Order and Progress: a Brazilian Peace Corps Saga

Ordem e progresso: uma saga do Corpo de Paz Brasileiro

Orden y progreso: una saga del cuerpo de paz brasileño

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Abstract

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As Peace Corps volunteers, Jack Epstein and Charles Fortin arrived in Bahia, Brazil, just four months before the military government enacted harsh repressive measures of the Institutional Act No. 5 in December, 1968. In their respective favelas, they operated under the vigilant eye of local police authorities who squashed community organizing initiatives and even issued an all-points-bulletin for Jack's arrest. After vacation through the Amazon oblivious to police pursuit, they returned to Salvador and Jack was immediately hustled out of the country for fear of arrest, imprisonment, or worse. This saga tells of his exile, of conflicts and tense negotiations with Peace Corps authorities, and his forbidden undercover crossing of the Brazilian border in time for Charles' wedding. The story describes the challenges and modest outcomes of community development under military rule. Later, under more favorable circumstances, they both returned to Brazil and, for several years, continued to make their presence felt.

Keywords: Peace Corps. Favelas. Community development. Military rule. DOPS (Department for Political and Social Order).

Resumo

EPSTEIN, Jack; FORTIN, Charles. Ordem e progresso: uma saga do Corpo de Paz Brasileiro. **Rev. C&Trópico**, v. 44, n. 2, p. 11-34, 2020. DOI: https://doi.org/10.33148/cetropicov44n2(2020)art1

Como voluntários do Programa Corpo de Paz, Jack Epstein e Charles Fortin chegaram a Bahia, Brasil, há apenas quatro meses do endurecimento de medidas repressivas estabelecidas pelo Ato Institucional, AI-5, pelo regime militar em 1968. Em suas respectivas favelas, eles trabalhavam sob a vigilância das autoridades policiais locais,

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que inibiam iniciativas de organização comunitária, e listavam motivos para justificar a prisão de Jack. Após férias na região amazônica e desinformados acerca da existência de uma busca policial em seu encalço, voltaram a Salvador onde Jack foi imediatamente forçado a sair do país antes que fosse aprisionado, ou coisa pior. Esta saga conta sobre seu exílio, conflitos e tensas negociações com os dirigentes do Corpo de Paz, e de seu retorno proibido, cruzando a fronteira do Brasil disfarçado para o casamento de Charles. A narrativa descreve os desafios e os resultados modestos alcançados pelo desenvolvimento comunitário durante o regime militar. Ademais, sob circunstâncias mais favoráveis, ambos retornam ao Brasil, e por anos ainda podem sentir a sua presença.

Palavras-chave: Peace Corps. Favelas. Desenvolvimento da comunidade. Regras militares. DOPS (Departamento de Ordem Política e Social).

Resumen

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Como voluntarios del programa Americano Cuerpo de Paz, Jack Epstein y Charles Fortin llegaron a Bahia, Brasil, apenas cuatro meses antes del endurecimiento de medidas represivas establecidas por el Acto Institucional A-5, por el regimen militar en 1968. Ambos, en sus respectivas favelas, trabajaron bajo la vigilancia de autoridades policiales locales que inhibieron sus iniciativas de organización comunitaria y han justificado las razones para el encarcelamiento de Jack. Después de vacaciónes en la región Amazonica y desinformados acerca de existencia de una busqueda policial en el caso de Jack, los dos regresaron a Salvador donde Jack fue imediatamente obligado a salir del pais con miedo de ser arrestado, encarcelado o algo peor. En esta saga cuenta de su exilio, conflictos y tensas negociaciones con los dirigentes del Cuerpo de Paz, y del su prohibido retorno encubierto cruzando la frontera de Brasil para atender a la boda de Charles apenas 10 meses despues. En esta narrativa también se describe los desafios y los humildes resultados alcanzados por el desarrollo comunitario durante el regimen militar. Además, en circunstancias más favorables, ambos regresaron a Brasil y por varios años hasta el dia de hoy, siguen sintiendo la presencia de Brasil.

Palabras clave: Peace Corps. Favelas. Desarrollo comunitario. Reglas militares. DOPS (Departamento de Orden Político y Social).

1. By Jack Epstein and Charles Fortin

In the summer of 1968, Fidel Castro was nearing his 10th year as leader of a revolutionary socialist government that had overthrown a U.S.-backed dictator, nationalized U.S. oil refineries and closed casinos run by American gangsters. Successive U.S. administrations feared that a "domino effect" would lead to copycats in our backyard. Under John F. Kennedy, the Alliance for Progress and Peace Corps were established in 1961 to channel aid to the region and provide alternate models for restive populations.

