

Edythe Ben-Israel Oral History Interview
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Edythe Ben-Israel served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Malawi from 1968 to 1970 on a health project.

Access

Open.

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Oral History Interview

with

Edythe Ben-Israel

April 6, 2019
Ringo, New Jersey

By Candice Wiggum

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

WIGGUM: [00:00:02] Today is April 6th, 2019. This is Candice Wiggum and I am interviewing Edythe Ben-Israel, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in Malawi from 1968 to 1970 as a health volunteer. Welcome, Edie.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:00:18] Thank you.

WIGGUM: [00:00:18] And would you like to tell me why you decided to join the Peace Corps?

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:00:22] Well, I was, you know, a teen in the '60s and the call of President Kennedy was very inviting. It was that time in people's lives. And when I was in school, I was planning, I studied anthropology. And one of the things that concerned me was it seemed like a lot of the professors were alcoholics. And I thought, I don't want to become an alcoholic. And maybe it's because of the clash of cultures that they had to live in and deal with, the contrast. And I thought, well, if I go in the

Peace Corps, I can live in another culture and see how I can adapt and see if it causes me problems or not.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:01:25] And also, in those days, the world was very far away. And it was only, you know, when I was first going into the Peace Corps that they started to put photos of Vietnam War on the TV. People didn't know about other cultures.

WIGGUM: [00:01:44] Mm hmm.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:01:45] And if you wanted to travel and you didn't have the money, I mean. I was in Chicago. So we're landlocked. You know, we're not on a coast. We're not next to another country. So you really don't have that experience like in Europe with all the small countries close together. They can learn other languages easier and use them and learn about different cultures. So part of it was a way to travel. Part of it was to see if I should go ahead with anthropology or not. And, uh, part of it was altruistic.

WIGGUM: [00:02:20] Mm hmm.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:02:20] So those were the reasons I wanted to go.

WIGGUM: [00:02:23] Cool. When did you decide that you wanted to go in the Peace Corps?

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:02:29] Um. I must have decided in my senior year. Um. Or maybe a little before, I forget exactly when I decided, but it was when I was in college.

WIGGUM: [00:02:53] Yeah.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:02:53] And I actually had graduated early because I had worked in the summer in the city and taken a course or two at the university in downtown Chicago. So I was able, when the school changed from semesters to.

WIGGUM: [00:03:11] Quarters?

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:03:11] Semesters or quarters, whatever they called it then, I ended up with enough credits to, to stop a quarter earlier.

WIGGUM: [00:03:18] Oh, nice.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:03:18] So I did get accepted and my parents were not against it. My, they held a party for me.

WIGGUM: [00:03:28] Nice.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:03:28] And, um, it was funny. They had a cartoon in the newspaper, which at the time I thought was kind of funny, but I could really understand it when, after being in the Peace Corps of course. It was this person who child had come back from being in the Peace Corps and was sitting up in a tree and the mother is saying, oh, don't mind my child. They just came back from the Peace Corps.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:03:57] Because when I got to Malawi, I was at my post. I had no furniture. So all I had was my sleeping bag. And, and I had a crate, that was the sum total of furniture that I had. So, you know, you get used to sleeping on a hard floor so you can think that coming back and getting on a soft mattress would be uncomfortable. So here was someone who was used to doing something in the trees. So I just thought it was very, could be very accurate depending on the culture.

WIGGUM: [00:04:33] What did your friends think?

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:04:35] Well, you know, by the time I got accepted, um, some of my friends probably were away in other colleges and their lives had changed because we'd already graduated college. And I wasn't with, when I got accepted, I wasn't with the people that I knew in college. So I don't really.

WIGGUM: [00:04:56] So there wasn't much of a reaction that you were aware of? Yeah. Yeah. What was the application like back then?

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:05:03] And it was probably all on paper, obviously.

WIGGUM: [00:05:09] Mm hmm.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:05:10] And, um, I really. I don't know that, how much we had interviews or anything beforehand. We had to go through a medical exam. We went to some Army place and followed the lines and went from one person to another for them to do tests. And then, um. We had a psychiatrist. Those were the years they had psychiatrists during training, and we had to meet with them so that they could determine if we were capable of going overseas.

WIGGUM: [00:05:47] Mm hmm.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:05:47] And, um. That was also the time that we trained in the United States. And whereas now they train in country. So, you know, things have changed over the years.

WIGGUM: [00:06:01] Mm hmm.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:06:02] But, um, what happened was I first went into training in Tucson, Arizona, and it was, I guess, a resort that wasn't being used at that time, maybe more in the winter, and this was more the summer. And, um.

WIGGUM: [00:06:24] Get you used to the heat.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:06:27] I don't, um, perhaps, but I don't think that's always the case. You know, it's where they can get facility and where it was, uh, allowed them to do what they needed to do. And, you know, we built, um, an outhouse, you know, got practice. Like I never had to build one when I got to Malawi.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:06:57] There was no guarantee at that time that we could go to, we could pick a country. We could request a, I think, an area. I requested Africa because I thought it would be the most different from anything I

knew. And, um. We had language training where the first, they never spoke English for the first quite number of weeks. They pantomimed, pointed to things, took us in the cafe, you know, the cafeteria and would teach us words for the different foods and.

WIGGUM: [00:07:33] Now did you train with all Malawi volunteers so it was all the same?

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:07:39] The whole group of trainees were people who were going to Malawi for the same project.

WIGGUM: [00:07:46] Mm hmm.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:07:47] And we had some Malawians who came over to teach us the language and culture stuff.

WIGGUM: [00:07:56] Mm hmm. Mm hmm.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:07:56] But there were other people who were Americans who were, you know, also part of the training. Um, we had a cross-cultural experience that we were supposed to do as well. And for ours we went to a Indian reservation and we were doing a health survey.

