

Mitchell A. Seligson and Susan Berk-Seligson Oral History Interview
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Biographical Note

Mitchell A. Seligson and Susan Berk-Seligson served as a Peace Corps volunteers in Costa Rica from 1968 to 1970 on community development projects. Mitchell focused on cooperatives while Susan focused on nutrition.

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Oral History Interview

with

Mitchell A. Seligson and Susan Berk-Seligson

June 6, 2008
Denver, Colorado

By Barbara Kaare-Lopez

Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection
John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:00:00] I had it on voice activated. So if it pauses, it's because of that. OK. Today is Friday, June 6, 2008. And my name is Barbara Kaare, K-A-A-R-E, hyphen Lopez. And we're here in Denver, Colorado, and we're going to start an interview with a married couple who went into Peace Corps as a married couple in 1968 to 1970. Mitchell Seligson, S-E-L-I-G-S-O-N, was trained in cooperatives and community development and his wife, Sue Berk, B-E-R-K, hyphen Seligson, was trained in nutrition and community development. And they are Peace Corps Costa Rica, July or August 1968 until July or August 1970, and they were married one year when they went into the Peace Corps. OK. So I might just stop this to make sure it taped OK. OK, now we're going to begin, taping's fine. We're going to begin with questions and they'll be answering jointly or one at a time. And this is a suggested outline that we're going to be

using. So of course, the most common question is why did you join the Peace Corps? First question, whoever wants to start.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:01:46] Well, first of all, I was interested in Latin America, and that's why I became a Spanish major in college. I have relatives living in Chile. And I was always interested in Latin America. In college, besides getting the Spanish major, I started doing a lot of volunteer activities, tutoring.

M. SELIGSON: [00:02:05] Student advisor leadership.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:02:06] Student advising leadership program was some kind of a group that was formed.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:02:10] In college?

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:02:10] In college. I started doing a lot of volunteer sorts of activities. By then, I must have known about the Peace Corps because I was thinking of Peace Corps before I ever met him. Talking about do you want to do this.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:02:28] Could you say which university?

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:02:30] Brooklyn College of the City University of New York.

M. SELIGSON: [00:02:34] And mine goes all the way back to high school. We had an exchange student from Mexico which started it all, actually. And people who knew the exchange student he was in our high school class. We became friendly. And one of my closest friends went down to Mexico in high school, right after that and got into the whole thing of Mexico and persuaded me to go down shortly thereafter. That is now, I was already in college and I went down to a summer school program. Fell in love with the whole thing, got into it because the two of us in high school had sort of figured out that what we would do is, we would solve the problem of world poverty. That was our goal. And I thought it was actually an agricultural problem. Later on, I learned it was a

political problem. And maybe that explains why I ended up as a political scientist. And so the year after that, I went down a second time in Mexico and now with the American Friends Service Committee, which is the action arm of the Quakers. And they have these programs, which are sort of a short version of the Peace Corps, except you're in a group of 10 or 12 volunteers and a couple were older who led us. And we went to a Mexican ejido with their.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:03:49] A Mexican what?

M. SELIGSON: [00:03:49] An ejido, that was part of the land reform program that were set up after the Mexican Revolution, spelled E-J-I-D-O. And they were community organizations that in which the land was held in common. It's been part of the whole Mexican history. And we worked in this village building a street, the rocks, and training English at night, because in that village, you couldn't get into high school unless you knew some English for some strange reason. And there was no English class in the primary school, so the villagers could never get their kids into high school. So we tried to teach them some English. And so my interest, you know, stems from that, that whole period. And then Susie and I met in our sophomore years. We had the same interests. I was a Kennedy fanatic. I had campaigned for him when I was in high school and he was assassinated in '63 in my first year of college. And we wanted to do that stuff.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:04:53] And I was enthralled with the Kennedy family because by my senior year of high school and taking with some kind of Kennedy and was very active into the administration. I was very much tuned into the Kennedy clan, politically oriented, but I was fascinated by this young couple leading the country and the idea that he was projecting. Swept away by him.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:05:21] Are you both from Brooklyn?

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:05:23] I grew up in Brooklyn, he grew up in Long Island.

M. SELIGSON: [00:05:25] And then when I graduated high school and my father died years before, just my mother and I. And so we moved into the city to get free tuition from the city university system. It's a great gift. My mother was originally from Brooklyn and then we met. And in our senior year, we both applied for the Peace Corps and got in and accepted to Brazil, a fishing village in Brazil on the coast.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:05:53] Belo Horizonte.

M. SELIGSON: [00:05:54] And then simultaneously I was accepted into a master's program in political science and Latin American studies at University of Florida Gainesville. And so at that crossroads, we opted to do the master's degree and took a bye on the Peace Corps for what turned out to be exactly one year. And then we did, in the context of that program, reapplied. And I guess there's a story there, which is how we ended up in Costa Rica. In that graduate program, I met a guy named Frank San Vito, who was an older grad student, and he was telling me how interesting Costa Rica was. I was interested in Central America at the time. And he introduced me to a Costa Rican who was at the University of Florida getting her master's degree, and she was a Chinese Costa Rican.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:06:51] Hmm.

M. SELIGSON: [00:06:51] Her name is Alina Wachung, which will come up later in the tape. And because of that, when we reapplied, we said, could you send us to Costa Rica? And unbelievably they did. Because many of the volunteers in our group, like the one who organized this reunion that we're at today, spoke French and wanted to go to Africa, and they sent her to Costa Rica. So we were just lucky to get the country.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:07:14] Sounds like you were.

M. SELIGSON: [00:07:15] That's how we ended up there.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:07:17] Yeah. You know, this question is not on the suggested list of questions, but was it difficult because you are a married couple being interviewed? Was it difficult as a married couple to get into the Peace Corps at that time?

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:07:32] Yes, we were told that it was possible that one of us would be accepted and the other one would not be.

M. SELIGSON: [00:07:38] Oh, really? I don't even remember that.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:07:39] I remember that. That only if both were accepted would they, I mean, one could not go as a non-Peace Corps volunteer. It was either both had to be accepted on their own or they would not accept the couple. So they were not going to accept one of them without the other, it had to be both. And each one on his or her own merit. So we knew that.

M. SELIGSON: [00:07:58] Well, let's be fair, that is, that we were accepted for training. At least in those days, the training thing was this process of deselection. One of the things that made training a very unpleasant experience in almost every way.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:08:13] We heard that the rate of deselection was 25 percent.

M. SELIGSON: [00:08:19] So that meant, I guess in light of that, is that if either member of the couple didn't cut it, then the couple was out. Or I suppose you could offer a divorce at that point.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:08:31] I shouldn't laugh because you already said before we started the tape that there were three married couples at that time in your group, Peace Corps Costa Rica, and one of you is still married.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:08:42] Yeah. And we were told back then that the rate of divorce among Peace Corps volunteers who married was much

higher than the average for the country. Fifty percent. At the time for the nation, it was like thirty percent.

M. SELIGSON: [00:08:54] And I don't know if those are bogus statistics at all. I don't know where they really came from.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:08:57] Special situations.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:08:59] Yeah, it is.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:09:00] For newly married couples, that extra stress often broke up marriages.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:09:05] Huh. Well, congratulations on still being married. OK, I'll let you, whoever wants to go first. Describe your present family, work, current residence, interests.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:09:20] Well, speaking for myself.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:09:22] Or you could speak for your family together.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:09:24] Yeah, we're both professors at Vanderbilt University. I'm in Spanish and Portuguese department and also I'm associate director of the Center for Latin American Studies at Vanderbilt. And Mitchell is a professor in the political science department, he has an endowed chair there. We spent 19 years in Pittsburgh doing similar things. Before then, Mitchell had been at the University of Illinois at Chicago for one year. **

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:09:57] I'd been at Purdue University for two years, and before that, Mitchell did University of Arizona for about nine years. And I got a PhD at the University of Arizona and then became a lecturer in English as a second language and did that for two years.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:10:19] Hmm, interesting.

M. SELIGSON: [00:10:20] So I'll reverse the sequence in that when we are leaving the Peace Corps and going back to grad school for a Ph.D. and then ultimately moving into the professorial positions where we've been all our lives. And your dissertation and my dissertation came out of the Peace Corps experience and much of the professional work that I did for the first 20 years or so of my career was directly related to that. And since then, it's somewhat less directly related to it, but always has that key origin in the experience of the Peace Corps. It has shaped my entire professional career.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:11:07] Yeah, and the Peace Corps experiences I managed to weave into my classroom lectures to this day. And there's no class that I teach that doesn't have something in it about Costa Rica and my experience in Costa Rica and in my knowledge of the culture of Costa Rican peasants. I bring that into my classes because they are the most vivid things that I have to remember about my story. I mean, I have vivid research experiences but those two years in the Peace Corps were very intense cross-cultural experiences that left me with understandings that I never have gotten quite the same way by just doing plain research.

M. SELIGSON: [00:11:48] I think a generalization is the only question. What does Peace Corps really do? People are going to know that in some of these developing countries, and there's no question whatsoever in my mind that it is an enormous contribution to the U.S., having people who know the languages and cultures of those areas, which wasn't the case before. And in some cases, actually making it part of their professional life. It isn't likely, it was probably the exception, but a lot of people that you'll see if you talk to them have something or other in that. They became attorneys, but they end up working with Hispanic population in the U.S. or whatever work or nursing or servicing people in that area.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:12:26] My dissertation topic, which is variation of pronunciation in Costa Rican Spanish and how that's correlated with socio-economic stratification, came directly out of the observations I made in those two years. I noticed that people were speaking Spanish in a way that was not taught in my classes in college. And all these dialectical differences, I started noting. I didn't write them down, I just kept them in my head. And then I came back and started graduate school in the U.S., they became the topics of my papers and then eventually my dissertation. I went back and interviewed people, tape recorded them, analyzed the tape recordings, and started publishing from those topics.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:13:09] Because when I was Peace Corps Honduras, did they use *vos* when they talked to each other in Costa Rica?

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:13:14] Yes, exactly.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:13:15] *Como sos vos*, right?

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:13:16] They didn't use *tú* at all in Costa Rica. *Tú* was very much looked down on and considered to be snobbish, and so people who were putting on airs and who wanted to show that they've abroad. They used *vos* instead. But where we lived in the countryside, it was 99 percent said *usted*, everybody to everybody. Yeah. Children to parents, the children, school teachers to children, everyone to everyone. And sometimes you hear *vos* between a married couple when they were talking to each other only. But when they talked to us, it was *usted, usted*. Everybody was *usted*.

M. SELIGSON: [00:13:51] To their kids.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:13:52] Well, everyone was, *usted* used by everyone to everyone across the board in the countryside. In the capital city, you heard more of the *vos*, but not among people who didn't know each other.

M. SELIGSON: [00:14:05] And to this day, among the limitations I have in my Spanish is that the environments in university settings in Latin America, I'm there all the time lecturing now, people, when I use *usted* to them, they get sort of, you know, why do you treat me so formally? I mean, a university setting in Latin America, you're using *tú* or *vos*. And I just can't get over the habit of addressing people *usted*, even though I really mean more of a, you know, *usted* of course is a distance, and *tú*, you're more equal. In university settings, people tend to take with each other.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:14:42] Yeah, I've had to adjust and sometimes in a Spanish department all these years and people coming from all over Latin American states and each country, they have their own patterns of usage and *usted*, *tú*, and *vos*. I just adjust myself to people, so I had to learn to use the *tú* again to speak to people because I know they don't like hearing *usted*. It's a marker of a speaker of Costa Rican Spanish to say *usted*.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:15:07] Oh, that's interesting to me, like I just said, because of my Honduran experience. I didn't know who that *sos vos* was, and I found out it was me, when they would talk. OK. Is there anything that, one of the questions is, think back to the year before joining the Peace Corps. What was your life then? I mean, you've touched on a variety of things. You got married a year before Peace Corps. Anything else you might want to add about the year before joining Peace Corps?