In the 1960s, the cold war struggle to contain communism was the dominant foreign policy goal of the U.S. government. All this helps explain why the two of us found ourselves that summer in a poor, northern region of Brazil, where a right-wing U.S.-backed military junta and the Johnson administration shared the worry that millions of impoverished peasants might push the nation toward open rebellion.

In many ways, we couldn't have been more different.

Charles was an Irish-Catholic mid-westerner, a former seminarian who grew up in Whiting, Indiana and attended Notre Dame University. Before the Peace Corps, his version of an adventure was a trip to visit relatives in "faraway" Cleveland.

Jack was a West coaster of Jewish-Russian origin whose father immigrated to the United States from Latvia, and whose mother was a concert violinist. He attended UCLA and had worked on a kibbutz in Israel.

Before we were assigned to our host communities in the state of Bahia, we had spent six weeks in Brattleboro, Vermont, learning Portuguese and grassroots organizing in community development programs designed by Frank Mankiewicz. He later served as press secretary for Sen. Robert Kennedy and George McGovern during their presidential campaigns. Mankiewicz had been inspired by the legendary activist Saul Alinsky, who had organized poor people in Chicago, encouraging local leaders to "rub raw the sores of discontent." Alinsky also inspired former president Barack Obama, who himself was a community organizer in Chicago in the 1980s.

We both felt it was a unique and astonishing time when the U.S. government sponsored such programs. But that began to change after President Richard Nixon appointed Joseph Blatchford as Peace Corps Director in 1969. Blatchford, a Republican who lost a House seat to a Democrat in Los Angeles in 1968, aimed to chart what he called "new directions" for the Peace Corps by recruiting more craftsmen, farmers and education specialists rather than young liberal arts graduates just out of college like the two of us.

Image 1: Jack (left) and Charles in 2016



Source: Taken by the authors

We spent our first six weeks in Brazil continuing our training in the city of Feira de Santana inland from the capital, Salvador. Our trainers were veteran Peace Corps volunteers – a few had even been Freedom Riders challenging segregation in the south. They told us to figure out what our communities' residents most needed – be it water, sewerage, or some other basic service – and then help them achieve those goals themselves.

There was just one key hitch: despite its strong alliance with the U.S. government, Brazil's military government was no fan of the Alinsky/Mankewicz model of organizing poor people to pressure officials for basic needs. As the late Roman Catholic Archbishop of Recife Dom Helder Câmara, said at that time: "When I give food to the poor, they (military) call me saint. When I ask why they are poor, they call me a communist."

We were given a choice to pick out a town and a poor community known as *favelas*. We both decided to live where help to achieve basic necessities was most

needed. It was a shocking existence for both of us – middle class Americans who had always lived with running water, electricity and in-door plumbing, which were lacking in both of our communities.

Charles chose Santo Amaro da Purificação, a city of 58,000 and hometown of popular sibling samba superstars, Caetano Veloso and Maria Bethânia.

Image 2: Santo Amaro da Purificação City Hall.



Source: Taken by the authors

He picked the town's poorest neighborhood – *Maricá,* where shacks bore five-foot high watermarks created by previous floods that had engulfed the community. Ninety-five percent of dwellings had no running water, electricity or indoor toilets. With virtually no street lights, hard-working residents typically retired by 8:00 p.m.

Maricá was surrounded on three sides by tidal marshlands where the Subaé River – polluted by a French-owned lead factory upstream – emptied into Bahia's principal bay, The Bay of All Saints. Charles's primitive three-room rental shack, which he helped build, was surrounded by marshland, mangroves, and subject to the tidal ebbs and flows of a tributary that nearly reached his back wall. Mosquitoes, rats and snakes were ubiquitous. Residents threw garbage and human excrement in backyards or muddy streets amid chickens, pigs, and barefoot children.

Image 3: Charles (in background) building his mud-stick shack in Santo Amaro.



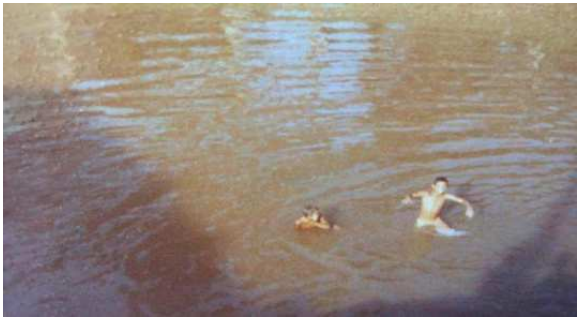
Source: taken by the authors.

