those serving in towns like Kelibia and Gafsa, many felt as though it offered a richer and more authentic Peace Corps experience. Because these areas lacked many of the conveniences found in Tunisia’s major cities, volunteers had to engage more deeply with their communities. Webber remembers that because Kelibia lacked any large shopping centers or supermarkets, she and Christine quickly grew to know many of the local street vendors and merchants. Further, without the social distractions of urban life, volunteers like Bruce Cohen (Gafsa 67-69) remembered spending his time “sitting in

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<sup>178</sup> Judy Dwan, interview with the author, 1 September 2012.

<sup>179</sup> Rice, 229.

café's with Tunisians,” and “just walking around town.”<sup>180</sup> To borrow the words of Ross Burkhardt who wrote about his integration into the rural town of Zaghouan, Cohen was “seeing Tunisia from the inside looking out, as it should be seen.”<sup>181</sup> Though also an English teacher, Cohen did not teach at one of the prestigious Bourguiba schools. His students were quite lower class and he remembers sometimes visiting their families who lived in the desert. Like Weber and Passmore, he became very close to his host community of Gafsa.

David DeSelm had a dual experience having lived twenty-one months in the cities of Sfax and Tunis, yet also participated in a three month project in Kelibia. As an historic preservation architect, he interacted daily with professional Tunisians at the *Direccion de Monuments Historiques*. However, he admits that “because I lived in two big cities where it’s harder to get to know people, I didn’t interact very much with Tunisians outside of work.”<sup>182</sup> In contrast, DeSelm conveys a much closer relationship when describing his project in Kelibia. While surveying Kelibia’s *Borj*, DeSelm recalled spending nights drinking tea and watching television with a Tunisian family that served as caretakers of the *Borj*. During this time he also lived with his assistant Mohammad and recalls learning a great deal from that experience. Although DeSelm concedes that spending only three months in Kelibia did not offer him a full representation of life, he acknowledges that in small town, volunteers “seem to spend more time interacting with and getting to know local people better.”<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Bruce Cohen, telephone interview with the author, 16 February 2013.

<sup>181</sup> Burkhardt, “The Volunteer,” November 1963.

<sup>182</sup> David DeSelm, email interview with the author, 1 April 2013.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

It should be noted that serving in a small town did not always guarantee a close relationship between volunteers and their host communities. Karen Trocki, who served in both the rural village of Bushema as well as Tunis, had quite an opposite experience. While she had great affection for the hospitable townspeople of Bushema, she felt more bonded to her *Tunisois* colleagues in the capital. Trocki saw them as her “educational peers,” and as most of them spoke English, she tended to build stronger relationships.<sup>184</sup>

There is some evidence to suggest that those in urban areas longed for a more rural experience. Kennet Love’s evaluation reported that Peace Corps nurses “yearned to get out of the city and into provincial life.”<sup>185</sup> However, because of their numerous struggles outlined in the previous chapter, their sentiments could be viewed as more of a rejection of Tunis than a desire for rural Tunisian life. Conversely, a reading of Arthur Wild’s (Tunis 70-72) journal indicates that there was at least some rivalry between volunteers in the city and those in the country. A Thanksgiving entry in 1972 reveals Wild’s animosity toward the perceived arrogance of rural volunteers.

Thinking about the people in Gabes (Peace Corps) & and a problem they have in their very vocal feelings that being in a small town is a better Peace Corps experience (?) but I think they’d rather be in Tunis because of all the justifying & re-justifying of their choice. “Bet you can’t get bread like that in Tunis” or “I told them I’d go anywhere but Tunis.” Etc. The whole experience turns into an ego trip...when we get back...of course the people from the small towns will have the solos, the rest of us, the chorus.<sup>186</sup>

Wild rejected the notion that a “real” Peace Corps experience existed at all. In his estimation, volunteers that had predetermined ideas of what life should be like, had already closed their minds to the various possibilities of what the Peace Corps could be.

