

Irving Penso Oral History Interview
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Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Irving Penso served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Brazil from 1968 to 1971 on a community development project.

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Oral History Interview

with

Irving Penso

February 3, 2007

Atlanta, Georgia

By Amalia Stephens

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

STEPHENS: [00:00:02] Today is February 3rd, 2007. This is Amalia Stephens and I am interviewing Irving Penso, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in Brazil in community development from September 1968 to January of 1971. Irving, I was wondering if we could start by letting, by having you describe, you know, something about your life now.

PENSO: [00:00:32] Well, currently I'm an ESL teacher. I've also been the administrator at our school. I've been with the ELS Language Centers for over 30 years and in various capacities, center director, academic director, and instructional specialist. And then before that, teacher.

STEPHENS: [00:00:54] And where do you live?

PENSO: [00:00:55] I live in southeast Atlanta. And I was born in Atlanta.

STEPHENS: [00:01:00] And could you think back a little bit to the year before you joined Peace Corps and talk about your life then.

PENSO: [00:01:05] I was a senior in college, I graduated in August of 1968. Had applied to the Peace Corps earlier that spring and was faced with the decision because I really wanted to go into the Peace Corps. But also there was a time when the Army Reserve an opening there became possible and I didn't necessarily want to join the Army Reserve, but a lot of people are using that as their protection against going to Vietnam.

STEPHENS: [00:01:42] So did joining the Peace Corps have anything to do with Vietnam?

PENSO: [00:01:48] No, no, not at all. I mean, I've always been, I consider myself to be pretty much of an idealist in many ways and try to be altruistic and thought that, you know, saving the world would be something I could do. Of course, I know that wasn't what I went to the Peace Corps for, but certainly going to help others was one of my motivations.

STEPHENS: [00:02:10] And how did you hear about Peace Corps?

PENSO: [00:02:14] Well, being a child of the sixties, born in 1946, and having spent my teenage years with the Kennedy mystique, the Peace Corps became part of what was then this country's desire to move forward in the world. And I looked at that as a possibility, and it's when it started in the early sixties. By the time I graduated and considered it, I realized that it was something that was worthwhile, and I just it was in my consciousness, so I knew it was something that I'd like to do.

STEPHENS: [00:02:51] Did you have a specific country or project in mind, something you wanted to do?

PENSO: [00:02:54] Well, being the son of and being a Sephardic Jew, I grew up listening to and in many ways speaking certain words, not very fluently in the ancient language of Ladino. And so Spanish was something that I've always been attuned to. And even though it wasn't your classical Spanish, it still was something that was in my blood and my culture. And

so I felt very close to that and I wanted to go to a country where I could possibly use Spanish. So I applied to South America Central or South America.

STEPHENS: [00:03:33] And do you remember anything about the application process, how long it took, what you needed to do?

PENSO: [00:03:39] I will say this, it did take some time and then we needed some letters of support references. You know, you had to write a very long essay, as I recall about why you wanted to join the Peace Corps and so on and so forth. And the day, the timing couldn't have been better really for me because a lot of my friends were joining, like I said, the National Guard was really big then, Army Reserve. I mean, and I had to make a decision because I hadn't heard from the Peace Corps and the day before I was supposed to go to make this final decision about whether to go to the Army Reserve. I got a letter from the Peace Corps that said, you know, welcome, you know, we're glad to have you come to the Peace Corps. And the letter was signed by someone who like the director at that time but from the Brazil Peace Corps organization, and they signed it *ciao*, which I thought was very odd because I always thought that was an Italian word, but it turns out they do use it in Portuguese as well.

STEPHENS: [00:04:46] And what did your family think, and your friends?

PENSO: [00:04:48] They were very happy. Of course, I had been living with my family during my college years, so we were very close, and even if I hadn't been living with them, I know we would, we still would have been close. I think they were they were happy for me. They were, of course, like any parent. Any parents would be a little bit fearful of the unknown, but they were supportive.

STEPHENS: [00:05:11] And your friends?

PENSO: [00:05:12] Oh, yes, they were. In fact, they gave me a surprise going away party before I went to a Peace Corps training in Brattleboro, Vermont.

STEPHENS: [00:05:20] And what project were you invited to join?

PENSO: [00:05:23] I was in the project that was sort of the counterpart to the 4-H clubs here. It was called Quatro Esse, which stands for 4-S. And we were supposed to go into a community. Like I said, I was in community development, and work with the children of the town, establish these clubs called *clubes agrícolas*, which was basically the translation is agricultural clubs, and start different projects, such as raising rabbits to kill and sell. Also, my partner was involved with the teaching of knitting skills, and it was actually trying to get people in the community to share their knowledge of these things so that once we left, there would be a sustainable project. And the idea was to make money from these clubs to give to the school that was there in the town.

STEPHENS: [00:06:17] And so how did you? Can you talk a little bit about your training? Where you had it? Who were who were your trainers, what you studied, how they prepared you for a project like that? What did you do with language training?

PENSO: [00:06:32] Right. In September of '68, I flew from Atlanta to New York from New York to Keene, New Hampshire, and from there took a bus with some other people who had joined the Peace Corps to Brattleboro, Vermont, to the school for international training. And stayed there for 10 weeks. While there, we studied Portuguese every day. It was total immersion almost all the time. And then we also study things that were very foreign to me, literally, figuratively as well, like raising rabbits, planting things. Agricultural endeavors, but also community organizing. How to go about doing those things. And a lot most of us were BAs, people who had graduated from college and something other than what we were going to be doing. So it was a real challenge to try to learn more about.

STEPHENS: [00:07:33] You didn't have a college background in biology?

