

Peggy Walton Oral History Interview
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Biographical Note

Peggy Walton served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Ukraine from 1994 to 1996 as an English teacher trainer. She also served as a Peace Corps Response volunteer in Ukraine from 2013 to 2016.

Access

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Oral History Interview

with

Peggy Walton

November 2, 2019
Falls Church, Virginia

By Elaine Staab

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

STAAB: [00:00:04] Ok, well, today is November 2, 2019. This is Elaine Staab and I am here interviewing Peggy Walton, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in the Ukraine in three different times, 1994 to '96, 2013 to 2014, and 2015 to 2016. She worked primarily in the education sector, so I'm very happy that she's here. Welcome.

WALTON: Thank you. Glad to be here.

STAAB: Great. And we're just going to go ahead and get started with the questions the most, um, what I wanted to start with was what was your life like before joining the Peace Corps, which would have been before 1994?

WALTON: [00:01:01] Well, I was one of the members of the older people in our group. We were in Group III in Ukraine. I was 48 when I went. I had been working in a community college as a program director, and those

programs were then decentralized and I became an English teacher and that was OK with me because I had always enjoyed reading and thinking about grammar and things like that. But I also wanted an international experience and I then had the marketable skills because I had to retrain as an English teacher. And I was divorced at that time and my youngest son was just leaving high school. And so it was an opportune time. I had this window of opportunity where my parents were still alive who could help with the kids if need be. And the kids were sort of on launched. So it seemed as if it were an opportunity not to be ignored.

STAAB: [00:02:10] And one of the most common questions is why did you join the Peace Corps? I guess you had kind of said that you wanted an international experience. Can you elaborate a little more on why you decided to do the Peace Corps mind?

WALTON: [00:02:24] I always wanted to do Peace Corps since I was little and JFK. Well, I wasn't so little when JFK came along, but he was an inspiration and I was itching to do it. But I got married instead. I had of other developmental tasks that took precedence. And by the time I was divorced and the kids were old enough, I just had another, not another. I had what I saw as this opportunity to do it.

STAAB: [00:02:54] Did you have a specific country or project in mind?

WALTON: [00:02:56] No, when I went you weren't able to really choose the country you wanted to. You could just give a general region. But I was good for anything.

STAAB: [00:03:09] What was the process like then?

WALTON: [00:03:12] For application process? It was huge. It was enormous. We didn't have Internet particularly. And so it was all paper. It was enormous amount of paperwork and letters of reference, which I'm sure you still have to have. But anyway, it just seemed enormous. And let me see, what else do you mean about the process? I was interviewed. I completed the initial

application. I was interviewed and I had the medical exam. And then I was accepted and I thought I was going to Yemen and I said, oh, that's good, because, you know, there aren't any amoebas or whatever in Yemen. They'd be all arid, you know, and then there was a civil war and no one went to Yemen anymore. So the recruiter called me and asked me if I'd be interested in the former Soviet Union. And I said yes. So off I went to Ukraine.

STAAB: [00:04:16] What did your friends and family think about your decision and how did you prepare?

WALTON: [00:04:21] Oh, they were surprised. And my parents were worried. My friends were supportive, but they were sort of like, why are you doing this? Uh, yeah. My mother didn't want me to go. She thought I was going too far away, even though I as I said, I was 48 at that time. She was concerned about my safety. My dad was very supportive. My friends basically were my kids rolled their eyes and said, oh, do what you have to do, mom.

STAAB: [00:04:57] So, you know, what was the training like when you got to the country?

WALTON: [00:05:03] Yeah, we got we were all in in an institute outside of Kiev. This was right after three years, three or four years after Ukraine had been become independent. And so it was very Soviet still. And I mean, it was a far cry from Maryland and this Labor Institute where we lived and had the classes and we were lucky if there was hot water there where we didn't have Internet. So we were, you know, all really removed from our homes. The training was done in part of the institute, you know, the classrooms. But half the classrooms didn't have any glass in the windows because it was so rundown. It hadn't been used in a while. So when it rained, it was a little dicey. This was in June, so it wasn't cold fortunately. The training was done by in in Ukrainian. Our language was done in Ukrainian by native speakers, which was, you know, you just jump in and you have to start learning. And that was intense. The other training that we got from the Peace Corps people in Ukraine was done in English. We were separated

into the people who, the volunteers who were in education, to those who were in business. There were only those two sectors in Ukraine at that time. And so we had two groups. And so we trained and did our language training together. I think with those people in education. And it was very intense. And it was as it's supposed to be, a weeding out process. So there were some people who left on their own. Some people, one or two, one person, I think, at the end of training was not asked to join, but most of us lived through it. You know, it was three months of intense learning, cultural language, educational, technical, I guess you'd call it training. And then we were off, we went to our site.