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<sup>184</sup> Karen Trocki, telephone interview with the author, 14 March 2013.

<sup>185</sup> Love, 1963.

<sup>186</sup> Arthur Wild, *Arthur Wild papers* box 16, #39, National Anthropological Archives, Suitland, Maryland.



Even volunteers that remember having been somewhat isolated from Tunisian life were perhaps too hard on themselves. Many retrospectively regretted not interacting more with locals, yet simultaneously recounted a host of humorous or memorable interactions they had with Tunisians. While Lucinda Pearlman admitted to not interacting very much with Tunisians, she also revealed at the end of her interview that she almost married a Tunisian. Volunteers also routinely picked up additional projects outside of their official jobs. As school was not in session during the summer months, teachers especially were encouraged to—and often did—take on secondary activities which brought them more deeply into contact with their communities.

## CHAPTER V / *Looking Back on the Peace Corps*

Life for Peace Corps volunteers in Tunisia's urban and rural spaces each presented unique opportunities and obstacles. Irrespective of where they served, volunteers from the "golden age" overwhelmingly looked back on their years with fondness. By the mid 1960s, the Peace Corps was engaging in increasingly larger professional endeavors. Likewise, volunteers—although sometimes quite insular—had built fond social relationships with many Tunisians. This does not suggest, however, that the problems experienced by the "first wave" had been vanquished by the second. To be sure, volunteers of the mid-late 1960s continued to encounter hazy job descriptions and wade through linguistic barriers. More so, they were forced to negotiate divergent expectations with their local counterparts. The process of reevaluating many of their initial goals has contributed to the frequent refrain among returned volunteers: they gained far more from the Tunisians than they gave.

Volunteers have retrospectively looked back on their time in Tunisia, despite the problems, as one of the most formative and meaningful events in their lives. Their experiences in many ways guided where their lives would go; many found their way back to Tunisia. The overwhelming nostalgia for Tunisia and its people at times highlights a dissonance with historical records that all too frequently focus on the struggles of the Peace Corps. Volunteer memories, however, reveal the degree to which Tunisia has become part of who they are.

As the number of Peace Corps volunteers grew, so too did the need to balance their expectations against those of the Tunisians. Volunteers became more quickly and deeply involved in their assignments as their predecessors had laid a foundation on top of

which they would continue to build. As such, the Peace Corps' adjunct status slowly gave way as they assumed more active roles and greater responsibilities. Volunteers often brought with them grand ideas of what they would accomplish overseas that did not always neatly correspond with that of their host communities. This sometimes exposed differing designs for Tunisia's development; in the case of many Peace Corps architects, this was very literal. In contrast to Peace Corps teachers who were guided by a curriculum, and nurses by patient needs, architecture at its base was creative.

While designing a women's education center in Dar Chaabane outside of Nabeul, Roger offered what for Tunisians was a relatively unconventional new design. Lewis wanted to forgo plastering the underside of the vaulted ceilings as is typical of traditional Tunisian architecture; his vision was to leave exposed the herringbone brick pattern. Initially, his Tunisian client balked at the proposal, to which Lewis offered a compromise. He promised to plaster over the brick ceiling if the final product proved unsuitable. Although Lewis got his wish and the brickwork remained, he was quick to point out that rather than being innovative, he simply capitalized on the architectural work that Tunisians did best. In this way, his designs were the outgrowth of a negotiated relationship. While this kind of bargaining was not unique, it also was not the rule.<sup>187</sup>

After months of unemployment, Arthur Wild found work as an architect in a private Tunisian firm; the government was already oversaturated with Peace Corps architects when he arrived in 1971. Although his new job broke him out of the "prison" that was Tunisia, he quickly realized that "the architecture he knew how to do and the architecture his supervisor wanted did not coincide."<sup>188</sup> (ECH224) Wild routinely

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<sup>187</sup> Roger Lewis, interview with the author, 1 September 2012.