PENSO: [00:07:34] Oh, no, no, nothing like that. So you felt like a fish out of water. But I guess the idea was to teach the basics of what you need to

do to get there, get things going. Because you weren't touting ourselves as experts. We were just there to organize and tap into the local resources from which we could start these clubs and get community involvement and then hopefully getting something get something that would continue after we left.

STEPHENS: [00:08:07] And do you remember anything about your group, how many of you were there?

PENSO: [00:08:11] No, for some reason, I feel like there were probably 35 to 40 people from very varied backgrounds. Many, well, I would say many, but several married couples who many of whom divorced either during the Peace Corps or after. People who, we had some Yale graduates, Harvard graduates, people were never graduated necessarily from any well-known school. I went to Georgia State, it was at that time Georgia State College. And people who were working class, some people who were obviously upper middle class or upper class. And so it was a mixed group of people. One man in particular, whose name was, he went by the name of Trig, he was the philosopher of the group, and people would gather in our bunkhouse and sort of exchange things about Kierkegaard and, you know, philosophy. As I recall, he wasn't chosen to go to the Peace Corps because I don't think that was, I think he realized after he got there that it wasn't his bag. But anyway, we were a mixed group.

STEPHENS: [00:09:16] So you can you explain that you hadn't been accepted before you started returning training?

PENSO: [00:09:21] No. When we went to training, we had a period of 10 weeks in which to be evaluated based on our language skills, our psychological development, how mature we were, our mental health, so to speak. You know, whether or not we'd be able to deal with this change going to another country and we had two or three different periods there to meet with a psychiatrist psychologist who would ask you questions and just see if you were mentally stable, I guess. And then they also gave us the Foreign Student Institute exam. We had to do that two or three, maybe four times to just test out our language skills. And so all of those things considered and you'd always hear rumors about, well, so-and-so is

dropping out or so and stuff, having problems, or that person didn't get didn't make the first cut or the second cut. So, so anyway, as it turns out, I would say that out of those people, maybe 25 made it.

STEPHENS: [00:10:25] Oh, really?

PENSO: [00:10:25] And maybe more. You know, I can't recall that. And our trainers, by the way, you asked about trainers. Our trainers were some Americans who had lived in Brazil and many Brazilians who were there just to teach Portuguese and nothing else because they were not into the agricultural aspects.

STEPHENS: [00:10:45] Were there any surprises or disappointments or anything that you particularly enjoyed about the training?

PENSO: [00:10:53] I enjoyed the training a lot. I think I grew up a lot there. It was hard for me to be away from home for so long. I was so tied in to being just, you know, homebody by living at home all that time. And I had been away from home before, but not for that extended period of time. And of course, the prospect of going away for two years on top of everything else was not one that was very easy to really accept, especially when you're going to another country and the culture. And they told us about certain diseases. You could get Chagas disease and get the schistosomiasis and rabies because there might be rabid dogs. I mean, it was really a scare tactic. And also, it was a way to just tell people to be careful what you do. So, um, I mean, all of it was great. When I think back about it, plus being in Vermont, it was beautiful. We had snow. There was a great camaraderie among most of the staff. You know, romances would blossom and fall apart. I never was part of any of that, unfortunately. But still you did, you got to know people pretty well, and I think it was fun.

STEPHENS: [00:12:01] And that in hindsight, do you feel like the training prepared you or was it useful to your Peace Corps service?

PENSO: [00:12:07] As far as language goes, it helped me get a foundation, but once you get there is you realize that you've got a long way to go, no

matter how proficient you may be in a language, it's not the same when you see someone face to face or you can telephone or, you know, somebody asks for information and people don't know what you're saying because your accent is a little bit thick. But I think that's where flexibility comes in because over time and I think when I got there, I was pretty good. My FSI score was pretty high, actually. But I think getting there deal with people every day really made the biggest difference. And so, yeah, it was it was really great.

STEPHENS: [00:12:48] Okay. Well, let's move into your what happened when you first arrived in Brazil? Maybe you can talk a little bit about just your initial reaction to the country and to your job, describing your living situation, maybe your project. Think about when you first arrived.

PENSO: [00:13:10] We arrived in Rio and it was extremely, extremely humid. And the thing that probably.

STEPHENS: [00:13:17] And this is in what time?

PENSO: [00:13:17] '68, December of '68. So it was summertime since they only have two seasons, basically, and we were this is the beginning of summer and it was very hot. And not only that there was there were men with military, with the machine guns everywhere because they were expecting a coup to take place. And there were always these rumors. At one point I was sort of saying, maybe they'll send us back home because, you know, you don't know what to think when you see. I mean, I've never seen people carrying, they call them *metralhadoras*, which are basically just machine guns, you know, outside the airport, outside of banks. But we stayed in what was called the Peace Corps hotel. My first night there, I just remember one guy named Walter, he was the one who graduated from Harvard and I kept wondering, what is this guy doing here? But he was terribly allergic. He was sneezing all night keeping the entire hotel awake because it echoed off the walls because the hotel had sort of like this the centerpiece that where all four walls are baseless. This was a shaft and people would throw trash through the shaft out the windows and stuff. Anyway, he would sneeze, and it really kept us all awake. The next day, we went to the beach, Copacabana, and I even

took a picture like a stupid American tourist of this woman in a bikini. I sort of snuck up behind her and I thought, well, I'll send my friends this picture. I mean, it was really, I just, you know, being a stupid tourist.