STAAB: [00:07:38] And you were probably pretty prepared for the technical piece because you had all this experience coming from working in the States in education?

WALTON: [00:07:47] Right. Right. So my placement in all three times I was in Ukraine was as an English teacher trainer. So I taught English teachers English. I wasn't in the classroom teaching young kids, you know, subjects and verbs. And so the people that I was with were English teachers in secondary schools by and large, and their needs. They knew how to write, but they didn't know how to speak. They knew the grammar better than I did, but they didn't know how to speak in practice. So that's what they got for me.

STAAB: [00:08:28] Interesting. Can you talk a little bit about that?

WALTON: [00:08:31] Oh, yeah, I had a great fun, I had great fun because I've been a very eclectic background, and particularly in my first placement for those two years. I was in the recertification institutes, what they're called, where every five years English teachers rotate back to this institute for three weeks and they have and they live in the institute. So they take an array of different courses in Ukrainian history and language in English. And that was the one I taught. And I've forgotten the others. But so they were there for three weeks straight. And we because, as I said, they knew how to read. They could read and they could write, but they couldn't speak. So I

did a whole lot of, you know, fluency projects of here's a map of Washington, D.C. How do you get from one place to the other, for instance. How do you talk about values clarification? So it was sort of a million different, you know, different types of skills. In one class, we did the Myers Briggs type indicator and very reserved, reduced, dissolved version of it. We did how to teach, how to write a paragraph, for instance, paragraph writing in English, because the way Ukrainians construct their essays is very different than ours. So it tapped into my other skills as a counselor and also as an English teacher. So my bread and butter job in Dnipropetrovsk, now called Dnipro, was to teach these English teachers. But there was another volunteer who worked in the business and Sean's employer wanted his employees to learn English. So I taught very elementary business conversational English to people who'd never studied it before, on site in this business. And then I taught psychology and English to fifth year university students at the University of Dnipropetrovsk who were studying psych in English. So I had the opportunity of teaching psychological theory and counseling theory to these university students.

STAAB: [00:11:14] Very interesting. And that was in your first two years?

WALTON: Yeah.

STAAB: Because I know you came back three times. Can you talk a little bit about the three different experiences you had and the three tours you served in the Peace Corps?

WALTON: [00:11:33] The first, the classic two and a half years to 27 months were in eastern Ukraine over where the war is in the war zone. It's very adjacent to the war zone. Now, that was in eastern Ukraine where people spoke mainly Russian. So my training was in Ukrainian, but my site placement people spoke Russian. So I had my, you know, changed over. And I was at that institute where I did these other things. The second time I came back was in 2013 because I really wanted to see how the country had changed because it was so very destitute and down on its heels in 1994.

STAAB: [00:12:19] So this was several years later, that would have been?

WALTON: [00:12:22] '96 to 2013. So quite a difference.

STAAB: Fifteen years or so.

WALTON: Yeah. So in that placement I was really lucky, but all of them, I was really lucky. The second placement I was in the northwest. Yeah. Part of the country about eighty miles from Poland in Lutsk and it's an old sort of you know, old European like city. Dnipropetrovsk was very Soviet, you know, very eastern Stalin buildings. People spoke Russian, very Russian leaning, ethnically Russian. In Lutsk, they were very spoke, very nationalistic, spoke Ukrainian, only did not want to speak Russian. I was in an institute there, too. So I did basically the same job that I did in Dnipropetrovsk. I was teaching English teachers English.

STAAB: [00:13:21] Was it any different than your experience?

WALTON: [00:13:24] I mean, in terms of what I did? Not particularly, no. It was the same, the teachers rotated in, they stayed for three weeks, we did, you know, the same kinds of lessons, but the environment was so different being in western Ukraine and near Poland. Then I was supposed to stay an entire academic year there. I arrived in August and we were evacuated in February because of the political upheaval and the revolution. And I.

STAAB: [00:14:01] When were you evacuated? I'm sorry.