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:15:37] I was, right after college, I got a job working for Head Start. And while I was not going to be an elementary or kindergarten teacher. [tape break]

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:15:55] OK, now we're on question two about the year before Peace Corps. And you were talking about Head Start.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:16:01] Yeah. So I was working in Head Start as a teacher's aide. I knew I would be leaving New York within five, six months

from getting married, and I had a semester in between college and what we were going to do next. And it was eye opening. It was an elementary school that had 100 percent minority students. It was half.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:16:22] In Brooklyn?

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:16:23] In Brooklyn. Half Latino and half African American. And these were three and four year old children. The relevance of this is that when I got to Costa Rica and I was supposed to be involved in the nutrition center that was being constructed, that we were helping to construct. I got the idea once the nutrition center was built that these children were coming to get nutritious meals every day, could really use something like a Head Start program, because in Costa Rica children start elementary school when they were seven years old. And these kids would come in at the age of four, five, three. And I knew what was in the household by then, because I'd gone from house to house. I knew every single house in the entire community, and I saw with these little kids are doing at home. They had no toys at all to play with, absolutely nothing, no crayons, no paper to draw on. There was nothing. They would take a stick and draw in the dirt. And so when the nutrition center was finally built, we talked about the whole process. I decided to do something that was a Head Start type of program in the nutrition center. The kids were there anyway, that they would get some kind of intellectual stimulation in addition to nutritional supplements. And so that Head Start program had an impact on what I did with Peace Corps.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:17:45] I also started a library for the kids in town. I just couldn't imagine growing up and not having books in a library, having grown up in New York City with the public library within walking distance of everybody. And so I started a little library and the challenge of getting books for it and who would keep up the library after I left. That was something I had not been told to do, it was just a burning desire. So that all had to do with the

intellectual stimulation that people needed but didn't have because they were all doing agricultural work. The girls were all in the home, helping their mothers raise little brothers and sisters. And I thought that something could be done with reading, open their minds.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:18:29] Yeah. Anything you want to add, Mitch?

M. SELIGSON: [00:18:31] Well, my mine was very different. I was intensely political and I took as many courses as I could on Latin American politics and Latin American social science in my years in college. But it was very, very little of that here. And I was at that time already very interested in problems of revolution and land reform and land tenure, something that in what I started working on in my dissertation later in Honduras.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:19:01] Oh, Honduras, OK, we'll get to that later.

M. SELIGSON: [00:19:03] And in during those years when I was in college, I became active in the United States National Student Association, USNSA, which was sort of a union as it was, an organization on American campuses of students interested in doing something. And a part of that was an international component. And I eventually was elected to the regional chairman, whatever it was called, of the international programs, which involved college campuses in the greater New York area, probably 40 colleges and universities that were involved. And the whole thrust of what I was doing there was to try to create programs on Latin America and deal with problems of land reform. That was the Kennedy period where the Alliance for Progress had started under Kennedy. Cuba had already happened. The Cuban Revolution happened and earlier than that, the Bolivian revolution, way older than that the Mexican Revolution. And so there was what I was really interested in. I was very politically interested and politically motivated at that time. All of that played an important role in what was to follow in the Peace Corps years.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:20:16] OK, here's another question. How did you hear about the Peace Corps and what made you decide to apply?

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:20:26] Well, I must have heard about it through the PBS. I don't know how else you could learn about it. I didn't know anyone personally who was a volunteer among the people I knew. Maybe there was something in college? I don't know. I do remember the ads for the Peace Corps, glass half full or half empty. I remember that one very well. And seeing people out there in Africa working with poor people. I was interested in doing something about poverty. I became socially concerned in high school, didn't get involved with political organizations, but knew about poverty. There were things going on in New York City, I mean, there was protest. Well, the civil rights movement was going on, and the Latin American connection was always there. In college, I went to Mexico one summer to improve my Spanish. And that opened up my eyes to another culture. So Latin America booming all the time, and we forgot to mention that our honeymoon was spent in Puerto Rico.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:21:29] OK.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:21:30] Which is ironic because that's where we returned for Peace Corps training.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:21:34] Oh, you did?

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:21:35] Years later, that was very ironic.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:21:36] How did you hear about it?

M. SELIGSON: [00:21:40] Because of the Kennedy thing. And I followed every moment, you know, I used to read actively read the newspapers in those days. I probably remember something about the speech at University of Michigan, you know, and Sargent Shriver and later, as we can relate, we became we got to know

the one who followed him, Jack Vaughn, he was the next director of the Peace Corps and we saw that connection. And so that, for me, I mean, I just knew about it, and I kind of from the moment I heard of it, I said, that's for me. I mean, I can solve the problem of hunger.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:22:18] The moment you heard about it?

M. SELIGSON: [00:22:20] Yeah, I mean, it was like, I said, this is what I want to do. I want to do this. I was like, that's me. And the reason I joined that Quaker thing was that I was, well, am I really sort of going to do this? I mean, am I suited for this? So for me, that was sort of a dry run for the summer to see whether I'd be willing to do that. You know, the three year treatments later on. It was working on it, I mean, it is certainly what I wanted to do.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:22:48] Yeah. I know another part of this question is did you have a specific country or project in mind? You already spoke about you were going to maybe go to Brazil.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:22:57] We didn't ask for Brazil. But we asked for Costa Rica simply because Mitch had met this Costa Rican graduate student in Florida. We had no knowledge of Costa Rica whatsoever, and Costa Rica was not a popular place to show up at the time.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:23:12] Yeah, like it is now.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:23:14] Forty years later.

M. SELIGSON: [00:23:15] Where we ended up in Costa Rica in part had to do with that woman.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:23:19] Yeah, we chose that region of Costa Rica to live in, had to do with her father's farm being in general area.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:23:27] OK. Next question. What were your friends and family's reactions when you were accepted? Were there any and did you have any hesitations or reservations? How did they react?

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:23:39] I think both of our sets of parents were terribly upset and, well, were very nervous, concerned, nervous, and like they're afraid that something would happen to us. You know, the dangers of being out there in the wild.

M. SELIGSON: [00:23:55] And they were right in that since we were in an extremely remote area, I mean, we did have a health crisis. I mean, we're talking about days before we could get her medical help.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:24:03] So there were hazards out there.

M. SELIGSON: [00:24:04] There were hazards so.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:24:07] Venomous snakes.

M. SELIGSON: [00:24:08] You know, fast forward to having children and having, boy, I'd be, a kid of mine went into the Peace Corps, I'd be damned scared.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:24:17] And our mothers actually visited us in the Peace Corps, in our Peace Corps site. And they did leave scared.

M. SELIGSON: [00:24:21] And then they got really scared.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:24:23] Then they really got scared.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:24:25] Maybe they shouldn't have come. Oh no.

M. SELIGSON: [00:24:27] I can see that.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:24:28] They saw the reality and they were even more scared.

M. SELIGSON: [00:24:30] I think we should probably at that point talk about when the, in that period where the Peace Corps was going to take us in, there was this security clearance or background check rather. Background check is a better word. And that was fairly unpleasant part of the whole thing because the people who went around asking questions were Civil Service employees, but they presented themselves with the flipping of a card or a badge to neighbors in my mother's apartment building and your parents' apartment building. They didn't live more than two miles from each other in Brooklyn. And people thought it was Secret Service. And I think that I have the feeling that they wanted it to sound that way. And so of course, after they called, what is the Secret Service doing investigating Mitchie?

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:25:17] Mitchie? I've been calling you Mitchell.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:25:19] Well, don't call him Mitchie.

M. SELIGSON: [00:25:24] In her case because her parents are not English speakers, they're immigrants to the United States.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:25:29] What country are they from?

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:25:31] Czechoslovakia.

M. SELIGSON: [00:25:32] Oh, I don't know, but they speak some strange language like there was, you know, hmm.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:25:36] Well, that's it though. Neighbors who didn't know us well said that we were speaking unusual languages. Just the notion of us speaking a foreign language because they weren't familiar with it, would arouse suspicion.

M. SELIGSON: [00:25:49] You know, it's sort of a lesson as to how authoritarian regimes can get neighbors to think that perfectly honest, you know, hard working. Actually, we didn't smoke, not marijuana, and we didn't drink. We were, you know, our generation did, but we didn't.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:26:05] We were very square and clean-cut.

M. SELIGSON: [00:26:05] We were honest, hardworking students. But they saw us saying, well, that's strange, you know, and right away, I resent how that became. But we made it. They didn't throw us off because her parents were not English speakers.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:26:18] Oh, OK. What project were you invited to join? I know when I did the little intro, you told me what you were trained for. But anyways, if you want to speak on that a little bit more, what were you? What was your project and how did you prepare yourself for entering two years of service? Maybe you could talk about that.

M. SELIGSON: [00:26:38] Globally what it is, in those days at least, volunteers are brought in in groups. We were Costa Rica IX. Therefore the two things, it was a group and it was one country. Although when we trained, we trained simultaneously with another group that was Central American fisheries group, with whom we had some contact with the language program overlap. So we were both at the training camp at Puerto Rico at the same time. And in those days, our group was really a community development group overall. That is, we were going to be sent to places, not in the capital city, we weren't going in to do English teaching. We weren't going in to do a technical job. We were BA generalists as it were, as opposed to the fisheries group that had experts in fishing, biology, fisheries. We were BA generalists and the training then was determining, giving us certain sets of skills. And I don't really know whether we had the right to select or were assigned. I mean, I was trained in cooperatives and I don't know if any of the other guys in my group were also. You know,

if we all went to do cooperative training or whether there was some division. In the case of the women.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:27:47] As far as I remember, all the women were trained in nutrition.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:27:49] Oh, all of them.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:27:51] That's what I remember, we all trained in nutrition.

M. SELIGSON: [00:27:52] But we got the so-called skill training.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:27:56] But I must say, the training that I received in nutrition was pretty much a repetition of what I learned in the seventh grade. Which is not very much. I mean, there was very little new that I learned in Peace Corps training as far as nutrition was concerned because I knew all that stuff. Now what was new was the INCAP. That's the, um.

M. SELIGSON: [00:28:17] Central American Institute of Nutrition.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:28:20] Yeah, they gave us a book which had all the foods in it and broken down into the nucleus so that you know that apple has X percentage and grams of whatever protein and carbohydrate and fat level, and that you are supposed to be looking for high protein, available, inexpensive foods that the people in the community could eat and process that maybe they weren't using to supplement, to improve their diet. So I had to learn about combining incomplete proteins to make a complete protein, which was something new for me. I never heard of before. So the rice and beans together made a whole protein.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:29:04] Yeah, right.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:29:04] Of course people are eating rice and beans two times a day though, that's what they were living on. So the natural, the cultural process that led Costa Ricans to eat rice and beans

together, was the same that the body needed to combine incomplete proteins to make a complete protein. I didn't have to tell them that, they're eating that anyway. And if they weren't eating whole proteins like fish and chicken and beef, it's because they couldn't afford it. It wasn't there. And if it was there, they couldn't afford to pay for it.

M. SELIGSON: [00:29:34] Just now that I think about it, these weren't entirely random. That is to say, in the case, I think the men were trained in cooperatives. I think it may have been a gender division there, but that's because the Peace Corps itself had linked up within Costa Rica to the co-operative movement, which at that time was actually run partially out of the private sector by a bank in Costa Rica that ran these things. And the idea was that there were cooperatives all over Costa Rica, and the idea was to assign a volunteer to work with the cooperatives to help them with their accounting, their promotions.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:30:06] A co-operative that already existed?