PENSO: [00:14:52] But then we went to the ambassador's house for dinner and you realize what a huge difference there is between the haves and the have nots. Rio was much simpler than as that can be said about a city is so beautiful. And there was a lot of poverty that you noticed. After we stayed there, we went to the embassy to be oriented and to what we're going to be facing once again, rabid dogs, boiling your water, you know, peel your tomatoes, which we never did. It was just cautionary and then they talked about our goals and so on and so forth. And then finally, we took buses to our different towns, which was very scary and sad at the same time. We'd been together for almost three months. And so we all went our separate ways. We found out who our partners were going to be. And some people were happy. Some people were not. Of course, the married couples stayed together as partners. And we end up going to Minas Gerais, my partner Mary MacGregor and I.

STEPHENS: [00:15:57] Now let me just ask you, did every volunteer have a friend?

PENSO: [00:16:02] I'm trying to think I think there was one person who didn't. Some people went to Sao Paulo state for rural electrification programs, and then they had others who went to Rio state. I think there might have been two people who were by themselves. Yes, there was one woman, older woman named Louise, who was probably when she joined the Peace Corps in her 50s, and I think she was by herself.

STEPHENS: [00:16:25] And were there already volunteers in Brazil?

PENSO: [00:16:28] There were, in fact, Brazil was the largest of all the Peace Corps programs. And as such, there were a lot of volunteers throughout the entire country. And whereas Argentina would refuse to accept the Peace Corps workers, many of the other countries in South America did. And I was placed in a town called Santo Antonio do Amparo and my Peace Corps partner was a guy named Michael, who was from Chicago. He had been there for three years, and everybody loved the guy. I mean,

you could just tell. They had done, it seemed like everything he could to bring things to the town. He was, in fact, he was that his *noiva*, his girlfriend and fiancée, was a woman from the town. She was very beautiful and sweet. And, you know, he was just a great host who showed me all around. And one of my most memorable recollections is walking through the town and people just greeting him and wondering if I'd ever have that kind of reaction.

STEPHENS: [00:17:37] Was he on his way out?

PENSO: [00:17:40] No, he was going to stay for another year, I believe. In fact, I think he had extended because of his relationship with this woman, Aparacita. And a woman, a very poor woman living in a mud hut, invited us in. She was sweeping her mud floor, dirt floor. And it was just so moving to me, the kindness of the people there that, she offered a banana or something like that, it was all she could offer. But it was just so, so sincere. It wasn't just to impress anybody. I think that's what really, really made me realize that we live in such a world of privilege materially but spiritually, not in a religious sense. But in other ways. We really don't know. A lot of us don't know how to stay in touch with what's real. We look at things around us and say, well, it's a banana. But in that woman's house, it was a way to offer kindness and hospitality, which I'm not saying doesn't happen here, but I don't think I think we take those things for granted. Anyway, it was a great experience being there. Then after that, we went back to Belo Horizonte. I had a Brazilian family that has given to me before I was assigned.

STEPHENS: [00:18:57] What town was it, where you were?

PENSO: [00:18:58] Santo Antonio do Amparo, after we had gotten to Belo Horizonte, which is the capital city of Minas Gerais. And then we had a Brazilian family to stay with for two or three days. Then we got sent to our regular, our sort of visitation sites.

STEPHENS: [00:19:12] But not where you were going to be?

PENSO: [00:19:13] Not where I was going to be.

STEPHENS: [00:19:14] Oh so that's where you were.

PENSO: [00:19:15] That's where I was getting training. And then we went back to celebrate Christmas and then the holidays. And then after that, we went to our towns and we were put in a jeep with the guy who taught us Portuguese, Edson, one of the guys, great guys. And they dropped us off at the time. Met the mayor who was this man, probably in his mid-80s, who was a member of a very powerful family in the small town Lagoa Dourada, which means golden lagoon. And his name was, I forget his first name. His last name Hesenge, with an R, initiating that word. And he was, he had no clue as to why we were there. Everything was supposed to have been settled. Okay, they're coming and you know, you're going to help them. Well, it was like pulling teeth after the guys who dropped us off left. Our center director left and then the state director left. And it was it was pretty difficult.

STEPHENS: [00:20:13] So there hadn't been volunteers in the town before?

PENSO: [00:20:16] First time and the rumor.

STEPHENS: [00:20:17] And there were two of you?

PENSO: [00:20:19] My partner Mary and I. And the rumor had it that Los Americanos were there to exploit the gold because many years ago they had discovered gold, which is why they called it Golden Lagoon. And they thought, you know, well, these people are here, they must know something. They're Americans, right? Well, that persisted for the first few months that we were there and it was very, very hard to break through that because they looked at, they even asked things like, people would say, well, what's Jackie Kennedy like? Did you know Jack Kennedy? Because they'd get LOOK magazine and Life magazine and they'd always think that everybody knew all the wealthy people. They thought we were wealthy and compared to some of them, we really were.

STEPHENS: [00:21:08] Okay, so maybe you could talk now a little bit about the specifics of your job, what you had to do and where you lived, what a typical day was like.

PENSO: [00:21:24] OK. Well, there was the town of Lagoa Dourada has about 3,000 people, had about 3,000 people at that time. And just the two streets crossing each other. The main street was the road between BR3, Brazil inter-state road three, which led to Rio and another road that led to Rio de, sorry. One led to Sao Paulo, one that led to Rio.

STEPHENS: [00:21:58] How far were you from the big cities?