WALTON: [00:14:04] February of 2014. We were all out, you know, very quickly, very abruptly. Um, so that that that year was abbreviated into about six or seven months, seven, maybe seven months. And that was difficult because we couldn't tell anybody that we were leaving because the Peace Corps didn't want word to leak out. The Americans were evacuating because they thought something might happen to us. So it was very abrupt and very left me very feeling a lot, very unresolved. So I went back again in 2015, like a year and a half later to try to, you know, close things

up for myself. But I was then I went to Uzhhorod, which was in the southern southwestern part near Romania and Hungary. So I had three very different experiences, although I was doing the same work in the same sort of institute.

STAAB: [00:15:14] Can you describe these places a little more? It's hard for me, having not been to the Ukraine, to understand them and other people who are listening. Can you describe the what the places were like a little more?

WALTON: [00:15:26] OK. Dnipropetrovsk was that is the third largest city in Ukraine, but it often was not on maps at all because it was a closed city. So people there had not seen Americans because that's where the Soviet missile factory was. It was all underground. And so nothing would show up on the map. But no, but maps of Ukraine didn't have the city, like millions of people who live there. But that shows you how important the importance of that city to the Soviet republic and the fact that the rockets were built there. So there were a lot of people who were very still there still are lots of people who are very well educated and Dnipropetrovsk in terms of the sciences. And but it made for my coming in there or, you know, those of us in Group III who were posted there as real anomalies because people weren't used to people not speaking their language very well. And they would, they couldn't understand us because we had such a strong accent. Whereas here in the U.S., you were used to having people, immigrants and who can't speak the language, you know, all that well, sometimes in and we can, you know, give them some slack. But in Ukraine, I mean, in Dnipropetrovsk, people didn't want us to try to speak Russian out loud, you know, like in a in a group setting because of our strong accents. And we were told on the trains, for instance, don't speak English and don't speak Russian because you sound so weird. So basically be quiet because there was a security issue for us.

STAAB: [00:17:17] Why was there a security issue?

WALTON: [00:17:18] Well, people hadn't seen too many Americans in the East and they were afraid for our safety because there is some vestiges of the Cold

War and all that. And in fact, the KGB came to the institute to talk to the director about me because I was suspicious. So Dnipropetrovsk is a huge, huge city with all kinds of different institutions like polytechnics and the university. And people are concerned about their education and are very professional. And when I went to Lutsk, Lutsk is this much smaller city. It's very old and has medieval castle and things like that. And it's just a very lovely small old city with the with the castle and the cathedrals and people who are very traditional and very nationalistic. It was really interesting to be there when Ukraine was supposed to enter into negotiations to join the European Union. People would gather in the square, the town, the city square, and listen to the speeches for, you know, entering the European Union out in drenching rain with their blue umbrellas with the gold stars around them, covering them up in the rain, listening to these speeches. So I was, when I was there, I was very optimistic that Ukraine would join the European Union. And the reason for the revolution was that Yanukovich, who was the president, backed out of it. And then people got really angry and that ignited the Maidan and the revolution in Kiev.

WALTON: [00:19:19] But right there, it was this sense of possibility in 2013, especially in the fall over the Christmas of possibility of change, of radical change, are becoming more westernized and then the revolution. And now they're still working it out. When I was in Uzhhorod and the last time, '15 to '16, it's another very old city, but has much more of a cosmopolitan atmosphere because across the river from Uzhhorod is the Slovak Republic and Slovenia. And so there's a lot of commerce and interchange with Western countries, and particularly from the south in a little bit south of Uzhhorod into Hungary. In fact, people there a little bit south of Uzhhorod say they're Hungarian, even though they were born in Ukraine. So that's a little confusing. And they don't understand that to me, you know, the difference between nationality and ethnicity, there's a difference. But to them, they don't really get it. They don't buy into being Ukrainian because I'm Hungarian, my family speaks Hungarian. So they're all kinds of ethnic language issues on either, I guess, throughout Ukraine. But I could see them in the east where people said, I'm Russian, I want to speak Russian. And in southern southwestern Ukraine, OK, I'm Ukrainian,

I'm born in Ukraine, but I'm Hungarian and I'm speaking Hungarian in our schools and at home. So how do you bring this country together with you? If you don't speak even a common language. So I don't know where that leaves the country, but anyway.

STAAB: [00:21:26] So your job was to teach English, which is sort of the common, what could be the common language.

WALTON: Right.

STAAB: It's an important language.