M. SELIGSON: [00:30:08] Oh yeah, I don't know. I think the essence of the villages are out there probably were in parts selected, oh, there's a co-operative. In our case, there was a coffee co-operative, and it's a long important story about that. And the nutrition centers were another aspect of it. CARE had linked up with the Peace Corps to try to help the development of these *centros de nutricion*, which was to provide nutrition to the kids.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:30:30] CARE and USAID. AID provided plastic plates and kitchen utensils to use in the preparation of the food. CARE provided powdered milk, and I think CSM.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:30:45] What's CSM?

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:30:48] CSM was a high protein.

M. SELIGSON: [00:30:50] Soybean, corn starch, and milk. So corn was asked for soybean and with milk. So it was a composite of beating to make a higher protein.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:31:00] I've never heard of that.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:31:02] Well, it was an experiment. I mean, they were trying to see if they could improve the nutrition of, this is for preschool children and lactating mothers to help them. These nutrition programs were specifically targeting preschool children and lactating mothers because there were school lunch programs. That was something else. I think CARE did.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:31:20] They did have school lunch programs?

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:31:22] There were school lunch programs, that's what Mitch ended up doing. Vegetable gardening and school lunch program, but I worked with the nutrition center. In the first year, we were watching the building being built.

M. SELIGSON: [00:31:34] And that's not just the garden, just to conclude the idea of the nutrition center. So the nutrition center. [tape break]

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:31:44] OK. Let me see. We're talking about the training. This question is more specific to it, but let's see if there's any of things you haven't talked about yet. Yeah, where the training was.

M. SELIGSON: [00:31:59] We started about the nutrition center, I just wanted to get the.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:31:59] OK, go ahead. Sure.

M. SELIGSON: [00:32:01] The nutrition center concept involving a tripartite agreement and the Ministry of Health provided this bacalao, which was a little pill that the kids got, which would be probably for.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:32:12] What did you say, bacalao?

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:32:14] Yeah, that's codfish.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:32:16] OK. I've heard the word.

M. SELIGSON: [00:32:17] So that was their contribution. It was the milk and the CSM thing, and so the kids would get milk. They would get this high nutrition tortilla. And so I think in our case, since we were a couple, it was a perfect village that they put us in because there was a nutrition center in embryonic form that was going to be built. And there was this cooperative which supposedly had this problem that I was going to come in and fix.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:32:39] And let me explain about the nutrition center, because they had something in the United States called Nutrition Center, which are stores that sell vitamins. The problem was malnutrition among children and also lactating mothers. Malnutrition was measured by weight for height. That was the way you measured malnutrition back then. I don't know if it's changed any since then. So they would have all the little preschool kids that they had to be five and under. And they come into this place to be weighed and measured for height. And based on that, they were put into categories and either not malnourished. Or first degree, second degree, and third degree malnutrition, third being the worst. Third degree, when we see these pictures today of the children in Africa where they're emaciated and you can see their skeleton is shown, that's third degree. But there are these three degrees and each. If you were even first degree malnourished, you have the right to the nutrition center food. And we were trying to get the women who are nursing and their babies to come in and also drink milk and have this high protein food so that they would give better milk to their babies and they'd be better nourished themselves.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:33:47] That was the powdered milk?

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:33:50] Yeah, powdered milk, CARE powdered milk. So that was the mission of the nutrition center. And also, I saw it as a way of keeping hygiene. It was one of the few places in the entire town that had indoor running water, a sink, a little sink for children, and a toilet to flush. None of these children had ever seen a flushing toilet and none had running water.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:34:16] Did they have latrines or just go out into el campo?

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:34:21] So the poor did not have latrines and would go out and what came out of them went down the river, got into the river, and they'd drink the river water. The whole cycle of amoebas and all kinds of parasites.

M. SELIGSON: [00:34:38] We've jumped the gun because here we are in the field already in the Peace Corps. The training then I think had a logic to it. And the assumption that was made is that the cooperatives were having problems because the people just didn't know how to run them right. Or couldn't get the accounting right. And so.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:34:54] When were these cooperatives formed?

M. SELIGSON: [00:34:56] Cooperatives began in Costa Rica in the '50s, and it has had a very, very successful actually. The first cooperative, which was started in Costa Rica in 1942 during World War II because they confiscated property that was owned by German families when Costa Rica declared war on Germany, some allege for the United States. And they turned this property over to their peasants who were working there to do something.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:35:20] To get away from the German families?

M. SELIGSON: [00:35:22] Because they were stealing, they were taking, they were stealing the property. They were taking away the property from Germans who in some cases lived in Costa Rica for

generations. But that was part of the nature of exercise with the internment of the Japanese in the United States. And the bank ran and this co-operative movement became very, very successful throughout the country with this thing called Dos Pinos, which is a dairy cooperative. And throughout Central America and many parts of Latin America, Costa Rican products, milk, ice cream, yogurt are sold. And there's another cooperative called Victoria, Victoria from the war victory, which made sugar, the first refined sugar in Costa Rica. And so but this is now a whole generation later, and there are many cooperatives, savings and loans, and I'm trained in this. The training was boring, miserable. I don't know how much I learned. Accounting to me is, you know, I guess if I had to be accountant, I would think about, you know, the suicide. I know, you know.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:36:19] Sorry, any of you accountants who are listening.

M. SELIGSON: [00:36:22] I mean, like, terrible. And so here we are trained in this stuff thinking that the problem is these people just don't get it, right? And I'm going to teach them how to do it right, which had absolutely nothing to do with the problem. I was sent to a village in which there was a coffee cooperative. Costa Rica's a major exporter of coffee, has always been. And that same movement of coffee cooperatives began at the same period of time as the farms were confiscated from German immigrants to Costa Rica who lost their farm. This particular village had a cooperative had a coffee farm that was set up by a French emigre years earlier, who went bankrupt. And when he went bankrupt, the coffee *beneficio* and the land on which it was located became owned by the banks, just like our mortgage crisis today. And suddenly the bank owned it. But the bank was also in charge of cooperatives, so they turned around and gave it to the peasants, which sounded really great, but saddled them with the debt of the land that they didn't want, which was squatted on by people who were not allowed to be there.

M. SELIGSON: [00:37:30] And these peasants then had to pay the interest on the mortgage for land that they couldn't own and could not farm and would never own because the squatters wouldn't be expelled in a country like Costa Rica, which didn't do violence to the squatter that is there. There was no army. They weren't going to throw them off. And so the cooperative couldn't succeed because the debt on the land, which they didn't own, far exceeded any profit they could have made from the coffee. It took me months to figure that out. I mean, maybe it took me six months or eight months to finally figure out that there was nothing that they were doing wrong. I mean, Peace Corps couldn't have known this, but they were, this was a problem that required a solution ultimately by the legislature to recognize that the conflict of interest between the bank, which held the mortgage of the defaulted land and the defaulted coffee *beneficio*, which also had been responsible for setting up the cooperatives under state law. And therefore they got rid of their debt by assigning it to poor people who was supposed to pay them for land they couldn't possibly own. They didn't own, could never own. Eventually, years after we left, that law was passed in the legislature, exonerating the peasants of that thing. And the co-operative is there to this day.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:38:43] To this day, huh.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:38:43] Yeah, I came to similar conclusions about my role as a Peace Corps volunteer and how much I could do with my knowledge. I thought if I would tell people to boil their water, that would reduce the incidence of intestinal parasites. You know, to get rid of the native and all kinds of other parasites from the water before. And after about a year of telling people to boil their water, I realized that the poorest people could not afford to use the wood to boil water, just to drink water, when they really needed the wood to cook the food with. And they just didn't have the luxury of the fuel. And I'm talking not about gas, very few people had that. I mean, and not even potbellied stoves, just putting wood on top of like a slab of cement.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:39:34] Did they use kerosene? Do they get kerosene in your village?

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:39:37] There was kerosene, yeah, kerosene. The very poorest people couldn't afford any, but some people in the town.

M. SELIGSON: [00:39:43] *Leña* was the most popular, firewood was the most popular.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:39:45] What we came to a realization about after about a year of watching people, watching babies die of intestinal parasites before the age of two.

M. SELIGSON: [00:39:54] Including our godchild.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:39:54] Including our first godchild, was that what the parent really needed was a potable water system put in by the government. That's what they needed. And this effort to get people to boil the water was just not going anywhere and wasn't feasible. And so that's what Mitch worked on, getting this potable water system. While we were still there, we saw the beginnings of it.

M. SELIGSON: [00:40:17] Contacting the United Nations Development Program, UNDP, and they sent an engineer who was a Bolivian, I remember, and he came out to the town and the villagers showed him this water source, a stream that was above the town and that had a nice flow. And he brought some instruments to be able to test, I saw photographs of that testing of the flow in the dry season. And that eventually became the system designed in the Ministry of Health, which was in those days in charge of those kind of things. It was a big struggle between the municipality, the Ministry of Health, and the National, SNA, the National Water System, which eventually took this all over.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:40:52] Did you say SNA?

M. SELIGSON: [00:40:52] SNA, the Sistema Nacional de Aguas Subterráneas.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:40:59] Oh, OK. It's a Costa Rican acronym.

M. SELIGSON: [00:41:00] Yeah, so what we did was to try to connect villagers and their project to resources outside the town. During the time we were there, the water system was not filled, but the design was done. And eventually the water system came in. So it's not that we brought the new water source. We connected resources to make it possible for there eventually to be a potable water system, which is there to this day.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:41:26] We got involved in all kinds of health-related activities. For example, there was no, when we came to this county, there was no doctor in the entire county, for how many thousands of people?

M. SELIGSON: [00:41:39] Twenty thousand people living there.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:41:40] And no doctor. There were, the only medical staff there for all those people were two nurses. One was a British volunteer nurse, sort of like Britain's Peace Corps. She was an obstetrics nurse. And there was an American nun who was also an obstetrics nurse, and the two of them did all the medical. They ran a clinic. They were the only trained medical people for the entire county. And they specialized in delivering babies. And yeah, that was it. And so.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:42:13] Two nurses for 20,000 people.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:42:15] Right. So the community, they heard, there was we'd heard, a *unidad mobile*, a mobile unit of medical personnel that went around the countryside and would visit any given town once every maybe once a month, something like that. So doctors would come in in a jeep, one doctor, and.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:42:38] From the government?

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:42:39] Yes, this was a government sponsored program. The doctor, the *unidad mobile*, would arrive, I think, was maybe just once a month, and would dispense medicines. This was called *medicina empírica*, empirical medicine. In other words, you had no medical history for these people. People would show up sick, women would come with their children from the mountain side, they would have walked hours. And the doctor would give out antibiotics or something, I don't know what, whatever he had. Every medicine that he gave out had been, I believe, donated from other countries and we heard it was expired medications that no longer could be sold on the market.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:43:17] Yeah, it could be.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:43:19] That's what we heard. *Unidad mobile*, was that what they were fighting for? They were fighting for a big stuff.

M. SELIGSON: [00:43:29] The *unidad mobile* existed already. Can you explain what that product was?

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:43:33] Yeah, that the doctor would out once a month maybe.

M. SELIGSON: [00:43:35] *Unidad mobile* was a CARE and the Ministry of Health. In those days, the Ministry of Health took care of public health. It wasn't like it is today. So the Ministry of Health provided the physician and the pharmacist and the nurse and the driver, actually, with the pharmacy dispensary and the public health educator. CARE, I'm sorry, USAID provided the jeeps, which were American jeeps. And the key element was that in order to get one of these things, the community had to organize, get itself together, and charge each patient a token fee. It was essentially a colon or some tiny amount of money, which was couldn't, wasn't going to them, was going to go to the community for community development purposes.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:44:25] It was going to the community?