<sup>188</sup> Hoffman, 224.

complained that Tunisians—especially his boss Raouf—stifled any creative designs he sought to pursue. In a March, 1972 journal entry, he lamented:

There is a strange tendency here to take a rewarding job—like architecture, for instance—and make a kind of drudgery out of it due to, in part anyway, lack of enthusiasm and a creative approach. Yesterday I was helping Hedi with a façade and in trying to make it consistent and simple, made the entrance a bit different. He said, “That’s no good. I’ve never seen anything like that before.” In [the] USA, we would consider never having seen anything like, a triumph (right or wrong!)<sup>189</sup>

Wild struggled to reconcile Raouf’s “unimaginative” designs with his vision of Tunisian development. These disappointments were chronicled with abrupt entries in his journal. March 21<sup>st</sup> reads: “Another battle on the drawing board lost to cultural difference.”<sup>190</sup>

Wild also wrestled with various ethical dilemmas that required him to bridge the gap between his expectations and Tunisian plans for economic development. He bristled at projects that sought to replace traditional Medinas with suburban housing. More troubling, however, was the M’dilla housing plan that was intended to provide housing for phosphate miners. In his journal, Wild confronted the reality that this project was merely a ploy designed to more closely tie miners to the company due to the high level of absenteeism.<sup>191</sup> Wild struggled with whether he should simply design the best, most climatized housing possible, or “try to change some bigger part of the system...that part with is trying to dictate, to force, their moving to the mine.”<sup>192</sup> While his journal does not reveal the result of this project, his feeling of moral ambiguity is evident.

Stanley Hallet confronted similar circumstances during his time as an architect in Tunis. Having recently completed his thesis on housing in the developing world at MIT,

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<sup>189</sup> Wild, Journal, 15 March 1972, 57.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

Hallet arrived in Tunisia with aspirations of “revolutionizing” their entire housing system. Inspired by Kennedy’s call to action, Hallet—who had never been outside the United States—was energized “to make a real difference.” To his surprise, however, he found himself assigned to the Bureau of Tourism. His job: designing hotels for wealthy tourists. Hallet remembers feeling “terribly guilty” as his job was a far cry from his dream of creating low cost housing for disadvantaged Tunisians. Although crestfallen, his Tunisian supervisors explained that one hotel would pay for ten thousand homes for those in need. Tunisians, they told him, knew how to build their own houses. Hallet slowly came to terms with the fact that he would be a part of Tunisia’s development, rather than its orchestrator.<sup>193</sup>

After ten years of service in Tunisia, the Peace Corps seemed to recognize the necessity of adopting a similar outlook. In its annual country report on Tunisia published in June, 1972, representatives of the Tunisia program advocated a strategy that would more closely align with Tunisian needs and expectations. The report noted:

Ideally, the Peace Corps must establish its development priorities within the Tunisian integrated framework—the Four Year Plan. It is up to the Tunisians to tell us their needs and requirements. In the past, Peace Corps has established its own priorities such as the teaching of English and architects—two of the lowest priorities in Tunisia’s plan.<sup>194</sup>

This report seems to adopt the suggestions put forward by Peace Corps trainer and historian Charles Gallagher in *Cultural Frontiers of the Peace Corps*. In a country where, as a third language, English is “utterly superfluous,” and the national sport is volleyball, Gallagher questions the Peace Corps’ commitment to teaching English and offering Americanized physical education programs. He wonders whether these activities “might

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<sup>193</sup> Stanley Hallet, interview with author, 1 September 2012.

<sup>194</sup> “Peace Corps Country Plan, June 1972” RG59, Container 105, NARA, Washington, D.C.

not be subordinated to an intensification of the effort in the fields where American skills are admittedly potent,” such as farming technology and medical health.<sup>195</sup> Such realizations on an organizational level acknowledge the benefit of infusing the Peace Corps laterally into Tunisia’s own development plans, instead of devising them.