PENSO: [00:22:00] About three hours. And so there were these little towns that dotted the road, some larger than others. And this was sort of like a crossroad and also a bus stop. And so at the bus stop, there was a fairly large bakery and then put pool tables and so on. And the guy, you know, people get off the bus and have coffee or, you know, this delicious cheese bread, you know, because it was a bakery. And then behind the bakery was the Hotel Gloria. And so that's where my Peace Corps partner and I stayed. I stayed in the hotel itself, which was a collection of maybe six rooms with a shower stall in the back and also a seatless toilet, which, you know, was the way things were. And then the bakery itself was right outside my window. So every morning about 4:30 or five o'clock, the siren would come on to tell the workers who had to walk to the field. It's time to get up. And also, it was a way for the guy who was the main baker to get up. And it was, you got used to it after a while, but this really scared me the first few weeks. But anyway, so I stayed at the hotel and Mary stayed with the family. His name was Paulo de Lebono, which is Paulo from Lebanon, and he was of Lebanese descent. He and his brother Aloy and Geraldo sort of ran the hotel and the bakery and his wife, I can't remember her name now, Simone. They had some kids and Mary stayed in a room in their house.

PENSO: [00:23:34] So a typical day, well I got to say for the first month or two, even though we knew intellectually what we were supposed to be doing, we sort of wanted people someone to say, okay, well, what are we going to get this thing going? And we've got an office and we started talking

about how to organize the children. My partner from day one wanted to go home. She was just terribly homesick, didn't want to stay. She had left her boyfriend back in California. She'd never met a Southerner before and sort of had these very terrible stereotypical views of what we all was like. And then a Southern Jew, on top of that. She had been raised Christian Scientist, and I don't think she'd had a lot of contacts, she'd been pretty sheltered. By the way, since, over the last few years, we reconnected and become close. So sort of interesting.

STEPHENS: [00:24:31] Did she? She ended up staying?

PENSO: [00:24:33] She ended up staying because I convinced her that this would be the best thing. And she never forgot that. Until this day, the two things that I've done, she says to help her, one was to convince her to stay there. Because she ended up staying three years. She extended for a year. And then also when she had the chance to go back many years later with her husband. She got a Ph.D. in anthropology and her husband was a professor, or was, at Caltech, I think it's Caltech. Anyway he's Latino. He's Hispanic American, Latin American, what do you call it? Chicano, I guess, he said. Anyway, of Mexican descent. She wanted to go back, she was sort of afraid. She'd maintained contact with the people there. And I said, you got to go back, you got to go back. But she said it was one of the greatest things of her life to go back there. And once again, I don't know what I did, but I'm not taking credit for it. But she, I mean, from someone who didn't want to stay after the first day. Took me six months to convince her not to leave because she just was. She was just miserable.

PENSO: [00:25:37] But we tried to, I think the first few months was acclimating ourselves not just to the town and what our objectives were, but each other, how we could work together. You know, what was I going to do teaching people who already knew how to build the bamboo fence, which I've never done in my life, to build a bamboo fence. Or start a garden, you know, and I think we felt like fish out of water because at beginning.

STEPHENS: [00:26:02] There was no organization in the town for you to hook up with?

PENSO: [00:26:04] We were supposed to be working with certain people who had been identified as our contacts and they knew why we were there. But getting the word out and getting people to trust us took some time. And, you know, for a while, all we did was go to the office open. We had these kinds of doors, security doors that rolled down from the top. And you know, they make this terrible sound, that sort of corrugated aluminum. And that's very typical in Brazil. And we'd open the door. Go there, sit there, try to figure out what you're going to do. Close the door or go to lunch. My lunch is an hour, an hour and a half. Go back, you know, try to keep office hours, stay there.

PENSO: [00:26:50] We'd have some kids come by and we'd talk to them, and it was great way to practice the Portuguese. But then little by little, we started getting it together more. I mean, we were working, but we just needed more direction and more response from the people we were supposed to be working with in the town. That's my recollection. Mary might have another one, but I think they'd be pretty similar. So that was it. And lunch was a big deal because it lasted, like I said, about an hour and a half. I mean, that was when we were staying at the hotel. We were on a very fixed income and the owner of the hotel was just really trying to rip us off. He just thought we were just wealthy Americans. And so he was charging too much money and we decided, well, we just can't do this all the time. So I think we just cut it, we cut it back the number. She was staying with the family. I think her meals were included in her rent, whereas I just sort of did my thing and ate there for a while. But it was really just tons of food. You know, she felt guilty eating because there were people begging for food in this town. So we were able to make contact with people who were helpful, but it just took some time.

STEPHENS: [00:28:04] And then once you contacted them, what did you end up doing in terms of how you got the project moving that first year?

PENSO: [00:28:16] Mary had gotten in contact with people, um, through the priest at the church who might be helpful and we found women. She found

women around the town who'd be willing to teach young girls how to crochet and knit, and also the other projects that could be seen as money making. And we did have meetings with people in the community to try to tell them what we were there for so they wouldn't think we were there for gold. And we did meet people who I think bought into the idea of, well, this would be good for the town.

STEPHENS: [00:28:51] What would the town have any community development? What were the people doing?

STEPHENS: [00:28:55] Well, mainly I would say agricultural. There were people who raised cattle. There were people who had cachaça stills. Cachaça is the local firewater made of sugarcane. Very, very strong. And so they had various stills around. There were there were some ranchers who were fairly wealthy as far as land goes. And they had the orange groves and they would, you know, grow corn and let's see, what else was there. There was like a factory, a milk producing factory there, and they made cheese as well. But it was a small town and had three churches. There was only one priest and he sort of, I don't know, he was questionable. But we were supposed to be working with him, but I think we were working at cross-purposes. I think he had sort of a very jaded view of why we were there. So it was sort of hard to break through with him. But, you know, I think the town itself was nowhere for a lot of people. A lot of the young people left to go to Sao Paulo for the job opportunities they were there. Then there were a lot of people who were just there doing nothing. There was no high school. The high school people had to travel 40 kilometers to go to. There was an elementary school. And that's the place we worked with to try to bolster what they could do, to get more books, to get more supplies. So to help the town, help the kids in the town.