Image 4: The view outside Charles's shack in Maricá favela in 1968.



Source: taken by the authors.

Image 5: Two kids swimming in the polluted Subaé River



Source: taken by the authors.

Jack opted to live in Valença, a town he had liked for its colonial architecture and picturesque waterfront along the River Una. At that time, it had some 16,000 inhabitants.

Image 6: Valença's City Hall in Bahia state.



Source: taken by the authors.

Jack's favela, Bolivia, was populated by squatters most of whom were fishermen who had built shacks atop a swamp. As in Maricá, there was no running water, electricity or paved streets. The water table was also too high to dig privies. Jack's rented house was by far the nicest on the block – its walls were constructed with cement and mud stick and a steal at $6 a month.

In both Santo Amaro and Valença, tuberculosis, malnutrition, and intestinal diseases were common as well as such serious tropical maladies as Chagas – a disease caused by the bite of the "kissing bug" that affects the heart -- and Schistosomiasis, caused by freshwater parasitic worms that attack the liver and other organs. We avoided those maladies by investing in mosquito nets to keep out the *barbeiro* (kissing bug) and staying clear of stagnant water to avoid the deadly worms.

Image 7: As the only resident American, Jack never lacked for company.



Source: taken by the authors.

Image 8: Most of Valença's poor lived in shacks like this



Source: taken by the authors.

Note: The sign says: "Christ the only hope."

Both of us helped form neighborhood associations to pressure town politicians to provide running water, electricity, sanitation as well as basic health care.

In Santo Amaro, Charles began by showing local children cartoon movies teaching them hygiene practices like washing hands and filtering drinking water. He also organized dance parties, or *festas,* to earn money for association projects. The parties featured a local band led by a man named Eugênio, a carpenter and saxophone player who became the unofficial association president.

In Valença, Jack helped form the *Associacão de Moradores* – a residents' association -- which started sewing classes with donated machines and literacy classes, filled streets with coconut shells that soaked up the mud and chopped down trees for electricity poles after the cash-strapped mayor vowed to supply electricity if the community provided the posts (Alas, he never did).

Image 9: Members of the Bolivia association cutting down trees to show Valença's mayor that they were serious about sharing the cost of electrifying their community



Source: taken by the authors.

But these seemingly innocuous programs did not sit well with local authorities, and especially with Santo Amaro's police chief and Valença's mayor.

The Santo Amaro police raided and searched association headquarters, harassed and interrogated Eugênio, while hurling accusations that the organization was merely a cover for drug trafficking, pornographic films, and prostitution.

The police chief then warned Charles that he was monitoring his movements -- even on visits to the state capital of Salvador 50 miles away. He told him that he had no issue with such programs as adult literacy, health education, road improvements, and support for the area soccer team. But organizing residents into a neighborhood association to pressure authorities would be a different matter entirely.

In Valença, similar complaints by the mayor and several high-profile businessmen led to Brazil's Orwellian-named Department for Political and Social Order (DOPS) – the secret police akin to the Gestapo or Stasi – to break into Jack's shack while he was out of town. They detected evidence of what they deemed unacceptable political behavior displayed prominently and called for his immediate arrest.

During the military dictatorship (1964 to 1985), DOPS agents searched for "*subversivos*, and provided "ideological clearance certificates" for employees in certain jobs. They deemed Jack a "*subversivo*."

Fliers circulated In Valença asking "all patriotic citizens" to remain on the telephone if they heard subversive chatter when party lines crossed – common in those days – and to report anything they heard to the authorities. DOPS agents even turned their attention to "subversive music." Paulinho, who ran Valença's only record store, once asked Jack to shut the door behind him since he wanted to listen to a song by singer Juca Chaves called "*Caixinha, Obrigado*," ("Little box, thank you"), whose lyrics satirized the military (Chaves was later forced to flee to Italy).

Each Bahian town also had a local army garrison whose commanding officer was in charge of ferreting out subversives. In Valença, it was a stocky man called Sgt. Jehovah with whom Jack had a minor run-in at the town's first ever art fair after challenging his decision to close it down. Organized by a university student named Nilo from the state capital, Salvador, it included a painting of Che Guevara as Saint George beheading the U.S. dragon. That was enough for Jehovah to deem it "subversive" and arrest Nilo, who was later expelled from his university over the incident.