M. SELIGSON: [00:44:27] Yeah, it was a magical formula. The community couldn't get the health service until they organize themselves, A. B, they agreed to charge every patient. But the money stayed there for the purpose of building a community center, which is how the whole nutrition center. We can describe how that happened.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:44:44] So the committee, the *comité de bienestar comunal*, and that was community welfare committee. They were the leaders of the community. This was like maybe a group of five or six people. President, vice president, secretary. And two others. And they would meet on a regular basis, and we were involved with them, they invited us and we attended all those meetings and they tapped our resources. They wanted us to get involved and they wanted us to get connected to help them in their struggles. And this is what they ended up doing. So when they went to the municipality in the county seat, which was San Vito de Java. We would go along to the municipality meetings and sit there as the community leaders would beg and plead for a doctor to be sent to the county. And eventually they did get a fixed doctor.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:45:39] You know, I don't know if we ever did state this. What was the name of the community you were assigned to in Costa Rica?

M. SELIGSON: [00:45:46] Agua Buena de Coto Brus. Coto Brus is the canton. It was a new canton, new county, that had been founded only a few years before, split away from Golfito, which is where the United Fruit Company had its central operations, and therefore it was a brand-new municipality. And I mentioned earlier.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:46:07] Were you by the coast? Because you mentioned.

M. SELIGSON: [00:46:10] It is a coffee growing area up in the mountains, a thousand meters.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:46:14] And what was the nearest large town or city?

M. SELIGSON: [00:46:18] San Isidro de El General, which was about five hours away. We were very, very isolated. The only way to get from our village out there was to go down to sea level and cross the river, which had no bridge. And during the rainy season, this is an area which got storms from both the Atlantic and the Pacific side. So it had an average of 15 feet of rainfall a year, which is about the highest of any place on the planet.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:46:44] Sorry, started laughing. Fifteen feet?

M. SELIGSON: [00:46:46] I don't think there's any place higher than that.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:46:49] Rainforest country.

M. SELIGSON: [00:46:49] It was deep rainforest all around, and when the rains fell, which was throughout about nine months out of the year, the river was impassable.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:46:58] I'm sorry, nine months of the year, you said?

M. SELIGSON: [00:46:59] Nine months. There was only a very short January, February, March was the only dry season. Even that period would rain. During the rest of it when the rains got really vicious in September and October, you couldn't leave. No. That's when you got sick. And that's when we, you know, we couldn't cross. And you can tell that story.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:47:16] It was like in India, where you, um.

M. SELIGSON: [00:47:19] Like monsoons.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:47:20] Monsoon. It would be days and days of nonstop pouring rain.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:47:24] Yeah, I've been, well as an aside.

M. SELIGSON: [00:47:27] In Honduras you had?

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:47:28] In Costa Rica. [tape break] OK, now you can continue.

M. SELIGSON: [00:47:34] What was key here is that when I said this set me on my entire career. We were seeing was the ability of impoverished villagers in the middle of nowhere as it was to organize themselves. We didn't come in and say, get organized. They had already established this committee. The committee was established with the enormously intelligent logic of setting up this welfare committee, the *comité de bienestar comunal*, so that they could tap into this resource, namely a visiting doctor.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:48:05] Did they request a Peace Corps volunteer?

M. SELIGSON: [00:48:08] Well, I don't know the history of that. I'm almost certain if they had heard anything about it, they would have been first on the line.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:48:15] There had been one before. They always talked about this guy Bob, Bob. So they knew that.

M. SELIGSON: [00:48:19] They knew something about him. I'm pretty sure that there was community demand there and they were. So there was the village committee. There were international resources, USAID and CARE. There was the government with Ministry of Health and the municipality. And my work as a political scientist was driven by the ability of seeing people in different groups and different organizations organizing themselves to get problems solved. The municipality I mentioned was a very, very poor municipality that had a very small tax base, and they had very

few resources. But the few resources that they had, our villages struggled for, to pull to their town resources, to get the one tractor in the entire county, to be used for two days, and the municipality would provide the diesel. They would measure it by liter, five gallon drum. They would come up with two gallon two drums of diesel if the village could clear around the area so they could get this road or clear all this area, whatever it was. It was that kind of putting together with micro resources. And it impressed us. I mean, we came away from that experience.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:49:28] Well, the reason it impressed us to no end. I mean, the guy who was the president of the committee became our closest friend. This is a man of third grade education, Pisto Mehia Mehia, who we were close to for many, many years after that. With him, we became godparents to his grandchild and the relationship that they will for the rest of his life when he dies. When we return with our child to do research, fieldwork, participation, it was his wife who took care of my three year old so I could go out and do my data gathering.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:50:04] Well, good for you. Well, this is.

M. SELIGSON: [00:50:06] And then my daughter became, our daughter became friends with this godchild.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:50:11] Went to school with her whenever we came to do research.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:50:12] This is an unusual, interesting interview. But I mean that you went back and did your dissertation work there.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:50:21] We went back many times. I went back to the town a number of times and people remembered us. I mean, they, you know, we were watching their kids growing up every time we come back. And the one who was five is suddenly 18.

M. SELIGSON: [00:50:33] These stories without names are integral in my dissertation, their photographs and my dissertation got published a number of years ago. And then coming back with another scholar and anthropologist later, we wrote an article that won a prize on this area. It was an academic thing and you know, you have to go into the academic details, but it all emerged from that period. But when you left out, really, referring to the nutrition center, is what we saw when we got there and what happened, how the nutrition center happened, that's really.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:51:06] You know, I'm sorry I'm interrupting. I wanted to kind of go from what you had said originally, which you were trained to do, because you've talked about so many interesting things. You got your training was in Puerto Rico and all. But then you jumped ahead to what you were doing when you first got to your site. You had your nutrition training. You had your cooperative and community development training. Were you doing that work when you first arrived in town?

M. SELIGSON: [00:51:38] So I showed up. Here I am. I'm the local Peace Corps volunteer and I'm going to help you fix up this cooperative thing. And little by little, as I learned, and as my Spanish got better, I began to understand the full story, which I described to you a moment ago. And came to the conclusion, I don't know at what point, it was six months, nine months in, like this is not going to work. I can't fix this problem. But by that time, I had gotten engaged in a whole other dimension, which is the building of the nutrition center and collaborating with Susie on the implications of all that. And my work with this school garden, to get that side of things going for the school lunch program and the commercial farmers who were growing vegetables, and that's where I once again became a resource. Specifically, this was an extremely heavy rainfall area, and the problem of fungus on tomatoes was a serious problem. And so knowing nothing about this field, I started training myself in what it is that you need to do to get to grow in this area and wrote letters to land grant colleges all over the United States, telling them the problem and asking them for

stuff. And they started sending me samples of seeds that were supposedly resistant.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:52:47] Were they?

M. SELIGSON: [00:52:48] Well, they sent me some seeds that we tried them in trial, I learned how to do experimental trials. And we found the seeds in Brazil, the santerita variety of tomatoes, which were incredible. The whole plant could die, but the tomato would still grow, and that became, you know, a mechanism for farmers who were trying to grow tomatoes to export to the banana zone, where the United Fruit Company Workers were, who grew nothing except bananas. And to try to sell them down there. And that was sort of the kind of thing I did. So the training I had was never used. I never learned about it. It wasn't the Peace Corps' fault because they couldn't have figured out what took us a long time to figure out. They were well-intentioned. The question that a volunteer would say is, well, do I pick up and leave, go home, go to another site? Well, by that time we were so engaged in the struggle of this community that, on every front, the vaccines, the whole thing, the polio epidemic, you know, everything that we could go.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:53:45] There was the polio epidemic. So we had the resources to go to San Jose and to go to the Ministry of Health and get vaccines, which we personally brought back to the town and packed in ice and started giving out the oral polio vaccine.

M. SELIGSON: [00:54:01] Yeah, there was a political dance behind that because at that time, Costa Rica didn't want to admit that they had a polio outbreak. If they admitted it, they could have gotten into free vaccines, but they didn't want to admit it. So we had to find a way of getting to the Ministry of Health and getting these vaccines to this area, which had, the kids had no vaccine of any kind.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:54:18] There were no doctors around, nothing.

M. SELIGSON: [00:54:23] So we went personally to the Ministry of Health, went to that refrigerator, got the vaccines, packed them in ice, flew them out there, and then started putting the drops in the kids. No sugar cube, just the drops. That's how we did it. So we were, yeah, we got engaged in all stuff. But you should tell the story.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:54:42] Sue, did your training, because you had the nutrition training, I assuming. You tell me. Did it help you with what you did? You already talked about it.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:54:52] Well, a little bit. I mean, I studied the INCAP because this book has all the nutrients. And I discovered once I got to the town that there was something called blede, B-L-E-D-O, which I never heard of before.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:55:04] What is it?

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:55:06] Amaranth root, wasn't it? It was something I'd never heard of in English, either. But it was a leaf that had a tremendous amount of good stuff, lots of vitamins, and it was like high in everything. It was the ideal thing for eating. And radish leaf had it too.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:55:27] I've never heard of it.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:55:28] Yeah, well, that was one thing. But radish leaves also were very high in iron, certain kinds of vitamins. And you know, when you had intestinal parasites, you didn't hold in the iron very well, that was one of the problems you have, anemic.

M. SELIGSON: [00:55:43] You couldn't absorb the iron.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:55:47] Couldn't absorb the iron. So I just go with the radish leaves were great in this respect. And so Mitch started planting radishes leaves in school gardens.

M. SELIGSON: [00:55:56] Radishes.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:55:57] Radishes, yeah. And then when they harvested the radishes, they would take the leaves that they used to throw away in the past, chop them up, and put it into some kind of a salad or something and give that to the children. A salad that had radish leaves and tomatoes. So that was an innovation.

M. SELIGSON: [00:56:14] She was trying to do that thing so radishes, OK. So we found about these *rábano grande*, which were enormous and had enormous leaves and they grew fantastically there. I mean, you just had to put the seed in the it'd come up.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:56:27] The radishes themselves were not very nutritious, but the leaves were fantastic.

M. SELIGSON: [00:56:30] And so we got them to do the.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:56:33] The planning was really ineffective. I didn't find it useful for anything. What was effective in the Peace Corps training was not what my teachers taught me in classes, but the two weeks I spent going out with community development workers in Puerto Rico, watching them at work. Because they were my model, I copied myself, I modeled myself after them. They would go from door to door, house to house, chat with the woman of the house, invite them to council meeting, and try to get a message across to each woman.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:57:07] Were they part of a Ministry of Health? I mean, were they?

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:57:10] It was. It was.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:57:12] Something I'm guessing like that.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:57:13] An organized community development program in Puerto Rico.

M. SELIGSON: [00:57:17] In the slums of San Juan.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:57:18] It was a government sponsored development program. And yeah, I mean, the Peace Corps assigned us volunteers to tag along after them, to be with them for a week, watch them in operation. And that's what we did and this is how I learned the modus operandi, how to go about doing this. I knew we had to go up to house to house. So when I got to the town, I went to every single house, introduced myself, got to know who the people were. Went back a second time. And through that process, learned who the leaders. Had found out who are the active women who are willing to work with me and get involved. Who has the time, the resources, the education, or whatever it took to get engaged in the projects that I thought would be good for the town.

M. SELIGSON: [00:58:06] The Peace Corps had a policy on motorcycles or not motorcycles that varied. Every time a volunteer would get killed in a motorcycle accident, they would pass something that said no more motorcycles. But the absence of the motorcycle in the first year meant that.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:58:19] Really hampered us.