PENSO: [00:30:36] But one of the greatest projects that we really undertook was the school to school program, which was great. And basically, there was a man named Salas Oswaldo, short man with the most beautiful blue eyes. And he looked he looked like a little, um, not an elf, but he had this sort of impish look about him, and he's just the nicest person. He would walk from his town just several kilometers away. And he had heard

about us and we made contact with him. We met with him and he basically said, you know, we need a school and we live in an area that was that where they were? That wasn't even a village, it was sort of like a, I don't know what you would call it. It was smaller than the village. It was just pockets of people who were working in the field, had their own farms, but needed a place for their kids to go to school. And so they were meeting, his wife was a teacher and they were meeting, I believe, at someone's house. But they really wanted to go to school suite. We made contact with the school to school program, which at that time would set up. And you've probably heard about this too. American schools would collect money.

STEPHENS: [00:31:48] You were talking about the school to school program, and I was wondering if it was a Peace Corps program or what?

PENSO: [00:31:52] I don't recall the Peace Corps actually being involved. They may have been, I don't recall the accreditation and I honestly, I think it's it was something that probably we got information on from the Peace Corps, but we had to do the writing of the proposal. And eventually the money came in and we built a two-room schoolhouse. Osvaldo oversaw the entire thing. We kept records of what we did for the books and we had an opening. It was just incredible. I mean, that to me.

STEPHENS: [00:32:25] Did this happen in your first year?

PENSO: [00:32:27] Second year.

STEPHENS: [00:32:29] So in your first year, let's go back to that for just a minute. In your first year, did you ever do any of the raising rabbits or?

PENSO: [00:32:37] Oh yeah. Oh, that was always fun, because the raising rabbits back in Brattleboro involved killing the rabbits. I always managed to avoid that. You would get a stick or something hard and pound them on the head. And then, of course, and skin them because this rabbit pelt, which you would have to dry and then sell would be part of what you would use to make money, plus the meat itself. You would get and you have to, you know, gut it and save parts of it. Of course, it tastes like

chicken like as does everything. And so I just would refuse to do it. I'd always just sort of stand in the back.

STEPHENS: [00:33:22] You did that at training?

PENSO: [00:33:23] At training. So raising the rabbits. I raised the rabbits and they had little rabbits, but we didn't do anything with the rabbits. And the idea was that the kids were supposed to take care them, in Brazil. The kids were supposed to then raise the rabbits, kill them, get the skin, sell them, all that stuff. So really, the rabbit.

STEPHENS: [00:33:42] Did that happen?

PENSO: [00:33:43] It didn't happen. I just raised the rabbits.

STEPHENS: [00:33:46] So that was not a project that took off.

PENSO: [00:33:48] It did not take off and but getting the garden going was and we grew cabbage and some other grains, which we collected and sent to market and make some money off of. I got some men in the community.

STEPHENS: [00:34:03] Who were the gardeners, was it women, children?

PENSO: [00:34:05] No, just it was the boys and in the beginning, a lot of kids were there. Then little by little, they sort of drifted away no matter how enthusiastic we were about trying to get them to do it. You know, it's basically, they know how to grow a garden, you know? So but this was, of course, we got all the supplies given to us. So it wasn't like they had to pay any money to join the club. But there were a few of them who stuck around. But, you know, a lot of our days was spent, I think, finding out who we were. I really feel like the Peace Corps experience I had, and I know you haven't asked about that, but I think a lot of it was self-discovery that we really discovered a lot about ourselves. And so each day we became closer to the town and did whatever we could to make the projects work. But if they didn't work, we just went to sleep, got up the next day and started all over again. But I think as we were doing that, we were growing individually. We were maturing a lot. It was a much

different urban after it, first to the first two months from the first night when I got into my room in the hotel. Had no screen up in the window, it was very hot, had the windows wide open. And but when first got there, after saying goodbye to the people who dropped us off, closed the door and I cried my eyes out because I'm thinking, what am I going to do? You know, I mean, it was that sense of loneliness, and that night I had the windows open, as I said, and all of a sudden I was swarmed with mosquitoes, tons and tons of mosquitoes, and I learned that very hard. I wore my flannel pajamas because those were the only ones I had. Closed the window. I learned how to deal with mosquitoes and fleas within the first few weeks. Got a screen put in and that made life a little bit easier.

STEPHENS: [00:36:04] You didn't sleep under a mosquito net?

PENSO: [00:36:05] No, no.

STEPHENS: [00:36:09] Did you have to take the anti-malarials?

PENSO: [00:36:12] We did we had that series of shots, a lot of it, which, you know, that we had series of shots, when we were in Brattleboro for different diseases. Probably one of them was malaria.

STEPHENS: [00:36:26] So you didn't take the anti-malarials?

PENSO: [00:36:28] No, not doing that.

STEPHENS: [00:36:29] Because malaria wasn't prevalent?

PENSO: [00:36:30] No, it wasn't. Now, in more tropical areas, I'm sure it was.

STEPHENS: [00:36:36] So basically, you're saying that new job really evolved?

PENSO: [00:36:41] Definitely. Yeah, I mean, because at the beginning it looks great on paper, then you know, the reality is something different.

STEPHENS: [00:36:48] You told us about a few of the people you met, like the man from the village. Well, first of all, how did your language, I mean, was that?

PENSO: [00:36:58] Oh my, my Portuguese, in all honesty my Portuguese is really good. I could talk to anybody.

STEPHENS: [00:37:03] Did you feel that as your Portuguese got better, it was easier to do more with this project?

PENSO: [00:37:08] Yeah, I think so.

STEPHENS: [00:37:10] You were talking about Portuguese.