Such harsh repression was made possible four months after our arrival in Brazil, when the military in December 1968 declared AI-5 (Institutional Act No. 5), which closed down Congress and gave the government the power to intervene in state and local affairs under the pretext of national security. It also imposed censorship, declared the illegality of political meetings, the suspension of habeas corpus and the removal of political rights of citizens perceived as subversive.

During its 21-year-rule, successive military strongmen arrested and tortured tens of thousands of Brazilians and executed or disappeared more than 400.

Half-way through our two-year Peace Corps stint, we were both ready for a break and entitled to an allotted one-month vacation. We left not knowing that authorities had issued an all-points-bulletin for Jack's arrest. The government told the Peace Corps that Jack would be imprisoned if it didn't send him back to the United States.

Without knowing anything about the mounting problem, and leaving no itinerary, we traveled by bus through the northeastern states of Sergipe, Alagoas, Pernambuco and Ceará before reaching Belem, the gateway to the Amazon River, where we boarded a steamship to Manaus, the Amazon's largest city.

We were on the run without realizing it, covering some 5,147 miles. Since our departure from Salvador, we had lodged in cheap hotels in red light districts, foraged on street food, and merged with poor folks at bus stations and rest stops.

After visiting Manaus, Porto Velho, Brasília, Belo Horizonte, and Ouro Preto, we finally arrived back in Salvador. We were two weeks over our vacation limit and we hoped our bosses wouldn't notice when we reached the main office, housed in the state lottery building supposedly to prevent a terrorist attack against a U.S. organization. The plan was to check for mail surreptitiously and head back to Santo Amaro and Valença.

It was there that Jack found an odd message from Peace Corps Bahia Director Romeo Massey. It said: "Jack, Stay in the Office. Don't Leave. Call me."

But Deputy Director James LaFleur was in the office with his feet on his desk, reading a Time magazine. Jacked asked him what was up. He agreed to call Massey, who was in Rio de Janeiro. In those days, long distance telephone communication was so poor that LaFleur had to yell into the phone and say "Over" each time he was ready for Massey to speak.

"Epstein is finally in the office. Over," LaFleur said.
Seconds after that, he hung up.
"We are going to Rio on the next flight," he told Jack.
"Why?" What's the problem?"
"I can't tell you that."
"OK. Then I am not going." Jack told him.
"I am not getting on a plane without knowing why."

His reluctance forced LaFleur back for another loud "Over" session with Massey. As Jack eavesdropped, he wondered whether someone had ratted on him for smoking *maconha* (marijuana) – a serious Peace Corps no-no. He indulged occasionally with a Valença friend, Roberto, who sold seafood.

"Epstein says he won't go unless he knows why," LaFleur told Massey. "Over." He then hung up.

"OK Jack. I can tell you is this -- it's a political problem. We are going to Rio."

A political problem? Jack was intrigued. Still not understanding the severity of the situation. He believed it would be nothing he couldn't talk his way out of. What could he have done that was so serious? And most importantly, he had never been to Rio de Janeiro, a city that he had always wanted to see – and on the Peace Corps' dime!

LaFleur later said he learned that the U.S. Embassy and the CIA had collaborated with DOPS, giving them background information on Jack – including his family's "Jewish Russian heritage" and his attendance at anti-Vietnam war protests while a student at UCLA. But apparently, what had started the investigation were complaints from two sources: the U.S. director of the Firestone rubber plantation near Valença – a staunch conservative with whom Jack had some testy arguments over the Vietnam war and the election of Richard Nixon -- and the manager of the town textile plant, who had made a special trip to Salvador to denounce Jack as an "advanced socialist" after a friendly exchange of ideas in his office.

It wasn't until much later that he realized that he had been a very naive 22-year-old American in thinking that as a U.S. citizen he could speak openly in an autocratic society about government repression and not pay a price.

When LaFleur and Jack arrived in Rio, they were met by a U.S. Consulate officer, who took them straight to the Consulate to confer with a Dr. Avery, the Peace Corps country director. Avery showed Jack a list of complaints compiled by DOPS, which included lies and distorted half-truths peppered with an occasional fact. They included:

"He dresses in a bizarre fashion, has long hair, a beard and is considered a hippie."