WIGGUM: [00:08:19] Mm hmm. Interesting.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:08:21] And, uh. But that was in, um. That was at the time that they were having riots in Chicago.

WIGGUM: [00:08:38] Mm hmm.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:08:38] I think they had some in Newark at the time, too, but I wouldn't been as aware not being from New York. Uh. And so I had called home because I wanted to get a report and found out that my mother was in the hospital. So when I told them, they put me with the only family on the reservation that had a phone. And in the middle of that project, they got a call that I should come home. My mother was not going to survive.

WIGGUM: [00:09:20] Oh, dear.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:09:21] So they packed me. They got, made reservations. I went right from the reservation, flew back to Chicago. And then after my mother passed away, they packed up whatever I had in the place where we had been staying before and sent it home to me. And, um.

WIGGUM: [00:09:44] And you had no idea your mother was ill when you left?

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:09:48] Oh, no, she wasn't ill when I left. What had happened is she had had a blockage that burst, and she got peritonitis. And in those days, they didn't have the way to treat peritonitis the way they could today. If she had it today, she would have survived.

WIGGUM: [00:10:03] What a shock that must have been.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:10:05] So, um. She was waiting for me to come home because I got home and went to the hospital. And I talked to her and said things that later I was, if I realized what, you know, I probably would have talked differently. But she just, I guess, wanted to see me. She hung on. And then after, I only saw her that one time.

WIGGUM: [00:10:32] Wow.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:10:32] We got five minutes, you know, every hour at that time when they're in intensive care. And, um. So, you know, they sent my stuff home because I said, you know, I felt I needed to be home. And they said, okay, just, you know, let us know, you know, what happened.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:10:50] So a couple of months later, I felt like things had been stabilized at home and I called them up and they said they had some more training programs. And I said, well, I think it'd be good if I went on one that was going to Malawi since I'd already trained so much for Malawi. And they had one that was a teacher program. So they sent me to Bunkie, Louisiana, to train to be a teacher. And we actually did some like almost like student teaching in one of the schools in Bunkie,

Louisiana. And, uh, they told us to be careful and not to travel to the towns alone in Bunkie because we were, you know, outsiders from big cities. And this is very rural, redneck area of the United States.

WIGGUM: [00:12:03] It seems ironic that it would almost feel more dangerous in Bunkie, Louisiana, than it may be when you went overseas.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:12:13] So, uh, they're different kinds of dangers.

WIGGUM: [00:12:17] Yeah.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:12:20] So, you know, I realized when we were doing the teaching, I thought, you know, this isn't really my thing, but I can't tell them I don't want to go. If I tell them I don't want to go, they're never going to give me a third chance. And I really, really want to do this. So, um, we. I don't even. We, we didn't. I don't think we went home after the training. Um. And we went, we went overseas. And, uh, as soon as we got to Malawi, they, the Peace Corps there approached me and said that there was a health volunteer who didn't like the unstructuredness of health. And she would love to switch with me and be a teacher.

WIGGUM: [00:13:18] And you went, woo, woo!

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:13:19] I sure did. I said, boy, you know, it was meant to be. So they first sent me to be with another volunteer in Malawi who was doing the health so I could learn the kind of things they learned there that I didn't learn because I didn't come then.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:13:37] And then sent me to my post, which had been a postmaster's house, and I really never knew why. There was no postmaster there, but it was right next to the post office. It was a two room brick structure with a tin roof. And it had a fireplace and a cement floor and two doors, a door in and a door out. And the one door led, I mean, there was a, you could go in and out both doors, but one door was into a sort of a courtyard which had four little, uh, rooms on the other side of the courtyard, and one was for storage and one was for cooking and one was for bathing and one was the outhouse.

WIGGUM: [00:14:31] Mm hmm.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:14:32] So, um. I, uh, I had a counterpart. Malawi was a country that gave us, uh, that had set up programs and gave us counterparts. So we weren't working alone.

WIGGUM: [00:14:56] Mm hmm.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:14:57] And so there was a health assistant and he was responsible for and I was working with him. So we set up a clinics to weigh the children and teach them nutrition.

WIGGUM: [00:15:15] Mm hmm.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:15:15] And it wasn't full time. So I also went to the secondary school that was maybe a mile or so down the road where there were some other volunteers and taught nutrition to the kids. And also there was a farmers market board in Mponela where I was posted and I taught the farmers as well about nutrition because in Malawi, children are the last on the totem pole to be fed. You know, um, they had a very high infant mortality rate. Um, one of the saddest parts about that was they would get powdered milk from, you know, it would be distributed by like USAID and other countries, and they didn't really know how to use it properly. So they would mix it with water and as long as it looked milky, they would feed it to the kids, but they wouldn't necessarily know to boil the water first so.

WIGGUM: [00:16:30] Or the right proportions.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:16:32] The right proportions to give them the right amount of protein. So it sometimes caused a lot more problems. And there was, um, so we used to weigh the children and, and chart for the parents to show how the kids' growth should be and that they were growing on the right path. And we had asked, we had tried to, um. Malawi grew groundnuts, which we call peanuts, and we tried to encourage them to pound them into a flour, which they did do, but to put it into the

children's porridge when the kids started, babies started to have porridge. So that would give them more protein.

WIGGUM: [00:17:17] Mm hmm.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:17:17] Um, in Malawi, the staple was either corn powder that was made into *nsima*, and *nsima* is kind of like porridge, except it, it, it's cooked to the consistency. It's like when you make oatmeal and you leave it and it kind of sets together and they make it into like patties and this is their staple. And they would have it with whatever else they could get if they could. A lot of times the people would, the women, would go out and look for the things that grew wild or things maybe they had planted that they could eat. And they knew which ones were edible, so they would cook some kind of greens.