M. SELIGSON: [00:58:19] We were actually working on agriculture. I could spend five hours walking to a farm and back. I was dead by the time I got there.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:58:25] Yeah, I spent my entire afternoons walking from house to house, talking to the women, saying, well, you know, if your child is sick and have you started boiling the water or whatever. You know that the nutrition center is opening up and providing them, you know, getting them to participate in the whole process. At some point, well, this is when I started to the idea of the Head Start program at the nutrition center. I did start that. I was a teacher and I brought back, when I went home to

the U.S. after the first year, our first vacation, I brought that with me all kinds of supplies for the Head Start program. Toys, crayons, whatever I thought a kindergarten should have. But I don't know how the idea struck me that starting school at the age of seven was too late. Because Head Start could get children to start age of three and four. Seven was already much too late when you had no stimulation at all in the household.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [00:59:22] So I thought, well, is there such a thing as a kindergarten in this country? I found that, yes, there kindergarten. But there are all in *meseta central*, in the area around the capital city, where the big developed, old developed towns are. Out in the countryside, there were no kindergartens. Theoretically, you could have a kindergarten, but you had to go through a certain process to get one. I found out from the Ministry of Education what the process was. You had to have a certain number of children in the community and it couldn't be less than whatever the number was. You had to have signatures of the parents saying they're willing to send their kids to kindergarten. You had to have a local physical place where you could have the kids come to the classroom. Desks or whatever, some equipment. And once I knew what it took, I worked with the community leaders, with one woman in particular. I can name people? Holita de Castillo. She was an incredible leader, a woman then in her 30s with five kids, who was engaged in everything, very active in several of the education committee and the school and church committee. And she worked with me with gusto on every project. And so she and I did a census, which is what you had to do, of each family, to see how many kids there were in Agua Buena who had kids of the right age. And I think they had to be then, I guess, six. And we got the signatures of the parents and we sent in and we got the commitment of the, um, I think we were wrong to use the nutrition center.

M. SELIGSON: [01:00:54] So that's the part you have left out.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:00:57] When we arrived there, there was a the embryonic construction of the nutrition center, which was this collaborative project of CARE and AID and so on.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:01:07] Who started it, CARE?

M. SELIGSON: [01:01:08] It started, well, the idea is the villages had to provide the physical locale and then CARE would come in with the milk and all the other stuff. The program was to have meals in nutrition center in mid-morning, but the people who lived within a kilometer of the school and lactating mothers.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:01:27] Because the children who live far away who were malnourished could come in once a month, and they would be given powdered milk to take home.

M. SELIGSON: [01:01:38] And CSN too.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:01:38] CSN too. These kids did not live close enough to come every day from sufficient time, so they would be given the milk to take home.

M. SELIGSON: [01:01:47] So they had two. So the idea was that. It became very clear to us that building the nutrition center was the crucial thing. We provided a few photos and just an empty lot or something like that. This wealthy man in town had given the land. And I think the Ministry of Health was going to provide the materials, that is the cinderblock and those kinds, and the town had to come up with the labor. So Susie and I did a lot to try to organize that. There's no tradition in Costa Rica of these *mingas*, of these community work things.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:02:19] What did you say, *minga*?

M. SELIGSON: [01:02:20] In the Andes, it's the *minga*. People in the United States, it's the housing bee with all the people in the town.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:02:30] Like what the Amish do, where everyone together builds a house.

M. SELIGSON: [01:02:32] Barn raising.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:02:33] Like they did in the 1800s?

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:02:35] Right. They did not do that in Costa Rica. But we organized community groups like that. We put a sign up saying, come on Sunday, volunteer your time, you know, to build a nutrition center, we'll give you café. And so people donated. The women who had the.

M. SELIGSON: [01:02:53] The women cooked and the men worked.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:02:55] They donated little cakes, whatever, to feed the guys who are doing the construction work, and they spent the entire Sunday instead of playing soccer in the field. They spent Sunday afternoon putting in the hard labor, building a nutrition center, along with a carpenter.

M. SELIGSON: [01:03:10] Who was sent by the Ministry of Health. You know,

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:03:12] Who lived there in the town, yeah, there was a carpenter there.

M. SELIGSON: [01:03:16] He was assigned to live there. [tape break]

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:03:23] OK, I'm going to ask a question that's on this list of suggested questions about language, and then I also want to ask, um, I want to use their nicknames Mitchie and Sue, Mitchell and Sue, about going down as a married couple, which is, um, they are the first married couple that I've done an interview with. So first of all, I'll ask about language. While I was switching tapes, Mitch said, I mean, his Spanish was. Well, he'll tell us in the minute. And Sue was fluent, I guess. And she's a linguist, by the way. So Mitch? No, Sue. You start and talk about your

Spanish. How that helped you, what was your preparation, and how that helped you as a Peace Corps volunteer? Because I already told them I'm impressed with all they accomplished. And I didn't accomplish all that.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:04:11] But I'd like to talk about language because I think it played an important role in our effectiveness. I came into the Peace Corps speaking Spanish fluently because I'd been a Spanish major in college. I spent a summer in Mexico. I had no trouble understanding Costa Ricans speaking Spanish whatsoever. I did have trouble in Puerto Rico in training because I'd never heard that dialect of Spanish, the Caribbean dialect, where they don't pronounce their S's at the end of syllables. Instead of saying *esta es la casa de Bonita*, they would say, *esta es la casa de Bonita*, where they aspirate their S's or just delete them completely taken off. And so I had trouble understanding Puerto Ricans for the first six weeks until one day, like magic overnight, I suddenly understood the Puerto Ricans around me. It was like a crystallization of the brain, you know? But the pattern has set in my brain unconsciously. But I haven't studied the dialectology of.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:05:11] What was the word you just used?

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:05:12] Crystallization?

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:05:14] No.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:05:15] Dialectology? I hadn't studied dialectology at all.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:05:17] Oh, about dialects. OK.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:05:18] I hadn't studied dialects, right. And I had to on my own figure out Puerto Rican Spanish without anyone telling me, without reading a book about it. And one day I suddenly understood people. I had no trouble in Costa Rica because they don't do that in Costa Rica. They speak with all the S's, and it's

a very easy dialect in Spanish to understand. When I came there, I was speaking Spanish of the type I learned in college, so I was using grammatical forms of the subjunctive, for example, that Costa Ricans were not using very much.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:05:48] The subjunctive.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:05:50] Not that way. Yeah, I mean, they were using the subjunctive in the less standard way. I was thinking more standardly than they were in many ways. The book Spanish, educated Spanish. So they would say, oh, you speak Spanish better than we do, which is ridiculous because I didn't. I mean, it was because they thought just because I was using the standard grammatical form and I'd studied vocabulary items that they didn't have. I sounded educated that I spoke better than they did it. So they had a great impression of my ability to speak Spanish. I could speak clearly, understandably. I could communicate well from the very beginning. And that impressed the leadership, especially this one man who was the richest man in the, oh sorry.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:06:31] I'll stop it one minute. OK, we were talking about your Spanish.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:06:36] The fact that I spoke Spanish in an educated way and fluently impressed the community leaders, especially this one man who was a high school teacher himself, had been, before he dedicated himself to running his property. And he respected us for our ability to communicate well. And this impressed him because not all the other volunteers had spoken so well. Mitch came in, was not a Spanish major, came in at a relatively low level. I was at the most advanced level, I was with the native speakers in Peace Corps training. So that helped me tremendously.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:07:07] Oh yeah.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:07:07] And I understood everyone. I could communicate with the people I talk to well. And I had no, I had no problems whatsoever understanding. And they understood me. So I think that was really important. However, the cultural meanings behind what they were saying, that took me years to understand. And I give these examples to my classes. When we had friends over for cafe in the afternoon, coffee and cake or something and we'd say, would you like coffee? And the answer would be, *no me importa*. I don't care. Which in America sounds like I'm not very enthusiastic, which sounds like I don't really care. I'll take it or leave it. And they would say that all the time. They'd always say, *no me importa. Me da igual*. It's all the same to me.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:07:49] Yeah.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:07:50] And but after a while, I realized they really wanted that very much. They wanted to have coffee and cake with us. But that was the polite way of saying yes.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:07:57] It was?

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:07:58] Yes. And in the coastal and countryside among peasants, that's the way you accepted an offer politely. You didn't say, oh, I would love to. No one ever said that. So I just learned, it grated on me terribly, but I learned to understand it. That's the polite way of accepting an invitation to have tea.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:08:20] And how long did that take you to grasp that, a year?

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:08:22] A year. There was another thing if you ask people, do you want the dark meat or the white meat of chicken? That was a real delicacy. The chicken was really expensive, not to be found. They'd have to kill their own chickens. And they didn't because they wanted the eggs. And they would never tell you which one they prefer. They just would not say because it was rude to express a preference.

M. SELIGSON: [01:08:46] In my case, my Spanish, I'm a lousy language student, although I eventually became fluent in Spanish. And I had this experience that I mentioned, the summers in which I learned very little, my Spanish in Mexico the first time. *Tú eres?* And I said, *tú eren?* And I couldn't get it. I mean, it's simple.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:09:05] They didn't say, *usted es* or something like that?

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:09:08] You didn't tell her what *eres* means.

M. SELIGSON: [01:09:09] But our closest friend in the Peace Corps, Francisco Mehia, rest in peace, came to our house virtually every afternoon around 4:00 or 5:00, generally in the rain, because it was almost always raining. And sat there across the table, asked me for coffee, he would say, *no me importa*, and she would serve him coffee, and we would have, you know, some bread or whatever we have. And he was my window into Costa Rican life, telling me all about the Costa Rican civil war and politics in the country and the agrarian reform struggles and the land struggles. I intensely wanted to learn that stuff.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:09:49] Yeah.

M. SELIGSON: [01:09:50] And so by listening to him, because he spoke a very, very clear Spanish and was very patient and very slow.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:09:56] What a gift, I have to say that.

M. SELIGSON: [01:09:58] And I would start to, I found myself just learning Spanish. You know, it was that one on one, complete immersion. We would sit there for hours and I would ask questions. Some of them were very funny things. But we can tell it. And, you know, kind of all these stories.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:10:15] By the second year, we were going to their house for lunch on Wednesday. But then we had a motorcycle.

M. SELIGSON: [01:10:21] Yeah, that was the big deal.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:10:22] Because we lived far away. I mean, it was quite a distance, we couldn't walk to his house, it would have taken an hour and a half. So we were going there more than once a week to have lunch with them, you know, the vegetarian lunch. Rice and beans and eggs. He was growing pineapple. He was growing an experimental pineapple that Mitch got on through Peace Corps.

M. SELIGSON: [01:10:43] Cudiablo Costa Rica is where they have these big classic experimental stations that existed all the way from the 1930s and '40s. And so I connected him up with that so they could give him pineapple seeds, which actually look like pieces of pineapple. And we got them shipped out there, a variety called matufa. And he started growing it and it did very, very well. And it was a very sweet and delicious.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:11:12] It was delicious. And people with the all were clamoring to get his matufa because no one else had it but him. It had a very different taste. The juice, I don't know if it was juicier or something. There was something about it that was different from all the other pineapples and they wanted it.

M. SELIGSON: [01:11:26] And he had a little pond in his farm. And so Cudiablo was also experimented with tilapia. Costa Rica is a major exporter of tilapia today.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:11:34] Is it?

M. SELIGSON: [01:11:34] So we got him tilapia.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:11:35] This is part of the nutrition part. Yeah, we found that the tilapia was a super high protein fish that was very easy to raise. We started with him as the perfect sample.

M. SELIGSON: [01:11:46] We had a pond and we seeded it with tilapia. And I bought a pH kit so we could measure the acidity of the water because it had to be the right way. We put lime in to get it right. We have wonderful photographs of planning and stuff, and all the villagers came around to see the tilapia ponds.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:12:01] We'd try to fish the fish out on Good Friday. So they could have, because that was a custom to eat fish on Good Friday. But they couldn't, they didn't have a net to fish it out with. So they use coffee sacks.