"His parents are Russian and still reside there." (Jack's mother was born in New York City and had never been to Russia until a

> vacation in 1982. His father immigrated to the U.S. from Latvia in 1928 at age 14. He became a U.S. citizen and won a Purple Heart fighting Nazis during World War II).
>
> "He gave up comfortable living conditions in the center of Valença to live in a miserable shack in a very poor area."
>
> "He has made statements on numerous occasions against the military government, president of the republic and admires Cuba, Russia, Eastern Europe and advocates violent terrorism in the model of the Cuban revolution. He has also advocated that all military reservists desert their posts."
>
> "His shack has pictures of Che Guevara, Fidel Castro, a wooden sculpture of a chained hand and a defaced military recruitment poster in which he has written in Portuguese: You too can become a fascist."

(Jack had a Christmas card with Che's likeness pinned to his desk sent by a Peace Corps friend in Chile. There were no photos of Fidel Castro, but a photo of Mexican American civil rights leader Cesar Chavez. The chained hand symbolizing slavery in Brazil – Brazil didn't outlaw slavery until 1888 -- was done by a local artist.

The doctored recruitment poster was in hindsight – a VERY STUPID thing to display. Jack mistakenly thought that nobody cared what he had on his walls. No one from the "*rua*" (middle class residents in town who live on paved streets) ever visited his home – except for his *maconha* buddy, Roberto, who advised him to take it down. In hindsight, he wished he had listened to him).

> "When in Salvador, he visits a Russian-educated Brazilian." (This referred to a Moscow-educated engineer, who resided at the *Pensão Universal*, where Jack ate lunch daily. They often talked politics over plates of rice, beans and whatever tasty dishes the owner, Dona Matilde, served. He never saw him outside of Valença.)
>
> "He receives subversive letters from a friend of Mexican origin. This friend lives with Jack's brother. He is an agitator and participates in demonstrations of a racial nature. This friend has also written about Castroite guerrilla activists and has slandered the Brazilian military."

(This "radical" friend was a fellow UCLA student in the Latin American Studies program, who later became a professor of Mexican American Studies. He was an outspoken advocate for California farmworkers and the civil rights movement headed by Chavez. Jack's brother, Jerry Epstein, was a violist for 42 years with the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra. He had never met Jack's UCLA colleague and aside from registering with the Democratic Party, had never been involved in politics.)

After reading the DOPS report, Jack told Avery that he had never advocated violence, nor had ever spoken in a public forum against the government, or called for mass desertions from the army. His opinions were made in private conversations with people he never suspected would report him to the authorities. He then asked Dr. Avery to set up a meeting with Brazilian officials so he could straighten out the problem.

"That's not possible," Avery told him.

The military had told Avery it's deportation or jail. Jack would have to sort out his future with Peace Corps officials in Washington. He was then given a plane ticket leaving that night for D.C., $50 and the name of a cheap hotel near Peace Corps headquarters and told to report there as soon as possible. (Avery, by the way, was on the same flight so he could attend an all-Latin American country director meeting later that week).

Jack arrived in D.C. believing the Peace Corps would back him against a repressive dictatorship, especially after pointing out the untruths painted by the secret police. Or at the very least, they would reassign him to another Latin American community development project since he spoke Spanish and wouldn't need to take another three months training course.

After a week of being grilled by a team of lawyers and the so-called Latin American Selection officer – a shrink – he was told that he would be terminated for breaking the cardinal rule of involvement in a host country's politics. Nor would they consider re-assigning him for fear he'd go off the rails again.

But Jack refused to take that as the final answer. There was too much at stake. Not only did he really want to continue his work for the Peace Corps but he knew that if he were dismissed it was likely he'd be drafted and eligible for a war that he had so vehemently opposed.

He then sought the advice of Bernard Lefkowitz, a Peace Corps program evaluator whom he had met a year earlier when he visited Valença to check out the Bahia program. Lefkowitz invited Jack to dine at his home with his wife, Abigail.

Over dinner, Lefkowitz told Jack that the Peace Corps couldn't fire him until he had passed all his medical exams. He advised him to spread out appointments with an eye doctor, dentist and a specialist in tropical medicine, which would give Jack time to talk to Latin American country directors still in town about reassignment. That, he said, was his only chance to remain a volunteer.

"If you can get a country director to accept you, there is not much they can do to kick you out," Lefkowtiz told him.

Jack wound up spending nearly three weeks in D.C., which gave him time to let Peace Corps lawyers know that he wouldn't go quietly by bringing up the subject of violation of free speech. He knew that the Peace Corps in 1969 had already been in court over that issue.

Jack's threat referred to Bruce Murray, who had sued the Peace Corps for wrongful termination. He had been on the music faculty of the University of Concepción in Chile before being recalled in 1967 without being told why. When he arrived in D.C., Peace Corps officials told him that he had been terminated for signing a petition published in a Chilean newspaper that called for the end of the bombing of North Vietnam and immediate negotiations for peace. And on top of that, he instantly became eligible for the military draft in his home state of Rhode Island.