WIGGUM: [00:18:15] What did you eat while you were there?

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:18:19] Um, I, I ate *nsima*. I didn't buy very many things from the store because they were very expensive, because they were imported in cans. And you paid more than you would have paid at home. But I would go to the market and get vegetables. And I tried to eat pretty much like the people there did so that I wasn't being different.

WIGGUM: [00:18:52] Mm hmm.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:18:53] Um, mangoes were only a penny, it was just wonderful.

WIGGUM: [00:18:57] Mm hmm.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:18:57] The things I missed were crunch. You know, everything was cooked so that it was safe to eat. And so you didn't have salad and you didn't have. They had something that was supposed to be like a cucumber, but it was soft. It wasn't crunchy.

WIGGUM: [00:19:13] Mm hmm.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:19:13] And one time when I was in Blantyre they had some apples that had come up from South Africa. Crunch. It was so, so.

WIGGUM: [00:19:26] It's like manna from heaven.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:19:29] The only other thing that was crunchy, which is something I seriously thought about having them send to me but never really was able to follow through. There was a certain time when the flying termites would swarm.

WIGGUM: [00:19:45] Uh huh.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:19:45] And they would catch them and then fry them in a pan with some salt. And it was like, this is like potato chips.

WIGGUM: [00:19:53] Yeah.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:19:53] I mean, you're eating insects, but let me tell you.

WIGGUM: [00:19:56] Yeah, it's crunchy and salty.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:19:57] It was crunchy and salty. It was really good. And one time when I was in Mozambique, I actually had peri peri caterpillars. So, you know, I wasn't. I see now, you know, when they do the survivor thing, they have people eat all kinds of weird things.

WIGGUM: [00:20:17] Yeah.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:20:17] You know, and that's, a lot of it is mind over matter.

WIGGUM: [00:20:21] Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:20:23] So.

WIGGUM: [00:20:24] Yeah. And how did you, did you just watch them cook and learn how to cook this stuff or?

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:20:31] Well, I. I had been, I'd been cooking my whole life, so I didn't, *nsima* wasn't. There was a Malawian woman, girl, who was working in one of the stores in the trading center, and I became friendly with her and asked if she wanted to come and live with me because I had room and I wasn't sure if she traveled to her village and back every time. So she said we had to go to her village and get permission. So we went to her village and got permission for her to stay with me, and she taught me how to make *nsima*.

WIGGUM: [00:21:25] Nice.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:21:25] It was nice. So, um. When I, actually, when I came back to the States, I made some for my, when my daughter was in school, I went to her class and made some for them. But they would, they would cook a lot of vegetables. They would only, they rarely would have meat. Sometimes they would if they had the money because you could buy a little bit of meat in the market. They would just, you know, it's hanging there and flies are all over and they just whack off, put it on the scale, a piece of meat. But we had no refrigeration. So, you know, it wasn't anything that you could keep for very long.

WIGGUM: [00:22:22] If you got it, you cooked it.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:22:23] If you got it, you wanted a small amount because you're going to use it and then that was it. Um.

WIGGUM: [00:22:33] Now, you said that, you talked a little bit before about where you lived. Do you want to describe that more and what you did for living situation?

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:22:45] Oh, oh yeah, I didn't. So when I got there and I only had my sleeping bag and, uh, and like the milk crate. I wrote a letter to the district commissioner and I told him what I was doing and that, if possible, I would like some furniture.

WIGGUM: [00:23:06] Now, this was a Malawian that you wrote to?

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:23:09] I wrote, yes. The district commissioner was, was a Malawian, because Malawi had its independence when I got there. When the early people went to Malawi, the first groups, it was still, it wasn't an independent country yet. So I went, um. I wrote a letter and nothing happened. So I'd been there a while, you know, and wherever I would go when we would go in a village, wherever we'd go, someone would find a chair and bring it out for me to sit as a guest. So I wrote another letter to the district commissioner and said how bad I felt that I could not offer the same hospitality that any Malawian could offer me when I would go, that I didn't have a chair to offer any guest who came to my home.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:24:06] So in Peace Corps, we had conferences every now and then, so we were having a conference. And I had left and gone to the conference. And when I came home, I couldn't get in my door. I had to go around to the other door and come in. And the place was packed with six rooms of furniture because they thought I was in the school that was down the road. They assumed I was in the school, I guess. So now I had so much furniture I couldn't move. So I put as much furniture in that storage room as I could.

WIGGUM: [00:24:47] Uh huh.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:24:48] And I just moved the furniture as best as I could. It was crowded, but I couldn't ask them to take it back after I had gotten it. But I learned a lesson about understanding the, the people you want to change and to make it relevant to them, in order to be more successful in getting that change done. So it was an important lesson.

WIGGUM: [00:25:30] Yes.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:25:31] I was given a bicycle so we would go by bike at times from one village to another because there was another clinic not too far away. Sometimes we were able to go with the health center ambulance, which was really a jeep. No place that someone could really lie down. But the health center had beds.

WIGGUM: [00:26:00] Now, how did you learn all the health stuff since you had training interrupted? Did you learn some before?

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:26:07] Well, that's what, when I, when, after we did the little bit of training, when we're all together when we first came in, they sent me to stay for a couple of weeks with a volunteer who was already doing the health in the field.

WIGGUM: [00:26:22] So that's how you learned.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:26:23] So that's how I learned.

WIGGUM: [00:26:24] What you needed to do.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:26:25] What I needed to know.

WIGGUM: [00:26:26] Yeah.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:26:26] Because what we had was very limited knowledge. You know, in training we practiced giving shots on an orange. We never practiced on a person. I was really glad I had the health assistant and I didn't really ever have to do that. I was afraid of hurting somebody or putting it where it shouldn't go just, babies squirm a lot, you know.