While at times the gulf between volunteer goals and host expectations seemed impossibly wide, many in the Peace Corps acknowledged Tunisian ownership of their own future. Despite the obvious and mounting frustration throughout Arthur Wild’s journal, he arrived at a similar conclusion. In one of his final entries before returning home, Wild reflected that “you must accept the fact that you are here mainly to learn (this is the reason we came over in the first place) about life in another world and the problems of getting along.”<sup>196</sup>

Wild’s comments foreshadow changing views of American life that many volunteers would experience as a result of their time in the Peace Corps. Returning to the United States prompted a reevaluation of their lives, community and government. Volunteers often underwent profound personal changes that made it impossible to maintain the same values and goals that they held prior to joining the Peace Corps. Gerard Rice argues that “Volunteers had to face the painful process of readjusting to aspects of their society that they had previously accepted as “American.” Many found the old ways exceedingly difficult to accept.”<sup>197</sup> This process of self-reflection sometimes began while volunteers were still abroad. An excerpt from Arthur Wild’s journal provides a vivid look at such introspection despite nine months of his service remaining.

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<sup>195</sup> Gallagher, 196.

<sup>196</sup> Wild, 222.

<sup>197</sup> Rice, 295.

...the Peace Corps has allowed me more philosophical time and has reinforced my idea that the typical U.S. way of life is too confining for me. I think I can give up the luxuries (telephones, pizza, McDonalds hamburgers) easier than I can accept the restrictions (40 hours per week at a job someone else manufactured and administered and sucked all the creativity from.) The next phase after the Peace Corps I feel will be very important for our continuing development and we must not slip back into the world of Laundromats and freeze-drieds too heavily or we could become lost forever.<sup>198</sup>

These struggles were neither confined to Tunisian volunteers, nor those that served during the 1960s. Irrespective of when or where, many volunteers shared in the anxieties of resuming their lives in America. Barbara Joe joined the Peace Corps in 2000, six years after the sudden death of her son. In her memoir, *Triumph & Hope: Golden Years with the Peace Corps in Honduras*, Joe recounts feeling “part Honduran” and struggled with the prospect of returning home. She noted:

Despite the thrill of reuniting with my family, my readjustment proves more unsettling than leaving the U.S. in the first place...Unpacking my clothes, still smoky from being dried near open fires, I’m overcome with nostalgia. And, given so many food choices, I gain 15 lbs. in as many days. There is life after the Peace Corps, but it’s not the same. I really miss Honduras.<sup>199</sup> (259)

The need of returned volunteers to recalibrate their lives was magnified in the politically charged atmosphere surrounding the Civil Rights Movement and Vietnam War. Their experiences overseas contributed to a heightened sense of egalitarianism and political engagement, causing many to return “more internationally-minded, more concerned with the problems of others at home and abroad, and more prepared to take action to solve them.”<sup>200</sup> Volunteers struggled to reconcile American foreign policy in Vietnam with their years of service in the Peace Corps. Jacques Ullman who was among the Tunisia program’s first volunteers became quite ambivalent towards the Peace Corps.

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<sup>198</sup> Wild, 126.

<sup>199</sup> Barbara Joe, *Triumph & Hope: Golden Years with the Peace Corps in Honduras* (Booksurge Publishing, 2008), 259.

<sup>200</sup> Rice, 292.

For Ullman, he and could no longer separate the organization from American foreign policy.<sup>201</sup> (JU)

Many volunteers also came home with considerably altered world views. They returned, to borrow a phrase from Aldous Huxley, “richer by much experience and poorer by many exploded convictions, many perished certainties.”<sup>202</sup> This was the case for Bruce Cohen who, as a Jew, was interested yet apprehensive about serving in an Arab country—especially in the wake of the Six Day War. Despite one negative episode in which some locals mistook his donating several pairs of *Levi* jeans as an attempt to propagandize for Israel, Cohen’s time in Tunisia changed his perspective about the possibilities for Arab-Jewish relations. He vividly remembered Bourguiba’s support for Tunisia’s Jewish communities in the aftermath of the 1967 War; in contrast to some of his “unexposed” Jewish friends in America, Cohen’s experience allowed him to “rethink the Arab world, and gave [him] a much more balanced perspective.”<sup>203</sup>