M. SELIGSON: [01:12:15] No, they used tarps for the top of the trucks. But now we know why nets have holes in them.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:12:21] Yeah.

M. SELIGSON: [01:12:21] You put a tarp and it sits there, and when it goes down, the fish all went away. You know, I realized all the like. We never knew, we lived in New York. We didn't know what bridges did, I mean, they were there. Until we lived in a place where there was a river but no bridge.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:12:36] Yeah, then it hits home.

M. SELIGSON: [01:12:37] Now there is a bridge, but we didn't know why. You know, what was the deal with bridges?

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:12:40] How long did it take you, do you think, to be able to converse in Spanish then, Mitch?

M. SELIGSON: [01:12:48] I can't give you a time, it's just that the combination of that. The mail came to the town three times a week when the little *aviamento* landed in the coffee cooperative and brought in all mail along with the newspaper. I used to joke, I said if there's a nuclear war and the world gets destructed, three days later, we'll read about it in the newspaper.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:13:11] We were the few people getting newspapers in the town.

M. SELIGSON: [01:13:13] And so I read every word.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:13:15] I didn't read the paper.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:13:16] Did you understand it?

M. SELIGSON: [01:13:17] Well, the point is that little, it was so easy, because there were the events going on and I could fill in the blanks. And little by little, that's why I developed a really good vocabulary because I was reading all the stuff.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:13:29] We had a shortwave radio. So he was being tuned into the news and reading it in Spanish. You know, he could.

M. SELIGSON: [01:13:35] Figure out what was happening.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:13:36] Now, when you were alone in your house?

M. SELIGSON: [01:13:39] We spoke English.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:13:40] Yeah, OK.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:13:40] Oh yeah, we spoke English.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:13:41] Did you help him with his Spanish, Sue?

M. SELIGSON: [01:13:43] She was my voice into the community originally because I didn't know what was going on. In addition to the daily discussions with him, we intended many meetings, sometimes several a week with the community development association, the welfare folks.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:13:59] Believe me, it went on for hours.

M. SELIGSON: [01:14:00] I didn't understand what was going on. I had a terrible headache.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:14:03] I had a headache, too.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:14:05] But you understood, I'm guessing.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:14:07] I understood but I had a headache from concentrating so much on what people were saying. I mean, there was stuff, contextual stuff I didn't understand. I don't know what they were talking about.

M. SELIGSON: [01:14:16] But then actually, as I began to learn and so what was happening is that is that you ask about the couples on all fronts with the constant overlapping. So it was a construction of nutrition center, which allows the nutrition center to get built and nutrition programs open. But it gave Susie the idea of the kindergarten. Where are we going to get a classroom? Here it was. There was this building, with a floor, a roof, sinks, everything, used for half hour a day for the kids.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:14:47] The nutrition center, only half an hour a day?

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:14:51] The *unidad mobile*, the mobile medical unit, would use that later.

M. SELIGSON: [01:14:56] It was a dual-purpose building, which now was so shrewd in this. They put, in one building, they had two wings. One was the nutrition center part and the other was the community development association part, which is where the doctor saw the patients when the town was successful in getting the doctor to come. But they had to have a place and all the things I mentioned. And so that's where they would give out the milk. That's where the doctor would come and see the patients. And that's where the place was, the physical place that you saw as an opportunity to ask for the kindergarten.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:15:29] So we did what you had to do to get a kindergarten, and we got the kindergarten and the crucial thing was getting a kindergarten teacher paid for by the Ministry of Education. And we succeeded in getting that. So lo and behold, one day this girl from the *meseta central*, from the capital city area, comes in. She's a kindergarten teacher and the kids have to have uniforms because all the kids in Costa Rican schools in the public schools have uniforms. And kindergartens, kids had to wear pale blue or something. The girls had to wear a dress and boys had shorts and shirt. And that was it. It was a real kindergarten.

M. SELIGSON: [01:16:05] Did you also help the poor kids in town who didn't have enough money for the uniforms?

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:16:09] Yeah.

M. SELIGSON: [01:16:09] So they raised money for that. And so the magic was there. It was a Head Start program in Costa Rica where the kids were nourished of the mind and the body because the nutrition program they got there, their high nutrition lunch as part of the kindergarten program. And this is the first rural kindergarten in Costa Rica.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:16:29] First rural kindergarten.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:16:31] There were no rural kindergartens. All the kindergartens were around the capital city and the largest, the county seat of the areas around the capital, but no rural area had a kindergarten.

M. SELIGSON: [01:16:41] Of course, as soon as our village got it, the county seat wanted one.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:16:45] They were jealous.

M. SELIGSON: [01:16:46] What is this?

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:16:46] How come you have a kindergarten? They imitated us. It started spreading.

M. SELIGSON: [01:16:49] And before you know it, everyone was getting it.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:16:51] Wow.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:16:52] Once they saw that you could.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:16:53] You guys were movers and shakers.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:16:56] Yeah, that was a tangible kind of thing, we felt as well. We brought something to this town and it continued and it was never taken away as far as we know.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:17:07] I'm jealous, anyway, but I wanted to just to. We talked about this when the tape was off. As a married couple, I asked, do you think you would have accomplished that the same amount that you have or been able to like Mitch with your, I can say poorer Spanish, would you would you have been able to accomplish this if you had gone by individually?

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:17:35] No, doubt it.

M. SELIGSON: [01:17:35] No. We were accepted as a couple, which is important. There was no issue like I was looking for young girls to marry. That was over. We were doing our thing and we were accepted by the elders of the community.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:17:48] Yeah, they really appreciated, we felt appreciated by them. We felt that they understood that we were working hard for them and the community. That we were really doing everything we possibly could to help the community. We felt that they had the same trust as we had for them. They also knew how much we respected them, the mutual respect for each other.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:18:16] I want to ask you a question only because your Spanish is, he said, it was more perfect I'll say.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:18:23] No, it wasn't perfect.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:18:23] Well, you are very fluent, OK? I'll rephrase that. If you had gone as a single woman, I'm sort of beating a dead horse I suppose with this, because I was a single woman in Honduras. Do you think you could have accomplished some of this? Most of this?

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:18:42] No, I don't.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:18:43] Even though you were fluent.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:18:43] I couldn't have been physically in the places where men can be, for example, at the meeting, you know, being there at night. I don't know if I could have gone out at night by myself to attend meetings. I wouldn't have felt safe for one thing, you know, because everybody in the town knew who we were. Everyone, I mean, even they didn't know us personally, they recognized us. They knew we were this couple who worked somehow with this leader and that leader, they knew we were there doing something for the community. No one ever bothered me when I went out by myself to the only three stores in the whole town. So I went out to get a cold drink because it was like the place that was a restaurant bar. I would to get a cold soft drink there to bring back for lunch. I could go out and no man would ever say anything to me because they knew that I was married to him. No man ever tried to hit on me, bother me, because they knew I was a married woman, you know, connected to the, a gringa married to a gringo. Although what I learned in the second year that because I called myself Susan Seligson and he was Mitchell Seligson and many people thought we were brother and sister because I should have called myself Susana de Seligson.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:19:52] Oh right.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:19:55] I didn't know that. I didn't know enough to say de Seligson. So a lot of people mistakenly thought we were brother and sister, especially since we had no children. And they always asked us why don't we have children? We'd only been married a year.

M. SELIGSON: [01:20:07] One of the things that they realized is that we began, we came into the village. It was a rich man on the hill and all these divisions in the community. And it didn't take us that long to the point where we began to see more and more these people as absolute heroes and superstars, pioneers living in the area which had which had a first non-indigenous settlement in 1941. This area was totally uninhabited. And there were a small number of Panamanian Indians across the border range from there.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:20:41] There was no settlement. There was nothing.

M. SELIGSON: [01:20:43] And these were pioneers.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:20:44] Oh yeah, we didn't cover that. I didn't think to.

M. SELIGSON: [01:20:48] So we began to develop.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:20:50] We didn't go into the other pioneers, the Italians from Italy, who came after World War II. These were, I think, Mussolini supporters who were unhappy with the outcome of the war. And they were in San Vito.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:21:01] What did you say again, they were?

M. SELIGSON: [01:21:02] They were in San Vito de Java was the county seat, which was by car in those days on the on the dirt road, an hour

drive. And they were central there. And one of the volunteers in our group was located there.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:21:16] And a Peace Corps couple had lived there before that, too. But there have been Peace Corps in that town, also, in the county seat.

M. SELIGSON: [01:21:21] But what happened was that they became made us part of their struggles so that when they went up to the municipality, which the municipality had a meeting every week and we would go there probably once a month, we always went with them. They dragged us along and we would see them. We would never get up in front of them to ask for anything. We were sort of there.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:21:42] But we were there as part of their representative delegation from Agua Buena.

M. SELIGSON: [01:21:45] And when the crucial moment occurred in that town, when the Ministry of Health decided that this mobile health unit was an inefficient way of using doctors' resources, and from then on, they would have people have to go to the county seat to get to see the doctor and the *unidad mobile* was going to disappear. This county went on strike. They blocked the roads. There was one radio station run by the priests and the Franciscan priests, and they took over the radio stations and they demanded that the Ministry of Health return this service to the community. And so the key leader, this was the rich man from our town.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:22:25] And that was Ernesto Arias.

M. SELIGSON: [01:22:27] In Costa Rica, people didn't get shot for this kind of thing. So they when they blocked the roads and all this sort of stuff, the Ministry of Health and the assistants flew out in the Costa Rican Air Force, which was a one engine Piper Cub and landed there, and thousands of people from the community

came out to an open air meeting. And Ernesto was one of those as spokesman. They had the head of the municipality.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:22:57] It was a brilliant rhetorician.

M. SELIGSON: [01:22:59] Tears rolled down our cheeks to hear him.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:23:00] He was a brilliant speaker, he was a really intelligent man.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:23:03] This is the rich man?

M. SELIGSON: [01:23:05] Yes, telling them how this resource.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:23:08] A high school teacher? Oh, he was rich. I'm sorry. I had to interject that.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:23:11] He owned all the land and sold off parts of it to other people.

M. SELIGSON: [01:23:16] His son went to West Point. Little connections. And yet when he saw this as the resource around which the entire community pivoted, the community development center, this thing was all related to having this doctor come providing the resources. If you take this away from us, they're stripping the community of its form. And they won. The ministry reversed its policy and put back the *unidad mobile*.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:23:41] Yeah, but eventually, in the two years they sent a sixth doctor, a permanent doctor to live, who worked in the clinic. Remember the guy who failed his exams?

M. SELIGSON: [01:23:52] Yeah, but he, no, he was. He was seen to be a doctor with the British Peace Corps at a hospital in Sao Vito. But he lived in Agua Buena.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:24:04] Right. But he was going to be in one. He wasn't going to be *unidad mobile*.

M. SELIGSON: [01:24:07] Well, what happened eventually in Costa Rica is that health services became much more common and they established what we call *puestos de salud*. And eventually.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:24:15] When did that happen?

M. SELIGSON: [01:24:17] After we left.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:24:18] OK. There was, can I interrupt, was there a Ministry of Health of some sort?

M. SELIGSON: [01:24:23] The Ministry of Health.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:24:24] But they didn't have clinics in a lot of rural areas.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:24:29] Not then. Not yet.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:24:31] OK.

M. SELIGSON: [01:24:31] Social security became universalized in Costa Rica, and the Social Security started opening hospitals, including a hospital in the county seat in San Vito, with these little *puestos de salud*.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:24:40] That was years later.