WIGGUM: [00:26:49] Mm hmm.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:26:50] So, um. That was something that would have been a little more nerve wracking.

WIGGUM: [00:26:58] What was most challenging about your work?

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:27:03] You know, I didn't find the lack of electricity, I didn't find not having running water as difficult sometimes as learning to deal about the limitations by the culture. But also the conflict because I was white and because I was from the United States, I was treated more like a man than a woman. So I couldn't just always stay with the women and learn what they're doing all the time. And yet I was a woman and

some, um. There's a couple incidences that were very indicative of Malawi and culture.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:28:00] Um, they had the, the president of Malawi, he was president for life. He always spoke in English. He, he had been raised in Malawi, but he had left at one point and gone to England. And because there was two major languages in Malawi, Chitumbuka and Chichewa, he didn't want to be speaking it incorrectly or.

WIGGUM: [00:28:35] Favoring one over the other?

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:28:37] Right. So he spoke in English and had an interpreter no matter where he went in the country. And, um. I forgot my train of thought.

WIGGUM: [00:28:49] We were talking about you being treated as a man, but there were a couple of instances that showed you.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:28:55] Oh yeah. So they had an English the, they had an English paper that, you know, that I could read. And, uh, and it was very interesting. There was a story in it one time where this young girl had gone to stay with her sister, who was married, to help out with the children. And just because in all of Malawian culture, if one family or one family member got a civil service job or some kind of better situation, they were basically kind of required to take in some other family members and help. They, it was kind of a communal pulling up by the bootstraps kind of thing as opposed to everybody, oh, you're out on your own and forget it. And the husband ended up having sex with.

WIGGUM: [00:29:58] The young girl.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:29:59] With the young girl, and they blamed the girl. It was her fault. So at one time there were two. Mponela was kind of at a crossroads of two different directions coming from Dowa in the east and coming from Kasungu in the north. And there were these two male volunteers who met at my place. They came on busses separately and they met at my place and they, they, they stayed overnight and then

they were going to go together on the next day. So when I walked out of the house the next day with two men, it was.

WIGGUM: [00:30:41] Scandal in the village.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:30:43] It was assumed that I had had sex with both of them, which was very, not understandable to most Malawians. I mean, they would have understood one, but two they didn't understand. And but of course that's what they assumed. And at one point there was a man who was a conscientious objector who had had a motorcycle, and he had a motorcycle accident somewhere near Mponela, and they brought him to the health center. And the health assistant at the health center said to me, I think he would be more comfortable at your home, he's from your country, than to stay here in the, in one of the hospital beds. So I said fine, you know, it didn't bother me any.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:31:30] But that afternoon everyone in town came by to see who I was going to be sleeping with that night because it was, that's the only reason for a man and a woman to be together. And it was sad because Malawian women could, were usually not given education. They had to pay for education in Malawi. They had to pay school fees. So if you're going to pay for school fees, you sent your boys because women had the job of taking care of the home. They did most of the labor and the farming. They fetched the water, they cooked, they gathered the food. So even if you got an education, it was, it was rare that a Malawian could really go ahead and get a, get an education and get a job.

WIGGUM: [00:32:26] Yeah.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:32:26] It was, it's much more difficult.

WIGGUM: [00:32:29] Did they do female circumcision there?

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:32:31] No. They didn't do that. That was more in Muslim countries and. It was more of a Muslim practice. And there were Africans who were Muslims, but it was definitely more in the Muslim countries or Muslim people with that religion. But, but it also meant that it was

difficult to travel alone as a woman. You were assumed to be like a prostitute if you did, because no, no person would let their daughter travel alone and just unprotected.

WIGGUM: [00:33:15] Mm hmm. And did you have relationships with the other, not sexual relationships, but friendships with the other Peace Corps volunteers, because you kind of trained with two different groups for different periods of time?

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:33:30] Well, I did have the school that was just down the road about a mile or so. I would, um, visit with them sometimes. They were obviously in the second group because they were teachers.

WIGGUM: [00:33:46] Mm hmm.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:33:46] I would see the health volunteers when we had conferences. But travel, you know, was not an easy thing.

WIGGUM: [00:33:59] Yeah.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:34:00] The roads were not paved and in the rainy season they, they could be washed out, flooded thing.

WIGGUM: [00:34:10] Did they have busses for their?

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:34:12] They had busses. But like most of the transportation, that was like Land Rovers and they all had winches on the front so they could pull themselves through the mud and out of places. So sometimes people would wait for the bus. But, you know, it's not like you knew when it was coming. You didn't have cell phones. Nobody could call ahead and say, we're stuck and we're going to be late. They would come and sit and wait for that bus until it came. And sometimes that would be a lot longer than they would have expected.

WIGGUM: [00:34:53] Was the headquarters for Peace Corps in the country in Doha?

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:34:58] Dover? Doha? No, that, Doha is not the right country.

WIGGUM: [00:35:03] That's not the right word?

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:35:04] I don't think that's, yeah.

WIGGUM: [00:35:06] Yeah.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:35:06] I'll have to. Dowa.

WIGGUM: [00:35:08] Dowa.

WIGGUM: [00:35:09] No, that was the regional, that was the regional headquarters for the, for the medical center. But the capital at that time was Zomba. But by the time I left, they had moved it up to Lilongwe because they wanted to bring more paved roads and more modernization further north. So they figured by moving the capital that way, it would, it would do that. Malawi is kind of long and narrow in a way, sort of like New Jersey.

WIGGUM: [00:35:45] Mm hmm.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:35:46] And if you look at a map of Africa and the southeastern part, you see this long lake, that's Lake Malawi, and Malawi goes to the side of it and a little bit under.