The Peace Corps narrowed the perceived gap between cultures and helped volunteers develop a sense of kinship with their host communities. Looking back, volunteers realized that they had far more in common with their hosts than they had anticipated. David Searles argues in *The Peace Corps Experience* that living abroad taught volunteers how “people the world over share certain common characteristics, and that the existence of cultural difference need not be a barrier to human understanding and cooperation.”<sup>204</sup> This was true not just in Tunisia, but throughout the Peace Corps. Also serving in the Maghrib, Judy Lippman recalled that her years in Morocco gave her an

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<sup>201</sup> Jacques Ullman, email interview with the author, 15 November 2012.

<sup>202</sup> Aldous Huxley, *Jesting Pilate* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1926), 322.

<sup>203</sup> Bruce Cohen, telephone interview with the author, 16 February 2013.

<sup>204</sup> Searles, 213.



“overwhelming realization of how we really aren’t different. Despite all of the outer differences and appearance and traditions.”<sup>205</sup> Feelings of grief, hunger and worry, according to Lippman, were shared human experiences. She maintains the forty years since her service in the Peace Corps, she still believes that one can find cultural similarities as easily as cultural differences if one chooses to look for them.

Eileen Davis’ experience as a kindergarten teacher in the poor community of Somrane, helped her forge a similar cultural bond. Davis grew close to her students’ families; the majority of them were transplanted Bedouin women whose husbands had come to Tunis looking for work. Sharing lunch with them every day, Davis recollects that “these women were exactly like women everywhere—saying the same things, reacting the same way, laughing at the same jokes about their kids, siblings, husbands...I loved these people and learned far more from them than I ever taught anyone.”<sup>206</sup>

Davis’ comments reveal not only feelings of cultural interconnectedness, but also what many volunteers would retrospectively conclude about their experience in the Peace Corps: they gained more than they gave. David Searles suggests the “universal truth” of the Peace Corps is that “the agency bestowed its greatest gifts on those who served in it.”<sup>207</sup> This was more a reflection of how personally meaningful their service was than any expression of professional inadequacy. These sentiments can be found among the earliest volunteers while their service was still ongoing. As a TEFL teacher in Tunis, Judy Dwan described how welcoming and appreciative Tunisians were for her service. When they would thank her for volunteering two years of her life, Dwan recalled

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<sup>205</sup> Judy Lippman, interview conducted by Jack Wilson, Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Oral History Project, University of Kentucky Digital Library, 12 December 2005.

<sup>206</sup> Eileen Davis, email interview with the author, 11 November 2012.

<sup>207</sup> Searles, 210.

frequently responding “we’re learning so much more from you.” In this way, she highlights a “mutual admiration” that existed between volunteers and their hosts.<sup>208</sup>

With few exceptions, most returned volunteers have retrospectively echoed Dwan’s sentiments. Lucinda Pearlman credits the Peace Corps as “probably the most important thing I ever did in my life...I got much more out of it than I gave.” Pearlman’s reflections on her time in Sousse are emblematic of the wider responses of returned volunteers. According to a 1970 poll by Louis Harris and Associates, while only 25 percent of volunteers serving from 1962-1968 found the Peace Corps to be of “great value” to their host country, 92 percent claimed the experience had personally been “very valuable.”<sup>209</sup>

Perhaps the biggest testament to the affection that volunteers hold for Tunisia is the degree to which the country and its people would remain a part of their lives. Many volunteers have, on numerous occasions, returned to Tunisia. The country has become the subject of many returned volunteers’ scholarly endeavors. Stanley Hallet’s recent book entitled *Évolution d’un habitat: le monde berbère du Sud tunisien* follows a 2009 work, *The Mosques of Djerba*. Larry Michalak conducted anthropological research on the market culture of Tunisian souks for his PhD dissertation, *The Changing Weekly Markets of Tunisia*. Moreover, Kelibia is the focus of Sabra Webber’s ethnographic examination of Tunisian folklore entitled *Romancing the Real*. At the outset, she acknowledges the people of Kelibia and her former hosts—the Najjar family—for their support. Also among those she credits is her former Arabic tutor, Salah Khoudja, who assisted in the transliteration of her book.