PENSO: [00:37:14] Yes, I believe that I was able to, as my Portuguese got better, people trusted me more, I feel, because I was hanging out more with the guys and we would play soccer. I mean, I didn't know how to play soccer, but you know, I would go watch them play soccer and attempt to kick the ball. But you could pick up on things related to the culture. And you know what, what certain things were happening. And it sort of made me more attuned to where people were coming from and sort of told me what I could and could not really do. Before though, I was just, you know, green and wet behind the ears as far as Portuguese, even though I could get by pretty well. It just got better and better and Maria's did too, uh, Mary's did. They called her Maria.

STEPHENS: [00:38:04] Um, you were saying that you went to some of the soccer games. Were there any other know, basically leisure activities that you did in your free time?

PENSO: [00:38:12] Yeah, the weekend was always, there was always a dance at the club, which was basically a large room above a restaurant, and they play Brazilian bubblegum music based on American bubblegum music like Yummy, Yummy, Yummy, I got love in my tummy. And Oh Happy Day, that was a biggie. And Clarence Clearwater, they like to dance to that in English and, you know, people would go out drinking. People would just hang out, I mean, Carnival, Carnival was a big time. And then

there was an amazing amount of religiosity in the city. I mean, Brazil is 90 percent Catholic, but only like 15 percent, maybe fewer than that, less of a percentage go to church. And there were some of the, um, a lot of the other holidays like Holy Week. I mean, as a Jew, you don't go to church. But I would, I had a girlfriend. And so she would go and I'd go with her.

STEPHENS: [00:39:16] Is this the first year?

PENSO: [00:39:18] The first year we started. Yeah, it's about six months after I got there or something. We were together for quite some time.

STEPHENS: [00:39:24] These are the girls from the town?

PENSO: [00:39:25] Yep.

STEPHENS: [00:39:29] What was her name?

PENSO: [00:39:29] Cecilia.

STEPHENS: [00:39:29] How old was she?

PENSO: [00:39:30] I never found out actually, she was, I think, I know she was older than I was, but it was a very sensitive topic. Because in Brazil, like in a lot of developing countries, the older woman is the less quote unquote marketable she is for marriage. And so I believe she was much older than I was. Not much older. She was older, five years older than I was.

STEPHENS: [00:39:53] You were like 22?

PENSO: [00:39:54] I was 22 yeah, but we were in love and, you know, I was with, you know, met her family and that proved to be very traumatic at times. Her father was an alcoholic and he would go off on just, you know, oh, you can't go out with somebody if you don't marry them. And then the fact that I was Jewish. The priest said something about Jews, and I'll never forget having dinner with him at his house. And he was showing

me this book with a caricature of a nefarious person who looked very much like what Hitler would have done when he had the caricatures of Jews with long noses. You know, the curlicues on the side of the hair, pearls and the hat and the counting the money. This was his picture of a Jew. And so Cecilia's father, when he went on a rampage, getting drunk and come home, just get very violent sometimes, you know, just yell and scream a lot.

STEPHENS: [00:40:54] And what did she do for work?

PENSO: [00:40:55] She was going to school at the time to become a teacher.

STEPHENS: [00:41:00] In the town?

PENSO: [00:41:02] Yeah, in the town, and I think she ended up teaching in São João del Rei, which is about 40 kilometers away. No, I can't recall if she was if, yeah, I think she finished her education courses. And since that time, I haven't had contact with her, but I know Mary as seen her on a couple of occasions and you know, you hear snippets. You're curious, you know, like to know what's going on with her family. But she was the director of the school, and now she's opened up her own language school, teaching English as a foreign language. So she really, she could speak some English.

STEPHENS: [00:41:43] Would you go back?

PENSO: [00:41:45] Me? Well, I'd like to go back sometime, take the family. Wouldn't that be?

STEPHENS: [00:41:51] Oh my gosh. Ok, so at the, well, I want to ask you also about your living conditions. You stayed in a motel?

PENSO: [00:41:57] I did.

STEPHENS: [00:41:58] The whole time?

PENSO: [00:41:59] The whole time. And then after the Peace Corps.

STEPHENS: [00:42:02] There was nothing else available, or wasn't it kind of expensive?

PENSO: [00:42:06] It was convenient. Put it that way. I mean, I had privacy as much as I could. Um, unfortunately, sometimes when Cecilia would come to my room of course everybody could hear it and that wasn't good because, you know, being a virgin was big and still is in many places. And I'm not saying we had sex, but what I'm saying is, is that the implications of that could be deadly to someone's reputation. After the Peace Corps, I stayed on in Brazil for another, boy, a year and a half, close for two years because I wanted to stay there and Cecilia and I were very involved. We almost got married in a matter of fact.

STEPHENS: [00:42:51] Oh, you stayed involved with her the whole time.

PENSO: [00:42:54] And yeah, but I. And so what, I started living with, I would stay with her family and I come home on the weekends as I worked in Belo Horizonte teaching English. On the weekends I'd go back, but I was not related to the Peace Corps at all at that time. I separated from it. But Mary was still in the Peace Corps for the first year, and so she was having difficulty because she didn't want to go back to come back to the States. She wanted to stay there.

STEPHENS: [00:43:25] Okay. So at the end of it, the first year, I don't even remember how you felt when you decided to stay on. Had you had any health problems, take any trips at the time?

PENSO: [00:43:40] I had a health problem once. I had a very serious sinus sinusitis attack. It really laid me low. And Cecilia had been a nurse at one time, so she has to take care of me. And you know, you could go to the pharmacy and get the medicine you needed and then she would just kind of give me a shot or whatever. But I was really sick for about a month and a half. I lost a lot of weight. And um, but, you know, recovered. And as far as trips go, I did travel a lot by myself. Mary would go with a couple that was from a town that wasn't too far away and this couple is actually still married.