WIGGUM: [00:36:00] So was the Peace Corps headquarters in the capital at the time?

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:36:04] In the capital.

WIGGUM: [00:36:04] And how did you get there when you had those conferences and stuff?

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:36:08] We went by bus or hitched.

WIGGUM: [00:36:11] So you were allowed to hitchhike then?

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:36:13] Yeah, we were allowed to hitchhike. It was strange to be able to hitchhike in Africa. And then you come home and you can't hitchhike because it's unsafe.

WIGGUM: [00:36:20] Yeah. Yeah. Did you ever have something that was really frightening happen to you there?

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:36:27] Yes. Um. There was a Peace Corps volunteer who, um, hooked up with a band and made very popular songs, health songs. He had been a health volunteer. And he made songs about brushing the flies from your kids' eyes and adding the groundnuts to the porridge and other health things. And but in the Malawian culture, they did a lot of learning by singing and the song would catch on and people would sing it, and that's how they would learn. So they were popular on the radio.

WIGGUM: [00:37:07] Interesting.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:37:07] And at one point, Malawi wanted to try to start a blood bank. So he did a song about giving blood. It saves lives. Well, there were people in one area near Mulanje that was finding that there were people that were killed and the story that went around was that they were being killed for their blood and the blood was being sold to South Africa to pay off a debt.

WIGGUM: [00:37:46] Hmm.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:37:47] And so when one Peace Corps volunteer in that area went into a remote village with her assistant, with the medical assistant there, she was stoned because she was Peace Corps and the guy singing that song was Peace Corps, and they were somehow.

WIGGUM: [00:38:05] Connected.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:38:05] It was a connection that wasn't healthy and they actually had to evacuate her.

WIGGUM: [00:38:09] Hmm.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:38:10] So that was scary. And then there was some talk that was when the, they were sending rockets to the moon from the United States.

WIGGUM: [00:38:26] Mm hmm.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:38:27] And the weather was kind of not normal. So people were saying that the United States was disturbing the moon god. And after what happened to that volunteer, we were concerned about what might happen with the moon shots. So, um, we had had a rainy season that started and then in the middle of the rainy season, it just stopped growing. And in fact, at the farmers market board, they were trying to get them to use fertilizer. And so they had a big sign fertilizer used. But this bunch, no fertilizer here. But because of the drought, the ones with the fertilizer were smaller than the ones without because fertilizer burned.

WIGGUM: [00:39:15] Burned it.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:39:16] And they needed to have the rain and they didn't have rain and they didn't have irrigation. So it wasn't a successful lesson that they, they were ended up teaching. So anyway, um, the growing season ended. Whatever the crop was going to be, it was going to be. But now if it started to rain, they would rot. And one of the rockets went up. And it started to rain. And that one was aborted or I'm not, I don't remember exactly why, but it never made it to the moon. And then the rain stopped. I know it was coincidental. It's not causal at all. But.

WIGGUM: [00:39:59] But to them it was.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:40:00] But to them it was. And we were concerned what would happen if it landed on the moon and all these crops started to rot. Would we again be considered, because we were Americans, part of the, part of the problem? And what, what would we do if, how would we

do it if we had to leave suddenly? If we had to evacuate, if our areas became unsafe?

WIGGUM: [00:40:22] Mm hmm.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:40:23] But that never happened because that particular flight never made it for whatever the reason it was. And we never had an incident that close that, that came with the same kind of situation again. So Malawi was never a place where there was normally fear because Malawi never had anything the colonialists wanted. It didn't have wealth, it didn't have diamonds, it didn't have gold. It was very hard to farm because it was, they had to do it on terraces. So it's not like they had this really rich land that was easy where they could have enormous tea plantations or whatever. So it just was not, so they were kind of left alone.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:41:15] Before they had their independence, Malawi was part of a federation with Northern and Southern Rhodesia. It wasn't called Malawi then.

WIGGUM: [00:41:27] Mm hmm. Mm hmm.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:41:27] And Northern Rhodesia became, um, Zambia and Southern Rhodesia became Zimbabwe after independence. And, um. So. And the other countries had more things. They had better wildlife or what, richer soil or minerals. And so Malawi was never really cheated in that kind of a way, the way other people were cheated out of their country's wealth and not getting the fair share. So Malawi was considered the warm heart of Africa. It also had the lake where they had resorts that people came. And after I left, they, they discovered that there were a lot of tropical fish in the lake and it became a center for studying those fish and also I guess probably for breeding them.

WIGGUM: [00:42:28] Mm hmm. What did you feel was your, some of your accomplishments? What do you feel proudest about?

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:42:36] I feel that, um, one of the most important things is that people learn to understand each other as people and not just listen to whatever propaganda is put out there. I mean, they have. The president used to travel once a year around the country, and whenever he came to whatever place he was coming, everyone, there would be a big event and people would come and the schoolchildren would come and the women would dance and he would make a speech. And then, and the special Nyau dancers would come in in their costumes and dance and everything would be really exciting.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:43:29] So the, some of the women asked me if I would dance with them when he came, and I was very honored to be included. So I had to have my, my outfit made. They had tailors who, they had a sewing machine and they'd set up shop and they looked at you and they measured you with their eyes and they made the thing. And sure enough, it fit.

WIGGUM: [00:43:53] Hmm.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:43:55] And considering that when I tried to, um, a towel roll that has five seams, I broke the sewing machine needle. I felt pretty good about the fact that they could do this. They were very talented. So I practiced with the women. And just before the president came to where we were going to be dancing, there was an article in on the radio about these, um, Indian women. Indian meaning they were from Asia and they were the shopkeepers in East Africa. And they were dancing for the president. And he made this comment about who do they think they are? And I got really scared. What am I going to do? Here I'm dancing. These women asked me. I don't want to insult them.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:44:53] So I went to the local party chief and I asked for his advice, what I should do, because I didn't want the women to get into trouble and I didn't want to cause a scene. But here was an article in the paper about these foreigners, who do they think they are? And the advice I got was not very definitive.