M. SELIGSON: [01:24:42] Years later.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:24:43] Could you guess what year maybe?

M. SELIGSON: [01:24:46] Oh, this is all when you get into the late '70s and maybe the hospital was opened in the early '80s.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:24:53] Yeah, I'm just curious because of my health background.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:24:56] But this one doctor who was finally sent to the county because the rich man Ernesto offered him free housing, that's why he chose to live in Agua Buena, instead of the county seat, which had all the stores and the better food and everything. So he was a young guy with a young wife. His wife was about 24 and he was about 28 or something. He'd gotten his medical degree in Mexico because apparently he could not get into a Costa Rican medical school.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:25:24] But he was Costa Rican?

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:25:25] He was Costa Rican. And within a couple of months, he moved to the county seat, he didn't want to live in our town. So everyone was so disenchanted with him. The doctor living in our little town, you know? The problem was that we had all, we would receive free medicines from Germany, and he couldn't read English and he couldn't read German. He would ask me to tell him what the label said on the medicine in front of the. I was trying to translate. My German was not good enough. The English, I could tell him. But he knew neither English or German, that's what he was giving out.

M. SELIGSON: [01:26:00] But years later, then electricity came, water came, telephones came, doctors, you know? That's all what happened in this little village, which was in the middle of nowhere, eventually became. A bridge was built. Bus service came in.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:26:14] Who were the early settlers? You said it wasn't begun until '41. Were they Costa Ricans?

M. SELIGSON: [01:26:21] It was World War II that did it. In World War II, the United States was trying to find, make a land route to the Panama Canal because there was a concern that there was German small airline companies around that were going to

bomb the canal and put it out of existence, which would have crippled the war in the Pacific. So they drove, the idea was to drive the Panamanian highway down to the Panama Canal, and this village was on the initial route, later it was changed, to go through there. And we saw a penetration road was built from the coast up to this area, and this area was where the road was supposed to go. There it was, the road. And with the road came the people. And the road was built by a company called Wanderlust, based in St. Louis, Missouri.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:27:07] And there were kids with American names, little kids called Roosevelt with blond hair, the product of, you know, this company.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:27:16] Yeah, OK.

M. SELIGSON: [01:27:17] When the war ended, that literally the day that the war ended, the construction stopped, the machinery was left to rot there on the ground. That was the end of it.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:27:27] But the people stayed?

M. SELIGSON: [01:27:29] The people stayed. But now there was a penetration road up there, there was a way of getting in. And then at the end of the war, this group of, we assume, from Mussolini, the Italians set up an Italian colony in Costa Rica.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:27:43] In that county seat?

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:27:45] San Vito de Java, yeah. San Vito was named after this Italian, Vito Sansonetti.

M. SELIGSON: [01:27:50] And so they created this thing, which to be a diversified farm. Most of the colony failed, mostly Italians went back to Italy. A small number of Italian restaurants are there and a small number of the bakers who would send us the bread.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:28:04] The baker's son became a *diputado*, a member of the Legislature.

M. SELIGSON: [01:28:09] That's a whole other story.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:28:11] You've got a lot of stories. Um, I think, anything before I talk about like the end of your two-year experience, anything else you want to add about your projects? You've spoken a lot about them.

M. SELIGSON: [01:28:32] There were so many other people. There was an American who lived out there on the border with Panama, and Darryl Cole. They used to tell there was a guy called Darren Cole. And he lived there. He had come out during the Korean War, I think, as a protest against the war and lived out there his whole life, married, and create his own organic farm along the border.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:28:56] How far away were you from the Panamanian border?

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:28:58] 30 minutes on foot?

M. SELIGSON: [01:29:02] It was about two miles, two or three mile walk from our thing to the Panamanian border. It was right there. It was an area of border dispute. It was an area where the coup occurred in Panama, there were all kinds of people going across the border and some shooting pains in that area.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:29:20] We would go there, there were a couple of stores there that sold important stuff, imported Cadbury chocolate bars, Campbell's soup cans, and cheese and, yeah, this is what saved their lives. We became vegetarians in Peace Corps for lack of meat around the thing, right?

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:29:35] Uh huh. Are you vegetarian still?

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:29:38] No. We became vegetarians again when our daughter became a vegetarian in high school. It was then we dropped that, but there was no meat. There was a butcher who would kill a cow. Display the live cow before he killed it. The live cow looked diseased, you know, the ribs showing. We wouldn't go near the things that he used to kill. Then he ran off into the mountains and disappeared, so that was the end of the butcher shop in town.

M. SELIGSON: [01:30:03] Well, that story and he had a dog, a hunting dog, who used to come to our house.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:30:07] We would feed his dog baloney, mortadella.

M. SELIGSON: [01:30:10] And then the dog became very sad, like the head down at one point. And I tried to feed her and put my hand in her mouth, and she wouldn't eat. When she disappeared, we learned that there was a rabies epidemic in the area, but it was dumb rabies where they, instead of being angry, they do this.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:30:30] They get lockjaw.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:30:30] I never heard of that. I mean, I've heard of rabies. But dumb rabies.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:30:36] They don't get angry. They don't bite.

M. SELIGSON: [01:30:38] They just think that like this. And so the dog was caught by our friends and they cut off the dog's head.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:30:47] Because of the rabies?

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:30:48] We had to bring to the capital and have it tested.

M. SELIGSON: [01:30:50] They put it into a paint can, and the Peace Corps doctor told us, you have to get in because this thing is filled with *nódulos negros*.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:30:58] Say it again.

M. SELIGSON: [01:30:59] *Nódulos negros*.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:30:59] Nodules, black nodules.

M. SELIGSON: [01:31:02] And so we came in and.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:31:04] Got rabies shots?

M. SELIGSON: [01:31:05] Every day. Every single day, I ended up with 25 shots.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:31:10] I had 11.

M. SELIGSON: [01:31:10] They were they were subcutaneous, very, very painful in those days. But nowadays it's much like three shots or something. And we didn't want to. The problem was, he said, that if you don't take the vaccine, you're going to die. And if you do take the vaccine, you may die from the vaccine because.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:31:26] Or paralyze you and you die from the paralysis.

M. SELIGSON: [01:31:29] They took our blood and sent it to the Center for Disease Control, and after the tenth shot, we still didn't have high enough titers.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:31:34] They had just created the duck embryo.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:31:38] That's what I think I had in Honduras, yeah.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:31:42] As opposed to the horse embryo.

M. SELIGSON: [01:31:44] That was over in time and it was just kind of a scary.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:31:46] On the border, so we were vegetarians because we had no refrigerator. And so I was like, no. The two little stores that sell food, they were called pulperias. The woman would have maybe three or four eggs for sale each day. And I didn't want to buy all of them because I knew other people wanted them too, so I'd buy like two eggs a day sometimes. And tuna fish was available. And but this store on the other side of the Costa Rican border would have gouda cheese imported from Holland, that did not need refrigeration either way up high and it got down to 40 degrees at night and maybe 75 during the day or 80. And that cheese kept itself good for like two months and did not need refrigeration. So we lived on that. I became very creative in cooking with cheese. I made these mini pizzas on the stovetop, you know, so I didn't have an oven either. I had a three burner propane gas stove.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:32:48] It was like kerosene or?

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:32:50] It was gas, like propane gas.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:32:55] OK.

M. SELIGSON: [01:32:56] Like when you would barbecue today, you know, the tanks.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:32:59] So there'd be two regular sized burners and one tiny one. And that's what I cooked on, right? I used the cheese for melting for pizza, combined with potatoes. It was a challenge eating then. And I was not, you know, I was in my first year, my second year of marriage, and I wasn't an experienced cook. Going to the Panamanian border to get that kind of saved my life. And the Cadbury chocolate was great psychologically.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:33:27] I am tempted to ask you a question. I'm going to put it on pause. OK, now we're taping again. I just was curious to know since they went in as a married couple and still are married. How many years have you been married now?

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:33:41] It would be 41 this month.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:33:45] *Felicidades*, congratulations! Did the Peace Corps maybe strengthen your marriage? You were married just a year, you said, when you went in. I got permission to ask them that.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:33:58] Well, I think it gave us common experiences that were very intense. Heavy duty experiences that we share and struggling with the community together, I think that brought us together in a way that we wouldn't have in United States. We would have been doing our own thing in the U.S. He was going to be a graduate student, I was going to graduate student, studying our own different fields. It's not that kind of experience. This is getting involved with people all the all day, every day, seven days a week. So close personal relationships in a way that we never have since.

M. SELIGSON: [01:34:41] By the time we left, sort of we and the community and everything sort of blurred. I mean, there was no longer a me or you or the community. It was just everything was everything. It was everything that happened in that community seemed to be our issue, you know, and problem. And we were so engaged in the struggles, the water system and the nutrition center and the schools and the teacher. The school teacher used to steal the vegetables out of the school garden, and how to deal with that. And some of the fathers didn't like the fact that they were planning these nutritional things and they wanted to put. [tape break]

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:35:15] OK, we're going to. Anything else you want to say about the marriage part, Mitch? It's been said.

M. SELIGSON: [01:35:24] No.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:35:25] OK, we're going to just talk about for time's sake. How would you evaluate your experience in the light of Peace

Corps' three goals? Do you remember the goals? Well, this is like to provide technical assistance where requested, to help promote better understanding of Americans by people served, to help promote better understanding of other peoples by Americans. Do you feel like do you want to comment about technical assistance? How was your service in terms of that, were you able to provide technical assistance?

M. SELIGSON: [01:36:08] I think it was a classic community development experience. These were people who knew how to organize. We ended up admiring them deeply for everything that they could do and the things they did, and we were an asset to them. Remember, we didn't have a job. They were employed and they had to go out and farm every day or do whatever they were doing with those teachers or whatever. But this is our full-time job. So we were resourced and we had connections. We didn't have money to give them, but we could write letters. We could make trips to the capital from time to time and get stuff.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:36:44] We would go to ministries and talk to people to say.

M. SELIGSON: [01:36:48] Try to explain their story to people and try to figure out new and try to unravel this whole problem with the cooperative. And I did what I could in trying to unravel it, but they eventually solved the problem on their own. Costa Rica has always been a very, very pro-U.S. country, so they didn't need us. Yet many people got to know us and I think probably saw that different from the tourists, we have a different agenda. I suspect that in that sense, the whole Kennedy thing was right on the mark. Americans is real people, not just the guy with the camera around the neck.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:37:24] We have the technical knowledge. I didn't bring any technical knowledge to the job and just the willingness, the desire to do something, to work for the people. One of the things that was part of public health that I was not supposed to work on was in birth control. And I just I would ask the woman who had

11 kids alive and several dead if they wanted more kids. And they said, no, but you know, to just get it, you know, whatever God gives. I mean, they didn't know about birth control, there was no birth control out there. There was no pharmacy out there. There's nowhere to buy anything, so what could they do?

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:37:57] But we didn't mention that we worked closely with the priest in the county seat. There was an American priest, there was an American nun who was a nurse, and there was a Costa Rican assistant who had been educated in the U.S., spoke perfect English. And it was the Costa Rican Franciscan priest who decided to get involved in birth control, and we were stunned. I don't think saw NGOs or government sponsored programs had a workshop.

M. SELIGSON: [01:38:31] It was an awareness thing.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:38:32] Consciousness raising.

M. SELIGSON: [01:38:32] You know, how to understand. You know, what is the whole thing about birth control?

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:38:36] He held a workshop and he invited all the women in town.

M. SELIGSON: [01:38:39] You were heavily involved in organizing that.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:38:42] Yeah, I helped him and I was, I didn't speak because I didn't do any public speaking. He did all the talking. I just helped him do what he needed to do, which is to invite people, to say this is the latest thing. And this hour on this day, it's going to be here in the city center. And if you're interested in learning more about it, come.