WALTON: [00:21:36] It's an important language for people who want to do business and who want to be members of the world, you know, and interact with people who are not Ukrainian, but bringing the country together without a common language I think is hard. And people say, oh, well, you have Canada, where you have the Québécois who want to speak French. But Canada has a history of speaking English and French. And Ukraine is fragile. It doesn't have, it only has like maybe thirty years of independence. It doesn't have a real strong basis as a country.

STAAB: [00:22:23] Looking back at your tour of service, what do you think were your main accomplishments? You talked a lot about different things you did. What were you what do you think your main accomplishments?

WALTON: [00:22:34] Um, I think I think that the English teachers in all three sites got, if they wanted to, some of them didn't had lots of opportunity to practice their speaking skills. Some were very embarrassed the way they spoke and they didn't want to talk very much. But others really sort of grabbed that, you know, ring and went with it. And I think they got a lot out of novel ways of teaching that they're used to a lecture type where you raise your hand like this, you know, so very formalized. Yeah. And rigid. Yeah. And so, uh, so they got they got the practice, the fluency, the proficiency, perhaps increased proficiency. They also got a taste of some what they would call nontraditional teaching strategies. The sort of inductive thinking,

which they're not used to. They used to talk down. Tell me what it is, tell me the answer. What is the right answer? I said, well, there really isn't one. And they said there has to be a right answer.

STAAB: [00:23:45] Getting them to think for themselves.

WALTON: [00:23:48] And yes, independently, because this is sort of interesting. When I would go into elementary schools in the east, first of all, the kids had never seen an American. So they'd peek around the corner, you know, like, you know, does she look like a monkey? How does she look? That was really funny. But they also, what was my point. What were we talking about? Nontraditional.

STAAB: [00:24:16] How it was just so different.

WALTON: [00:24:18] Oh, I know what it was. Yeah, I know it was. So they kids would recite the same poems, sayings, Shakespearean sonnets, they all knew them cold, but they didn't know anything beyond what was script, what they were taught, what there was right here in the curriculum. They didn't know how to access anything else or know anything beyond what they were taught. And they weren't allowed or they didn't have the materials. They didn't have resources. They didn't have they didn't have textbooks. Everything is oral. So it was you know, they would sing the same songs, they everything. And it was to me just so rigid, so same so you might say, indoctrinated. Everybody knew what the curriculum, but they didn't know anything outside of the curriculum here in the United States. Everybody, you know, there's very little Common Core curriculum and everybody knows all this other stuff. So it's a real difference from our educational setup. It's very centralized.

STAAB: [00:25:33] So how did your Peace Corps experience influence your plans in the future when you came back, you came back several times and then went back to the Ukraine again. How did that influence your plans and your career?

WALTON: [00:25:50] Well, it doesn't really apply to me because I was older so that when I came back in 1996, I had had a leave of absence from my college and I just ran right back into teaching when I had been teaching before. So I just folded right back into, you know, what I had been doing before, which is teaching. I was teaching. Writing, right. Yeah. I did some other college level. I did other things at the college, but that was my main job was teaching.

STAAB: [00:26:20] Do you think your experience working in the Ukraine changed your teaching in any way?

WALTON: [00:26:27] A little bit more empathetic for people? I certainly, this isn't anything that really affected my teaching, but I certainly learned the value of hospitality and just openness of just you're here, come in. You know, I don't have to look right. I don't have to meet a perfect meal. Just come. You know, the main thing was just being welcoming and a little bit more tolerant, I'd say. And then when I went back the other times, I had already retired. So I didn't have to come back to a job, per se.

STAAB: [00:27:11] One question they ask is, how have you, the three goals for the Peace Corps? I don't know if you're familiar with them. To provide technical assistance where requested, to promote better understanding of Americans, and to promote better understanding of other people by Americans. Um, can you talk maybe about the third one and how maybe you have done that and coming back?

WALTON: [00:27:38] Oh, I don't know it's been anything very deliberate or pointed. But certainly my friends, all of them have said that they've learned a lot about Ukraine from me and an awareness. They send me articles now about especially now it's all in the news about Zelensky and Trump and everything. They're also aware of the country in a way that they weren't before.

STAAB: [00:28:10] That you've shed that light on them. Talking about the Ukrainian people. Have you through the years now, it's now 2019, and I guess the last time you were there you said was 2015?

WALTON: 2016.

STAAB: So have you continued any kind of involvement now in there or do you keep in touch with people or have any other kind of continued involvement in the Ukraine?