WIGGUM: [00:45:25] Mm hmm.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:45:25] So I didn't have any good way to tell the women that I shouldn't go with them. So I went with them. And it was a really hot day and he was late and we're standing on the side of the road. And at one point I just, they had this place we could go to cool off and get a drink. So I went in there because it was hot and I kind of hoped that he came by while I was in there, but no such luck. So I went back out, you know, after I had cooled off and we, um, went there and, and he. Schoolchildren sang and we danced. And then he did his speech. And you can tell when somebody changes from their prepared remarks, you just can tell. And anyway, he called me up to the stage.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:46:25] My knees were like water. I didn't know what was going to happen. And it turned out that he thought, he thought I was a Peace Corps teacher and he thought that was wonderful. And so he literally offered me a job. And I, they took a picture. I was on the front page of the newspaper, and I really had hoped that it would work. Because at that point it was closer to the time that I was leaving and I had actually sat for the Foreign Service exam. And I thought I would like to go into the Foreign Service and, um. And what happened to the, to the end of that story is, is, you can get to later.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:47:20] But I think I felt like I really learned a lot and I think they learned a lot from me. And I felt like I had been accepted as an, as an equal. And I was very glad that I'd had that experience. It's, it's kind of like when I travel. I don't want to just see the sights. I want to kind of see how the people live. I go to markets and see what, what the, what the local people see and do and buy. And it's. That's how you learn about a place. You don't learn about it just by seeing the sights with a tour guide. That's superficial.

WIGGUM: [00:48:12] Mm hmm.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:48:13] So it's, um.

WIGGUM: [00:48:16] Did you feel like you had an impact on the, on mother and infant health or the other health things that you were working on?

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:48:25] Well, I feel that we being there, we may have helped keep the importance of having the health assistant there. So because that position continued after Peace Corps left. Peace Corps did leave for a short while because, um, it was a way of a country to say if they were mad at the United States. Oh, keep your Peace Corps volunteers, you know. It didn't last very long in Malawi. But, you know, there was a point that they kind of were planning on ending it. It was kind of a threat. I'm not, it was supposed to happen after I left. So I'm not sure how long it really did lapse. But there's Peace Corps volunteers there now.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:49:12] And it was many years after I came back before I knew that there was any kind of organization for returned volunteers. And that happened kind of serendipitously because I guess any address they may have had for me would have been under my maiden name back home in Illinois. And my father had long ago remarried and moved so nothing would have ever gotten to me. They didn't have this, the, the way to keep up with people, I think, the way they do now. So, you know, I was kind of like, they didn't know who I was.

WIGGUM: [00:49:58] Did you travel at all when you were there? It sounds like it would have been somewhat dangerous.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:50:03] I did travel when I was there, but not very much. Travel was very difficult. And it wasn't like teachers who had like the summer off and they had a specific time. I did travel once with, there were some missionaries also not too far away. They were from Canada, and I traveled with them to Rhodesia to, um, the falls. I can't remember, Victoria Falls? I don't think that was it. No. There's another falls in, in Rhodesia. And we went there.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:50:47] And I did travel to a Malawi game park with some volunteers. But it was really after I left my service that I did most of my traveling because health was ongoing. I just didn't feel like we really had vacation and we did go for conferences and things. So and, uh, so it was a little more, uh. It was hard to travel and we didn't really, we

weren't encouraged to do a lot of traveling at that time. We couldn't go to South Africa because we were considered too hippie and too subversive to go to, to be allowed to get a visa to go to South Africa and, um. So, so it just wasn't really.

WIGGUM: [00:51:48] An option for you.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:51:50] And I didn't feel like I needed it.

WIGGUM: [00:51:53] Yeah.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:51:53] You know, they told us we couldn't go home or to Europe and that would have been like weeks, you know, it would be like at least two days each way.

WIGGUM: [00:52:06] Mm hmm. Mm hmm.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:52:07] Or more, a day to get to the capital and then probably two days to get to Europe or something depending on the planes. And our allowance was small. I mean it was, it was really a lot of money if you lived like a Malawian. I managed to save quite a sum because I wasn't in a town and I didn't go drinking and.

WIGGUM: [00:52:33] There wasn't much of a place to spend it.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:52:35] And the market, you know, a mango a penny, you know. So my money went really far. Um.

WIGGUM: [00:52:44] How were your language skills?

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:52:47] Well, in Malawi they learned English because it had been an English colony, so more of the educated people had some English. So my skills were not as good as somebody who was using them all the time. I was able to communicate all the things that I needed to for the teaching of the, of the health, of the food, and ask people the usual things you do to ask people as you're greeting them. But I, I never really felt like I learned tenses. So if you really wanted to have a

conversation with someone who wasn't pretty fluent in English about philosophy, you know, or deep thoughts or. Sometimes I was confused about whether it was past or future that they were trying to tell me. So I would say my skills were passable but not.

WIGGUM: [00:53:52] And you got by.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:53:53] I got by, you know, and. I think that people now, when they first go and train and they live with a host family and they really have to learn the language much more, and they're put into learning the language a lot sooner. I mean, we had it in class, but we didn't really have to use it that much until you really get in country. And now you're in country while you're in training and you have much more opportunity to become much more fluid in the language. And of course, it depended, you know, on, on the kind of job you had too I think.

WIGGUM: [00:54:39] Did you have a, do you have a favorite memory that, that has stayed with you all these years?