M. SELIGSON: [01:39:01] He left the priesthood, married, and continue to work with family planning. You know, the American priest and the nun got married in the U.S.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:39:15] They left the clergy, got married.

M. SELIGSON: [01:39:17] So there's a whole story.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:39:18] Yeah, they would come to give mass in our town. So they want to buy this to put the center up there the parish.

M. SELIGSON: [01:39:30] This Ernesto designed the church to make it look like a New England little church.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:39:36] He was an architect.

M. SELIGSON: [01:39:37] And donated the land.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:39:38] Is this the Franciscan priest that spoke about birth control, Ernesto? Is that his name?

M. SELIGSON: [01:39:42] No, Ernesto was the rich guy whose son went to West Point.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:39:46] Oh, oh.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:39:47] This is a town that had two little pulperias, grocery stores, and a store that had dry goods and like stoves and fabrics internationally. But this little town with only a couple of places to buy anything had a movie theater, because Ernesto wanted a movie theater in his town. And every weekend on Fridays and Saturday nights they showed films.

M. SELIGSON: [01:40:10] He always said he wanted to provide some healthy entertainment. So instead of the people drinking at the bar, he wanted on Friday and Saturday to go to a movie?

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:40:21] Yeah.

M. SELIGSON: [01:40:21] And years later, because in our second year, when we either a parent came back or a parent. We took, our parents subsidized us with film for slides and we took pictures and we'd sent it to them.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:40:38] But they would develop them in the U.S.

M. SELIGSON: [01:40:40] Then we brought them back and had a slide show for the entire town in the movie theater. He charged 50 percent, a nominal fee, for the community support, for the poor kids.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:40:51] And then we'd put up a poster saying see yourselves in real life. See yourselves in the movie. And so we did a slideshow on the movie screen in this movie theater. And they enjoyed that. And oh yes, for the fundraiser, we sold popcorn for the first time. No one had ever eaten popcorn. They got popping corn. And this woman, Lolita, in her kitchen, popped the corn, and we sold it also for a nominal fee. And people loved that. No one was eating popcorn in San Jose movie theaters back then in '68. It was not known then.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:41:27] Boy, you accomplished so much. I'm jealous.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:41:31] I learned how to make pizza. There was no Pizza Hut yet in Costa Rica, you could not buy a pizza. So I taught her how to make pizza from scratch from my Fannie Farmer cookbook. And she remembered, that she knows how to make pizza, you know, with the natural ingredients available in the town, you know. This is so laughable. Because everyone knows what pizza is now.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:41:53] I don't know if you want to comment on this, because I sort of wanted to get on tape what you kind of told me before we started and all. But there's another question. Did you think you helped promote better understanding of Americans?

M. SELIGSON: [01:42:08] The ugly American thing was, there are people who, you know, maintain ties there for years. People remember us as whether you and I were considered to be imperialists or spies or people who were doing damage. But we ended up being scholars and wrote scholarly works on the country.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:42:30] And this is, which leads to the question we've talked about some but if you have any other thoughts about this. What was the effect of you on of your Peace Corps service? How did it change you? I mean, you've talked about this before we started the tape and sometime during the taping, you mentioned your careers. Do you want to say anything else about how the Peace Corps experience?

M. SELIGSON: [01:42:52] I mean, my first books were on political participation.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:42:56] How many books have you written? I don't know. I really don't.

M. SELIGSON: [01:43:01] On my CV I have 140 articles and something like 20 books.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:43:06] That you've written, 20 books?

M. SELIGSON: [01:43:08] Or edited.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:43:09] *Caramba!*

M. SELIGSON: [01:43:12] Perhaps more than that. But the focus of that work in those early days when we came back for the dissertation, I got to connect up with an American from Texas. It was to look at the view of Latin America from the point of view of the United States was the problem is these people don't do anything. They said that, you know, a Mexican sitting under the cactus with a sombrero, sitting on his ass, doing nothing.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:43:34] Uh huh. Right.

M. SELIGSON: [01:43:35] In fact, we saw people so intensely engaged in community development that only I flipped around the whole academic that these people are deeply engaged in it. They have no problem figuring out how to do things. If they don't get things done, as in many countries, there are militaries that would perhaps murder them watching at that time or Latin America, Costa Rica was in the grip of military rule. And so I, my perspective academically, was entirely turned around. It was to go out and do the first studies. I later ended up doing surveys. I'm now the head of the Latin American Public Opinion Project. In 2008, we interviewed 34,000 people in 22 countries throughout the Americas. And all of that generates from that work. USAID and UNDP and the Inter-American Development Bank all support the work I'm doing. That came from perspective that poor people had something to say. They knew how to do these things. And if they weren't getting them done, it was because there were obstacles to them, rather than the fact that there was something wrong with them.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:44:38] Yeah, well. My experience in Costa Rica gave me the idea for my dissertation and not only that, the publications that come out of this, but I've always included my knowledge of Costa Rica in all of my classes I teach. I bring up examples. I bring up the, I can't name him. I play some of the tapes of his life story because after the Peace Corps and then slipped back there for subsequently, he related in a systematic way his life story to us in our tape recorder. So we now have a 250 page manuscript of his life, and I've played bits of that to my classes at a certain point and I bring him alive.

M. SELIGSON: [01:45:30] He's called El Hombre de Agua Buena, the title, you know.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:45:32] And Agua Buena and the people in it and what we learned about those Costa Rican culture, I constantly bring up in all my classes. And also, it's enabled me to meet any Latin

Americans and feel comfortable meeting them. I mean, I can be introduced to the Latin America from any country and still perfectly ease and converse and know how to behave appropriately. Because I learned empirically the figured out is proper and proper behavior. You know, what to say, what not to say.

M. SELIGSON: [01:46:06] Let me add one thing. Some years later now and now we're talking about the early 1980s. We're back in Costa Rica now on a USAID project. We have a reception in our home. We know Costa Rican ministers and people in all walks of life, and we invite them to a cocktail party in our house with the people from the American embassy. I had no contacts for these people at all. They lived their enclave existence, they didn't have direct contact with. And they're seeing and we're sitting there sort of these are Costa Ricans, our friends, and these are Americans from the Embassy and AID. We got them together for the first time in their social environment. So, yeah, we were able to cross over. We were able to cross. We were able to become bicultural and move from one culture to another and see life from the way they saw it. First message I received on 9/11 was from a Costa Rican friend of mine. He said, oh my God, what a terrible thing happened to you guys. The first message I received, an email.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:47:07] I think you got me choked up. Sorry. It's Mitch, his fault, I got choked up. All right, well, I get choked up easily. It's a great story. How many times have you gone back to Costa Rica or is it too numerous?

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:47:31] Yeah, I mean, we went back with our child, you know, he was like, that's what I remember. We went back to school with an 18 month old, then we went back and she was in kindergarten in Costa Rica for a few months. Then we went back and she was in the fourth grade or fifth grade.

M. SELIGSON: [01:47:48] Fast forwarding a bit, then she went down and started, you know, she volunteered and she lived with the Costa Rican family.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:47:55] Was she a Peace Corps volunteer?

M. SELIGSON: [01:47:56] No, she was not.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:47:57] In college she had a semester at Costa Rica studying and living with a Costa Rican family. She did work on the survey, during the volunteer's survey for research.

M. SELIGSON: [01:48:11] And she lived in Chile by volunteering at an orphanage for a year. And now she works as an epidemiologist in public health dealing with children at risk. Many of them are minority kids in New York City.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:48:28] So it affected the whole family.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:48:32] Oh yes, she became very much a Latin American. I mean, her dissertation, she got a PhD in political sciences. She spent two years in Argentina doing her fieldwork. So, yeah, the Costa Rican experiences that she had as a child gave her the impetus to work on Latin America later on in academic work. Yeah, the whole family became a Latin American family.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:48:55] Yeah. Okay. I think. Anything you want to add?

M. SELIGSON: [01:48:59] You left the Peace Corps, the leaving was that you left, in those days, the only way you could get there was a bus that went from your and you'd get the bus.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:49:10] Ten, 11, 12 hour bus ride.

M. SELIGSON: [01:49:12] The bus left at six in the morning. We left in the middle of this temporal, crossing on a log that was across that stream.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:49:18] A log?

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:49:19] Yeah, there was no bridge.

M. SELIGSON: [01:49:21] And it was pouring and the village had come down and we were in the pouring rain.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:49:27] Balancing yourself on the log.

M. SELIGSON: [01:49:28] And they're getting us across.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:49:29] And so a couple of people from the town that were good friends came with us and carried our suitcases for us on the log and helped us, held their hands as we crossed the log.

M. SELIGSON: [01:49:41] Probably, probably the Peace Corps, which is a fully funded and small agency in the U.S. Government, probably there are an enormous amount that could be done to extract all the experiences and to turn them into greater benefit. That is, we're all, this is the first time we're getting together as a group. That was one small meeting a few years ago in New York. It was 40 years later. Now a lot of us are doing things that are one way or another related to those experiences, and yet there's no systematic effort to try to capitalize on that. Costa Rica is a country with whom the United States has great relations, but I can imagine a lot of places. Bolivia and the United States for having real problems now. There are thousands of returned volunteers from Bolivia, who probably had a really great time. I could, you know, people could use that. So there was no follow up. We left the Peace Corps and we never heard from them again.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:50:33] Never heard from whom again?

M. SELIGSON: [01:50:34] Peace Corps as an organization. Once in a while they trace us. They finally got us and we put these things as a Peace Corps thing.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:50:42] Well, now and then every year, when the Peace Corps comes to recruit volunteers, they asked for people who have been in the Peace Corps in the past to come and participate in some way, but they found us.

M. SELIGSON: [01:50:56] But it's pretty unsystematic.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:50:57] Well in Peace Corps there's someone independently tries to find ex PCVs, and made a circle of former Peace Corps volunteers. But that was his own doing and had nothing to do with Washington.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:51:09] Are you part of the National Peace Corps Association?

M. SELIGSON: [01:51:12] No.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:51:13] No.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:51:13] And because they do exist. Or have you heard of them?

M. SELIGSON: [01:51:17] Here and there. And I guess I mean, in our particular case, since our lives are really as Latin American, as I became a director of a Latin American center, you know, this is what I do for a living. So I'm engaged in the thing as an individual. That's my profession. So I don't feel it's time to sort of try to seek that out as a way of, you know, if I were a businessman selling cars, I might to do that on the side. That's my mainstream as well.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:51:48] OK, anything else? Do you want to add anything?

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:51:55] Um, not really. The Peace Corps has irrevocably changed our lives. If I hadn't been in the Peace Corps, a lot of what I am today would not be there. I mean, I wouldn't be the same person, you know. I hope that what I taught my students is help them to act better when they go to Latin America as a U.S. representative.

M. SELIGSON: [01:52:23] Profound respect for the all the people of other cultures that we could have never gotten any other way. Understanding that there are actually other people out there who were just as smart as you. This Francisco Mejia, third grade education is all he ever had. Smart as they could be, as articulate as anyone can be. Wow, you know.

S. BERK-SELIGSON: [01:52:41] This is what we learned. Just because you don't have formal education and you're poor doesn't mean that you're not smart. And I think we wouldn't have understood that if not for Peace Corps.

M. SELIGSON: [01:52:54] A lot of the views, Americans, you know, American government in the United States, we really get and somehow we, you know, that ain't so, that ain't so. And it's that kind of hubris is something that's gotten us into a lot of trouble in the contemporary period.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [01:53:12] Yeah. I have to say this is the only interview I've done where I've gotten so choked up. OK, thank you.

M. SELIGSON: [01:53:21] Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]