WALTON: [00:28:37] Yeah, I was just there this summer and went to visit my friends who were, who live in Lutsk. They we met in, uh, in the Lviv, which is another very western city in Ukraine. So they came down to leave to meet with me and my counterpart from Uzhhorod came to Lviv to meet with me also. Then I when I was in Kiev, I saw some of the Peace Corps staff people, one who was there in 1994, too. So that was pretty cool. Yes. Nice to see Jhana. She gave me these earrings. That's why I'm wearing them for her today.

STAAB: Aw, that's nice. And who was she?

WALTON: And she was like a program director. And she still is. So she knows. She said right now she's head of the Response volunteers in Ukraine. But she was a program director at that point, help train the new volunteers, the newbies.

STAAB: [00:29:45] So you've kept in touch with a lot of Ukrainian and Americans also working there still?

WALTON: [00:29:49] Yeah, also, I was I when I was in Ukraine this summer, I saw my first, she wasn't my counterpart, but she was the person delegated to sort of like my housemother, you might say, Luba. And I've seen Luba a couple of times, actually, uh, she came to the U.S. in 1997. Friends and I sponsored her to come for a visit. And then I saw her when I was, uh, back in 2013 and I saw her in 2015 and then I saw her again this summer.

So, um, I saw her family. And in fact I was really, really flattered that her grandson, who is studying in Vienna, came home in big part to see me this summer, which was just really. I was really tickled. Anton's a sweetie. That was it was very nice of him. Yeah.

STAAB: [00:30:54] I think I already kind of asked this question, but I'm going to re-ask it again. What has been the effect of your Peace Corps service on your life in general? What are the biggest takeaways and sort of the last question? What do you feel like it? How what if it's not on you?

WALTON: [00:31:16] Well, in 1994, I did have a computer and I had one of those dot matrix printers that was seen as really crude. There was no Internet. So I was really isolated in in Dnipropetrovsk. I remember having a dream before I left that I was on a ship and I was leaving the safe harbor and I was going across this ocean, but I didn't know what the port of arrival was going to be. And I remember feeling this is like a cult because I had to leave my job, my family, my dog, my house, my car, my friends. It's like, whoa, this is major. So I was feeling pretty uncertain when I left. So the, and mail didn't arrive reliably at all. So I can remember going to the post office any number of times and leaving in tears because there was no letter, there was nothing from anybody. And I felt that I had been forgotten. I know, I mean, I intellectually I knew I hadn't been, but I certainly felt that I had an emotionally felt that way because I was there. I mean that by myself. I was you know, as I said, I was 48, 49, 50, when I got home. I was older than the 20, 22 year olds who were there coping with all this. So if I were having trouble think of it, they had also gone through because I hope to think that I had more coping skills at an older age anyway.

WALTON: [00:33:11] So one of the biggest things I learned was how to tolerate solitude and how to entertain myself and keep myself balanced at times when it was really, really difficult because we were so removed from what was familiar. And even though Dnipropetrovsk became familiar, not in a deep way that your home becomes familiar. We were always foreigners. So that has stuck with me. The loneliness, the absolute loneliness and emptiness of being, you know, sort of on your own. And getting across

town was not that easy, that we couldn't be called very easily even because the phones didn't work that well.

WALTON: [00:34:16] Yeah, so the other thing I learned was that I alluded to was hospitality, so my place in DP became sort of a gathering place for some many of the other volunteers. I think there were about 15 of us in the city, but I didn't see them because they were strewn all across and they were, you know, anyway. But when they came, you know, into the center of the city where I was, they often just gathered at my place and I would have dinners and parties, so to speak. And that was, that helped. That helped everybody I think.

STAAB: [00:34:53] That's very nice. Oh, is there anything else you'd like to share?

WALTON: [00:35:01] Well, you know, Peace Corps slogan is the toughest, toughest job you'll ever love. And it's absolutely true. I look back on those years as being really years where I thought that I was using the skills that I had in meaningful ways. And helping people to as a model, but also as a skill giver teacher that I hope people, teachers in particular, you know, are using those skills.

STAAB: [00:35:38] Right. What was very nice interviewing you today, Peggy, thank you so much for your time.

WALTON: You're welcome. Thank you.

STAAB: Very interesting to learn about the Ukraine and your three Peace Corps services there. Thank you so much.

WALTON: [00:35:51] You're welcome. Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]