STEPHENS: [00:44:17] Peace Corps volunteer?

PENSO: [00:44:18] Peace Corps volunteer. But I would travel by myself.

STEPHENS: [00:44:23] Did you have much contact with other volunteers?

PENSO: [00:44:25] Not really. And I didn't mind it that much. You know, I traveled to Rio, Sao Paulo. I went to Curitiba in the southern part of Brazil, never made it to the most southern state, which is Rio Grande do Sul, which is right on the border with Uruguay and Argentina. As far north, I went as far north as Rio Grande do Norte which is one of the most northern states. Never made it to the Amazon unfortunately. But yeah, those were trips that I really enjoyed and traveling by yourself you get lonely sometimes, but it was alright.

STEPHENS: [00:45:00] And so at the end of the first year, did you have a kind of a better idea what you were going to be doing?

PENSO: [00:45:06] Yeah, yeah. Things are falling into place.

STEPHENS: [00:45:09] Had you already started the school project then?

PENSO: [00:45:12] I dealt with. I believe so, but I'm not really sure. It took some time, you know, it's those things, especially long distance. It's hard getting answers and then we only had one post office, well, of course, only one post office. But it was the only place that had phones. We had no telephones, no TV until '69. And then Paolo and Simone got a TV, in fact we were able to watch the moon landing, which was quite bizarre. And there had been by that time after we got there, you know, there were more people getting televisions. And so it was quite amazing. And there was one man in the town whose name was Joao Dubaho, which I guess kind of translated into John Mudd. But he was this guy who would look like a Uncle Remus guy, Uncle Remus from Song of the South. Except he had bowlegs and he had to always ride a horse wherever he went and he had a white beard, he was a black man, wore this cap. And the most cherubic face you could imagine, and he would ride for to town.

He had sort of his crooked stick he would use to hold himself up with when he had to walk. He never once believed that they put a man on the moon. He just thought it was a big [inaudible]. It was just wonderful in a way, I mean, he wasn't because he was unwilling to accept truth, but he wanted to believe what he wanted to believe and that's what he believed. He didn't. He wasn't swayed by anything. And I think that's one thing that that was hard to work. And when you take that, when you expand that idea into the entire workings of the town and many other places in the world, some people are so set in your ways, anything that threatens the status quo is unacceptable and will not work. So you have to find individual people who will believe what that change is necessary or that there is change and that's how it comes about.

STEPHENS: [00:47:08] So like, you were working with that one man to build the school, did you have other projects?

PENSO: [00:47:13] We did have some, like, you know, organizing. I think in see, we had some things done, but I don't recall what they were. I guess the fact that I don't recall says how important they really were or anything. I mean, once I left after two years, I didn't have much to. I mean, I look back on what I got out of it, but I don't know what the people there got out of it. So although I will say this, when Mary returned to Lagoa Dourada back in 2002 or 2003, she sent a video, I have it, of the town and I have actually dreamed of the town. I had dreamed of the town before she went there, and the pictures that I see of the town are a lot like what my dreams have been like, which is very odd. And I guess the theme from The Twilight Zone should be blaring now. But uh, but the Oswaldo was in town when she was there.

STEPHENS: [00:48:13] Who's that?

PENSO: [00:48:13] He is the man who helped build the school.

STEPHENS: [00:48:15] Oh, really?

PENSO: [00:48:16] He still remembers to this day. He's got a picture of us in his house.

STEPHENS: [00:48:20] And is the school still operating?

PENSO: [00:48:21] The school is still operating. Isn't that amazing? So if there's anything I can say that we did, that was it.

STEPHENS: [00:48:29] That's really, yeah. I mean, I was just about to ask you if you felt like you had achieved anything.

PENSO: [00:48:37] I think we also broke down some stereotypes of Americans all being wealthy and the fact that like three kids in my family and Mary's family, the two and two of her parents were accused of being lazy and half joking. But you know what that means you each have more kids, you know? But it was sort of like, well, you know, people are different. And I think that was something else that we were able to tell them about our world, just like we were learning about theirs. But there was not one way to do that one, honestly.

STEPHENS: [00:49:07] Well, that's a good place to talk about this because, you know, Peace Corps had these three goals. Don't know if they talked to you about them. To provide the technical assistance, to help promote a better understanding of Americans, and then to help promote better understanding of other peoples, you know, by Americans. And do you feel like your service, that you fulfilled those three?

PENSO: [00:49:35] I think so. I think we didn't break any laws. And you know, we may have crossed some moral boundaries as far as what the do's and don'ts of a small town might be when it comes to relationships. But we didn't, I think, do anything that was detrimental to the reputation of ourselves, for the most part, or for the United States. Not that you were there as representing. We never thought of ourselves as flag-waving individuals. I remember there was a United States Information Service office in Belo Horizonte, and you could rent, the Peace Corps could and rent movies. And of course, we rented, um, I say of course, we rented [John F. Kennedy]: Years of Lightning, Day of Drums or whatever, I guess it was. It sounds like one of those Chinese bad phantasmagorical movies. But it wasn't. It was the president's definitive and about his

death. And I'll never forget when we took it to the local movie house to show and the place was packed. It was all in English, so the people couldn't understand what was going on. So we'd would stop the projector and I have to get up there and explain the Portuguese what was happening. And they didn't care, you know, it was just they were just there, it was a happening kind of thing. So that's about as close as I got to promoting this country. I mean, I wasn't I didn't put it down, but, you know, the Vietnam War was going on. People had these misconceptions about who people in the United States really were. And I think that when we left, I think that they saw that even though we weren't a member of the Bouvier family or that we were, you know, wealthy, that people could make contact with us and see that we were like them in many ways. You know, the people who cared.