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<sup>208</sup> Judy Dwan, interview with the author, 1 September 2012.

<sup>209</sup> “Less Zeal Found for Peace Corps,” *New York Times*, 4 April 1970.

Webber's acknowledgements demonstrate the intense personal relationships that have endured between returned volunteers and their Tunisian hosts. Many volunteers have come back to Tunisia in order to reconnect with their past experiences or share them with their new families. Jody Olsen, who in 2001 was appointed Deputy Director of the Peace Corps by President Bush, began as an English teacher in Sousse from 1966-1968. Olsen reflected on her days living and laughing with the Zinelabedine family, and the intense personal relationship they developed. As her service came to an end, Olsen recalled that she "dreaded leaving Tunisia, leaving the Zinelabedines....They gave me the gift of time and of themselves, and in doing so changed my life."<sup>210</sup> Before leaving she shared one final joke with the father, Mahmoud Zinelabedine. She gave him a can of Metrical—a diet drink "in honor of his weight." As Mahmoud placed the can into the refrigerator, Olsen remembers feeling that she would never see him again. Fifteen years later—while serving in a different capacity within the Peace Corps—Olsen unexpectedly returned to the Zinelabedine's house in Sousse. She was overjoyed to find Mahmoud and his wife Suad still there. Olsen recalls that after reminiscing for an hour, "Mahmoud stood up, went into the kitchen, opened the refrigerator, and came out, holding the small can of metrical I had given him 15 years earlier. He said, I saved it for you, I knew you would come back."<sup>211</sup>

While reflections such as these were born out of the strong personal relationships that volunteers built with Tunisians, the Peace Corps also helped guide many volunteers toward their later professional endeavors. After returning home, Roger Lewis received a Ford Foundation grant to study housing and community development for underdeveloped

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<sup>210</sup> Jody Olsen, "A Special Meal in Tunisia" Peace Corps Digital Library, 19 November 2008.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid.

countries at MIT; he attributed this opportunity to his experience as an architect in Nabeul. More directly, Lewis notes that his service in the Peace Corps was a deciding factor in his interview to become a professor at the University of Maryland's School of Architecture in 1968. Moreover, when Lewis opened a private architectural office, one of his first commissions from Boise Cascade Paper Company was to design housing for workers in Venezuela. His familiarity with building low income housing in Tunisia, again, played a critical role in earning their business.<sup>212</sup>

The Peace Corps, as well as many other agencies devoted to social and economic development proved to be the beneficiaries of much of this talent as they absorbed returned volunteers into their ranks. Thousands of volunteers began careers within USAID and many proved to be naturally suited to serve as diplomats within the State Department.<sup>213</sup> In this way, Kennedy's effort to bolster the ranks of America's foreign services with more experienced candidates was realized. After Larry Michalak's initial years of service in Tunisia, he returned as a Peace Corps staffer in 1967 and later spent an additional 3 years as a director of the Tunisia training program in the early 1970s. Bruce Cohen embarked on a twenty year career as a Peace Corps recruiter, and Don Watson's commitment to Third World development led him to work at the World Bank as well as serve as a consultant to Save the Children in Tunisia.

Beyond opening professional doors, returned volunteers also credit the Peace Corps for some of the most transformative moment in their personal lives. Many volunteers like Larry Michalak and Karen Trocki found their future spouses while serving in Tunisia; weddings quickly followed after returning home. As an historic

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<sup>212</sup> Roger Lewis, interview with the author, 1 September 2012.