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:54:51] I really like the way that they taught you to slow down, to spend time with people. And in Malawi, you wouldn't. If you saw people talking here, you might think, oh, I don't want to interrupt. There you would always not walk behind people because if you walk behind people, you could be trying to hurt them. You need to walk in between people. When you greet people, you greet them with both hands so they can see that you have no weapon, that you're a friend.

WIGGUM: [00:55:31] Mm hmm.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:55:31] And people would ask about all your, you would ask about their relatives and you would talk about the weather. And if they were farming, you would ask about their crops. And it's all the kinds of things that bring community, that, that mean, tell you that people matter, that you're not just.

WIGGUM: [00:55:56] A blip on the, blip on the radar.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:55:59] I mean, here we rush around so much. People don't always think that you're, you care or understand or know because you're busy rushing from one thing to another.

WIGGUM: [00:56:11] Mm hmm.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:56:12] And there was much more about just getting to know one another and helping one another. The, the little girls thought it was funny when I would carry water because I needed a hand to hold the bucket on my head. And they could balance it and do all kinds of things. But you know, they started when they were younger. And you learn something when you're young, you're, it's much easier than when you're older.

WIGGUM: [00:56:39] Mm hmm.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:56:39] And so. I think it's just, I don't know that there's really one thing. It's just it was a wonderful experience because I felt that we lived in such a sheltered world view when we at that time. We knew so little about any place else, so little about any other way than the way we did it. And the way we do things is not always the right way. And, you know, it's not always the way that works for everybody. And just because it worked for us doesn't mean it's going to work for someone else. And I think it was a very informative. I felt I learned more than I imparted to them.

WIGGUM: [00:57:32] How did you feel when it started getting closer to time to leave? How did, was that hard? Were you looking forward to it?

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:57:40] It was hard. And of course, like I said, I was thinking I was going to get a job. So I was kind of excited and hoping that we could get that resolved. It actually, finally I ended up having to leave the country, and by the time I got a letter that they had it worked out, I had met my husband. And it just, my whole life had changed at that point and it was too late. I had actually bought a backpack to travel home with and it came after I left and followed me from one place to another and finally caught up with me when I got to New York. I was never able

to use it the whole time I traveled. And I really always regret that I never saved all the stamps on the package, you know, because I think that would, that would be a good thing to show.

WIGGUM: [00:58:50] Yeah. Yeah. Interesting.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:58:51] In that time, it managed to follow me all across the country. I went, I went from Malawi. I went to Tanzania and Kenya. And from there I went to India because there was someone I had gone to school with who was in the Peace Corps in India, and we traveled around India together and it followed me around India. And then it followed me to Israel because I went to Israel and spent some time on a kibbutz and it eventually followed me to New York. And I just, it was, it was amazing that it made it, that they kept forwarding it. It was just really very interesting.

WIGGUM: [00:59:37] Now, it sounds like everything at home had pretty much changed by the time you got back. Your mom had passed. Your dad was remarried by that time.

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:59:47] Right.

WIGGUM: [00:59:47] So he might have been in a different home. You know, what was it like coming back?

BEN-ISRAEL: [00:59:53] Well. When, when I came back, I, I was coming back with my to-be husband.

WIGGUM: [01:00:14] So you met him traveling?

BEN-ISRAEL: [01:00:15] I met him traveling. I met him at Ein Gedi in Israel. Ein Gedi is where water comes out of the desert and makes some pools.

WIGGUM: [01:00:29] Nice.

BEN-ISRAEL: [01:00:30] And that's where I met him. And I had been on the kibbutz for a while and picked oranges and worked in the kitchen and did all

the things that we were supposed to do. It was another interesting experience of a different kind of way of life, a more communal kind of way of life. Um. So. But I do remember when I came back to New York, the first two things I said were, everybody here speaks English and the buildings are so tall. You would think, you'd think I'd never been in the United States.

WIGGUM: [01:01:15] Or a city.

BEN-ISRAEL: [01:01:17] It was really, it was really funny. But, um, when you get used to traveling and not knowing the major language and you feel. One of the places I went to was Zanzibar on my traveling. And now, after being able to get around in Malawi by being able to speak, now I'm traveling and you don't know the language. And I, I ran into someone who was from Malawi. It was like, oh, how wonderful, I can talk again. And we, they invited me to their house to have tea. And it was, it was really, it was, it's so much fun because you feel like I can communicate.

WIGGUM: [01:02:16] Yeah.

BEN-ISRAEL: [01:02:17] But there's so much you can communicate by the fact that you want to, by miming, by using the few words you have if, if you want to try. Yes, it's not going to get down to the deep issues and they're not going to be clear. But there's so much that you can, can learn.

WIGGUM: [01:02:39] Mm hmm. Mm hmm.

BEN-ISRAEL: [01:02:40] So.

WIGGUM: [01:02:41] So you're back in New York, you're with your husband-to-be.

BEN-ISRAEL: [01:02:45] Yes.

WIGGUM: [01:02:46] And what happened next for you guys?

BEN-ISRAEL: [01:02:50] Um. Well, um. We actually got married pretty quickly. Well, actually we tried to get married on our way home. But in Greece there was some, you had, I think they only had religious ceremonies. Or they needed something from a rabbi back home, or whatever it was we couldn't do it. And then we were in Germany and you had to post something for two weeks and we weren't going to be there for two weeks. So the easiest place to get married was in the United States. You only have to get a license and in three days you can get married. So we got married by the justice of the peace. But then we wanted my father to be able to have a ceremony and have the family. So they did plan that in Chicago and we had gone there, but we, when I came back we lived in New York.

WIGGUM: [01:04:03] Mm hmm. Mm hmm. And did you work in New York or? You know, what was your next step as far as?