STEPHENS: [00:51:17] Right. And why don't you talk a little bit about people that you've stayed in contact with? Do you have any, um, any other information that I mean?

PENSO: [00:51:31] No, I wish I did.

STEPHENS: [00:51:32] Mary had gone back. Like in the video, does the town look similar?

PENSO: [00:51:34] In some ways and very different in others. I mean, it's definitely grown. It's become sort of almost a bedroom community of Belo Horizonte, although not quite because it's so, excuse me, so far away.

STEPHENS: [00:51:48] How far was it, that's the capital of the state?

PENSO: [00:51:52] It's a city about the size of Atlanta. And I'm sure it's. The road, you don't have superhighways there, like they do here. So there were these two or four lane roads, sometimes maybe two and Minas Gerais, which translates into general mines, was an iron producing and gold producing part of Brazil. And so taking the bus, you go through these iron ore fields and coal fields, and it was really sort of, you know, a long trip. But you know, it's sort of stark landscape that you have these

mountains and probably like you saw in Africa, the termite hills. We had lots of those, but I'm sure Lagoa Dourada has become sort of a place where people go on weekends. It seems like a much more affluent town.

STEPHENS: [00:52:47] Than it was.

PENSO: [00:52:48] Than it was, right.

STEPHENS: [00:52:50] And you haven't heard anything from any of those people that you worked with.

PENSO: [00:52:56] No, uh, Mary, like I said, has kept contact. And Cecilia had a sister who was sort of like Emily Dickinson type of person. When the father went on a rampage and she was very, very young. She left. She went into the street because she was so embarrassed by the whole thing. And then she came in and she never left the house again for years and years. I am talking decades. Very intelligent young woman, very depressed in many ways, saw the world only from the ledge of the window that faced the streets or from the living room. Never went down the steps again, it was sort of like something you could write a novel about and everything she knew she learned from gossip or from what she heard on the radio. There was no TV. What she read in the newspaper. Very intelligent, and Mary has kept in touch with her. She's gone through depression, she's had gum disease, had to go to the hospital. She had several problems and she's still as depressed as ever. She's probably close to, I'd say she's 65, almost 70 now. So it's very, very interesting.

PENSO: [00:54:09] And we heard, you know while we were there, this is an aside. There was a lot of incest. I shouldn't say a lot. There was some incest where cousins of married cousins pushed them to keep the power in the family. And that family I mentioned at the beginning with the mayor's family, that was that was one of the things that they were known for, infamous for, was intermarriage, uh, intra-marriage.

STEPHENS: [00:54:34] Well, I mean, in some places that's not that uncommon.

PENSO: [00:54:38] No. But the product was, is that I mean, the thing was that some of the kids that had to do, they were, you know, mentally challenged. And so it's just something like out of One Hundred Years of Solitude that you can't believe exists. But that's a great book to read, either before, during, or after having an experience like that. And I'm not saying it as someone who's just gawking at them and making fun of, pointing fingers. It's just that we're so sheltered we don't realize what it's like.

STEPHENS: [00:55:13] Like [inaudible], have you read any of his books?

PENSO: [00:55:17] No, I have not.

STEPHENS: [00:55:19] [inaudible]

PENSO: [00:55:22] Yeah, that book was written probably in the sixties maybe. So I guess with becoming things. I think that when I went, when I left the Peace Corps, I stayed in Brazil longer.

STEPHENS: [00:55:34] Yeah, what prompted that?

PENSO: [00:55:35] Well, I loved Brazil. I came home for two months in '71, January, end of January something like that. Stayed until early March, went back to Brazil, got a job teaching English in two different schools, and I just loved the life there, I thought it was great.

STEPHENS: [00:55:55] When you finally did come back, did you get involved in any Peace Corps activity that was for returned volunteers, especially the, you know, third goal activities?

PENSO: [00:56:05] No, no, I didn't. Unfortunately, I I say.

STEPHENS: [00:56:11] What about through your work?

PENSO: [00:56:14] Well. I mean, I didn't start teaching English as a second language until several years later. When I came back from Brazil, all of a sudden, you see my brother's getting married. I mean, it took me some

time to acclimate to this country, to the society. And it wasn't that I was trying to be lazy. I guess I was sort of in a state of shock in a way that I didn't know how to, where to start. It was like starting all over again. So no, I didn't. I think I feel like my experience with Peace Corps was wonderful as far as I was concerned. But I didn't know what, I mean, I probably got to, I've met returned Peace Corps volunteers from other countries, but there was nothing as organized as there seems to be now or has been in the last few years to spread the word about the Peace Corps. Not to proselytize, but to say we need to establish better contact with other people. And I regret that to a certain extent. But I do feel that having been with the Peace Corps and being overseas, having been overseas equipped me quite well for dealing with and working with English as a second language because I have come into contact with literally thousands of students, thousands of people.

PENSO: [00:57:31] And I do feel that having lived abroad, which was afforded, I was afforded that opportunity by the Peace Corps. By being a Peace Corps member to help sensitize me even more than I probably would have been to what it's like for people to come to this country and try to live and function and with the language in a way that that's going to help us. So I think, you know, and even though I haven't been a Peace Corps program, it has been there has been something done on my side that really has, I feel, helped build bridges between, you know, among different cultures.

STEPHENS: [00:58:12] Well, that's great. Anything you want to add?

PENSO: [00:58:15] No, thank you for asking these questions, Amalia. And I hope you liked the guacamole.

[END OF INTERVIEW]