<sup>213</sup> Searles, 212.

preservation architect, David DeSelm spent three months living in the Byzantine fortress that overlooks Kelibia. While sketching the fortress one day, DeSelm had a chance encounter with another Peace Corps volunteer who happened to be visiting from Nabeul. Four years, “and lots of shared experiences” later, David and Jane DeSelm were married. Jane DeSelm recalled that one of the best things about the Peace Corps was meeting her future husband where they “had romance in the Roman ruins.”<sup>214</sup> (YouTI)

The story of Stanley Hallet and Judy Dwan offers perhaps the best example of how the Peace Corps helped shaped the direction of volunteers’ lives. While serving in Tunis—Stanley as an architect and Judy as a TEFL teacher—the Peace Corps provided a platform that supported both of their professional interests. Because Dwan had dreams of being a documentary filmmaker, she joined the Peace Corps, in part, as an opportunity to make a film. Similarly, Hallet saw Tunisia as a chance to immediately put his degree in architecture to work instead of starting out on the lower rungs of an architectural firm in the United States. These interests intersected in Southern Tunisia. When not working in his official capacity designing hotels for wealthy tourists, Hallet explored the cultural housing systems of Berber villages. At the same time, he helped create Dwan’s documentary on Berber life. Their relationship began in Tunisia and they were married only three months after returning home from the Peace Corps. Both maintain that their adventures in Tunisia provided a critical spark for Dwan’s later career as an Emmy winning documentary filmmaker, and Hallet’s rise to become the Dean of the School of Architecture at Catholic University.<sup>215</sup>

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<sup>214</sup> David and Jane DeSelm, interviewed by Ernie Zaremba, “Peace Corps Family Album – Tunisia 2” *Peace Corps Family Album*, youtube video, 18 March 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l5Kq0nF9na4>

<sup>215</sup> Judy Dwan and Stanley Hallet, interview by the author, 1 September 2012.

It should be remembered that relationships between volunteers were not the only romances that formed during the Peace Corps. Local Tunisians also dated and sometimes even married volunteers. As early as 1963, Kennett Love noted these kinds of “happy and promising” relationships in his evaluation.<sup>216</sup> In Kelibia, Sabra Webber and Christine Passmore’s monthly stipend exceeded their usual expenses; to better integrate into their community, the volunteers used their extra money to hire an Arabic tutor. With help from the Najar family, they were put in contact with Salah Khoudja, a local Kelibian that excelled in English. What began as a professional relationship between Khoudja and Passmore, ended at as Presbyterian Church in Basking Ridge, New Jersey. Khoudja continued his studies in English at Boston University before moving the family—now with three children—to Saudi Arabia for a job at King Saud University. Although the Gulf War prompted the family to move back to the United States in 1991, Tunisia always remained a part of their lives as the family would visit relatives in Kelibia every summer. As the youngest of their three children, this project itself is a legacy of the cooperative relationship between the Peace Corps and Tunisia.

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<sup>216</sup> Love, 1963.

## CONCLUSION

In 1996, after thirty-four years, the Peace Corps closed its offices in Tunisia. This was part of a larger disengagement that witnessed Peace Corps programs depart over a dozen countries from Latin America to the Pacific Rim. The organization sought to withdraw from countries that had experienced marked economic development and “concentrate its resources on to those where the need remains great.”<sup>217</sup> *Peace Corps Tunisia: The Legacy*—a twenty page pamphlet published by the Peace Corps in the wake of the Tunisia program—lauded the work of over 2,300 Americans that served in Tunisia. It highlighted the “remarkable social and economic progress” Tunisia had made since 1962; this was ostensibly the reason for the Peace Corps’ departure.<sup>218</sup> According to former Peace Corps trainer Mohamed Halouani, “Tunisia considered itself developed enough not to need the United States anymore.”<sup>219</sup>

This explanation perhaps too boldly represents the disengagement from Tunisia as simply the successful culmination of the Peace Corps’ mission. It should be remembered that by the 1990s, relations between American volunteers and Tunisian nationals had cooled significantly from the 1960s. The Peace Corps arrived in Tunisia at a time when the country was filled with enthusiasm from its recent independence. In the intervening years, however, the country’s failure to make substantial economic progress made Tunisians increasingly reticent toward America’s mission.