BEN-ISRAEL: [01:04:11] Oh, I did, uh.

WIGGUM: [01:04:13] Did you go to school?

BEN-ISRAEL: [01:04:16] No, I didn't go to school. I did go to work. I did some volunteer work at the Museum of Natural History. And I. Then I also started to work for Women's American Art, which is an organization that does work to help women learn skills and get education so that they can better themselves.

WIGGUM: [01:04:53] Did you feel like your Peace Corps experience helped with that?

BEN-ISRAEL: [01:04:57] Well, what I did there was not any of that kind of planning. I was just, you know, a clerk.

WIGGUM: [01:05:03] Yeah, yeah, yeah.

BEN-ISRAEL: [01:05:07] And then, um. After Laurie was born, I, uh, I stayed home for a while. And then I started to work for H&R Block and, uh.

WIGGUM: [01:05:31] So you didn't stay with anthropology?

BEN-ISRAEL: [01:05:33] No. Anthropology required a lot of more studies. And by this time my life.

WIGGUM: [01:05:41] Had changed.

BEN-ISRAEL: [01:05:42] Had changed. And there's only so many things. And I didn't go into the Foreign Service either, because at that, you know, everything was too much, too much had changed. I mean, if I had gotten in first.

WIGGUM: [01:05:55] Mm hmm.

BEN-ISRAEL: [01:05:56] But it was interesting. So yesterday, actually I think it was this morning, they were talking about how many positions in the Foreign Service, the diplomats, are not career people, but are donors.

WIGGUM: [01:06:12] Hmm.

BEN-ISRAEL: [01:06:13] They said more than usual, but they said in the past it had been like a third, and now it's almost a half.

WIGGUM: [01:06:19] Wow.

BEN-ISRAEL: [01:06:20] So I'm thinking, gee, I didn't know that. You know, if I had known that, but um. I think I would have liked to have been in the Foreign Service. But, you know, I never, by the, by the time I got back to the United States to really kind of follow through on it, my life had changed. So it just wasn't, wasn't where we were headed.

WIGGUM: [01:06:43] Is there anything you want to add that I haven't asked you about?

BEN-ISRAEL: [01:06:48] Um. The, uh. It was. I, I did do some traveling also. You know, it was interesting. We had tried, I had read some other people at

one of the hostels and we were going to try to climb Mount Kilimanjaro because we were told, it's just a path. Just follow it up. So.

WIGGUM: [01:07:26] You're young.

BEN-ISRAEL: [01:07:28] We tried. We, we. But they said, you know, at about, you know, a day's walk there was some kind of place you could stay overnight. Well, we never found any place to stay overnight. And we ended up spending the night outside, you know. And in the morning we decided too many things looked like paths to us. And we obviously didn't take the right one and we should go back down the hill. And when we, we were very glad we did because that night when we got back down the hill, they said last night there had been lions roaming and but we could have been somebody's dinner.

WIGGUM: [01:08:11] Yeah, that's what I would worry about.

BEN-ISRAEL: [01:08:14] Well, that wasn't anything I was worried about because you'd think if there were, people would have told us. But, you know. It's like, you know, when I lived in Springfield, you don't usually see bears, but in certain times when they can't get what they need in their more remote areas, they come down to there. Springfield is not exactly like the more northern areas where people have bears a lot more often in their garbage and stuff. So.

BEN-ISRAEL: [01:08:46] Malawi was, all in all, a really comfortable place. The people were, were friendly and, um. It. The. The one disappointing thing was when I was leaving. All the time I was there, I never had any problems that I would really say. But right before I left, someone had broken in and stolen my, stole my radio, which was my connection to the world at that time. And, um, it was. It felt like a, you know, it's a violation when someone breaks in and takes stuff. It's not that it was that valuable, it's just that now I guess I wasn't as protected feeling as I had been before.

WIGGUM: [01:09:46] Do you think it was related to the fact that you were about to leave?

BEN-ISRAEL: [01:09:50] Probably, but I don't really know. The person wasn't caught, so we wouldn't know. Like I said, my place was right by the bus station, so it's very possible that I had gone to visit some people and were away and they just, whether they knew, you know, we don't know who took it. So it's, there's no real assumption. It's just that I never had anything taken before. So.

WIGGUM: [01:10:16] And what effect, what lasting effect do you think that Peace Corps had on your life?

BEN-ISRAEL: [01:10:25] My attitude towards solving problems I think is probably the biggest one, about trying to understand everything before you go diving in. And I think that comes partly from anthropology too. Because when we studied anthropology, I remember the story about people had gone to this culture in the Pacific Islands somewhere and they didn't understand why more people didn't have axes, because if they had axes, they could get the work done so much faster. And they, they started to give out axes, but they didn't realize what an ax meant, that they had people, certain people had it. It was a certain badge of honor and power. And now they were giving that power away indiscriminately and it changes everything.

BEN-ISRAEL: [01:11:21] And when I traveled in India and saw families on the side of the road breaking boulders into gravel so that they could build roads. As sad as that is, if you brought in something that could grind that up in no time, some machine, all those people would be out of work until you could provide them with something else to do that would give them income and not take away their pride in being able to care for themselves. You would be causing a problem. And we see that here with the whole thing with the coal miners and trying to bring back coal, which is not.

WIGGUM: [01:12:09] The answer.

BEN-ISRAEL: [01:12:10] Popular. And instead of trying to find something else to, to give these people another opportunity to, to work in something that's

gainfully employed and to give them pride for what they're doing. So, I mean, I think, really think that that's the biggest impact it had on me.

WIGGUM: [01:12:30] Yeah. Well, great. Thank you so much. Very interesting.

[END OF INTERVIEW]