Although Tunisia had become significantly more industrialized by the 1970s, this did not alleviate their economic problems. Most jobs created were low paying and offered

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<sup>217</sup> Searles, 194.

<sup>218</sup> Peace Corps Tunisia: The Legacy, 1962-1996 (Washington, D.C.: Peace Corps, 1997)

<sup>219</sup> Carolyn Lambole, “Tunisia: U.S. Peace Corps Veterans Debate Return of Program to Locals,” *allAfrica*, 27 March 2012, <http://allafrica.com/stories/201203271116.html>

little in the way of upward mobility for average Tunisians. The unemployment rate stood between 13 and 16 percent throughout the 1970s with young men between the ages of 15 and 25 accounting for almost three quarters.<sup>220</sup> Moreover, massive population growth coupled with an increasing number of women in the workforce put greater strains on the nation's struggling economy.

Economic frustrations contributed to the souring relationships between volunteers and members of their host communities. Jody Olsen expressed in an interview with Sylvia Whitman that when she returned to Tunisia after fifteen years as a Regional Director of the Peace Corps in 1983, "the nature of the interaction between the volunteer and the young Tunisians had changed dramatically in the fifteen years since I had been there."<sup>221</sup> Whitman notes an increase in the harassment of Peace Corps volunteers—usually women—by unemployed and disenfranchised young men. Many Tunisians were also attracted to a growing Islamic movement whose ranks were filled by Tunisians that had been "victimized" by an economy that "reduced a third of the population to poverty."<sup>222</sup> While the gulf between volunteer and host had progressively widened since the 1960s, Zine Ben Ali's overthrow of Bourguiba in 1987 symbolically represented at least a new chapter in the Peace Corps, at worst it foreshadowed its end.

The Tunisia program's brief suspension in 1991 due to the Gulf War was followed by a full pullout in 1996. Sylvia Whitman suggests that in addition to the changing relationships between the Peace Corps and their hosts, American officials "did not value or need Tunisian friendship to the degree they had three decades earlier."<sup>223</sup>

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<sup>220</sup> Perkins, 160.

<sup>221</sup> Whitman, 92.

<sup>222</sup> Perkins, 166.

<sup>223</sup> Whitman, 114.



This is reflected, she contends, in the progressively dwindling number of news reports on Tunisia over the years. An analysis of the Washington Post reveals that whereas a reference “Tunisia” appeared over 1,400 times in the 1960s, by the 1990s it had shrunk to only 178.<sup>224</sup>

Since the self-immolation of Muhammad Bouazizi instigated the Arab Spring and precipitated the ouster of the Ben Ali regime, American officials have refocused their attention on Tunisia. The revolution has provided a unique opportunity for reengagement. As President Obama announced in 2011 American intentions to reopen the Peace Corps in Tunisia, a study of the organization’s initial experiences becomes especially valuable. Considering that some of the intended programs, such as English language training have their roots in the 1960s, it would behoove the organization to consider its past success and failures. In March, 2012 several veterans of the Peace Corps attended a forum in Tunis to discuss how the Peace Corps might best integrate itself into a complex and sometimes unstable social and political atmosphere. Many recognized the possibilities this renewed partnership in the nation’s post-revolutionary society. Some, however, were relatively skeptical. As reported by Carolyn Lambolely in *allAfrica*, one Tunisian attendee asked “Why should the Peace Corps care about teaching English? Why does the Peace Corps not seriously think about things related to peace, and cooperate with Tunisian people?”<sup>225</sup> (TunAlv) It is clear that while governments can forge agreements, both parties will again have to manage divergent expectations in order to fashion a genuine partnership between people.

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<sup>224</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>225</sup> Lambolely, 27 March 2012.

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