Murray sued for violation of his First Amendment rights and lack of due process and won. The judge handling the case said: "Mr. Murray's dismissal was "a shocking, unconstitutional act on the part of the Peace Corps."

(In a March 12, 1970 article, the New York Times disclosed that 12 volunteers had been separated from the Peace Corps because of their public opposition to the Vietnam war.)

Meanwhile, between trips to see doctors, Jack talked to as many Latin American country directors as he could. For all but one of them, his story was enough to send them walking away as if he had a bad case of COVID-19.

Enter John Arango, a former Peace Corps volunteer in Colombia and Panama's country director. After listening to Jack's tale for about two minutes, he said: "OK, I'll take you since you already speak Spanish and we have a community development program. Who do I talk to?"

They then marched into the lawyers' office to finalize the arrangement. The lead attorney immediately said he would draw up a legal document for Jack to sign that stated he would not return to Brazil while still in the Peace Corps. He refused, telling him that he wasn't that crazy to return to a country known for torturing and killing dissidents.

Back in Santo Amaro, persecution by local police had finally put an end to the association. Charles then initiated -- along with four local volunteer teachers -- a two-year adult literacy program at the local school that filled four classrooms with 100 adults nightly. The program earned Charles the title of "professor," which mollified the chief of police. There was also high demand and full attendance for such classes. In 1969, the literacy rate in Brazil was about 68%.

Yet Charles felt he had become complicit with the status quo. The military coup had ended Brazilian educator Paulo Freire's unique and successful "social awareness" method of literacy training that employed no textbooks but which the military regime perceived as Marxist propaganda.

In its place, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) funded a private initiative by the Evangelical Confederation of Brazil. This conservative aid organization was not tailored to advance social awareness, or the problems of poor communities. Instead, students learned to read and write by rote, repeating words and prescribed phrases. Charles believed the program had been designed to squash dissension.

On Friday, October 10th, 1969, Jack flew to Panama City, where Arango picked him up at the Tocumen International Airport, and took him to a hotel. Then, on his first full day in country, he was stopped by an undercover agent of Panama's equivalent of DOPS -- DENI.

October 11 happened to be the one-year anniversary of the military coup that brought Gen. Omar Torrijos to power. Jack had been taking photos of the *Guardia Nacional* general speaking to a large crowd about the glory of his revolution. After examining his instamatic camera and learning that he was a Peace Corps volunteer, the agent told him to move on.

At that moment, Jack swore that he would keep his political opinions to himself in yet another country with a military dictatorship even though many Panameños themselves talked openly about the *Guardia's* involvement in prostitution, illegal lottery, casinos, arms and drugs. Torrijos once described the infamous Manuel Antonio Noriega as "my gangster," when he headed the Guardia's intelligence unit.

After a week, Jack decided to forego the community development program in Panama City, rationalizing that he couldn't get in much trouble working in the rural province of Veraguas. The work there involved advising cooperative stores in poor communities that sold consumer goods as well as local farmers' agricultural products such as fertilizers, seeds and chickens.

He was sent to Santa Fé, a mountainous, isolated village some 185 miles west of the Panama Canal to train for one month with a Peace Corps couple and a Colombian Roman Catholic priest named Hector Gallego. Like Archbishop Dom Helder Câmara, Padre Hector was part of a religious movement called Liberation Theology, which linked religious faith with aiding the poor and oppressed by working for social change.

But the cooperatives were controversial in Santa Fé. The stores cut into profits of local political and economic bosses – so-called *caciques* – who sold their goods at high prices and paid paltry sums for the peasants' produce. As a result, many area farmers were forced to leave home several months a year to work on sugar plantations to make ends meet.

In 1968, to try and break the caciques' economic grip, Gallego organized the *Cooperativa Esperanza de los Campesinos* (Hope of the Peasants Cooperative) that bought and sold items at fair prices and loaned money at reasonable rates. He paid for this venture with his life.

In 1971, thugs burned down his straw-roofed hut. He barely escaped unharmed. A month later, he disappeared after being taken away by two men who identified themselves as members of the *Guardia Nacional*. He was never seen again. In 1988, investigative reporter Seymour Hersh wrote in the New York Times that Gallego had been thrown to his death from a helicopter and that U.S. Army intelligence had intercepted a message that overheard Noriega joking that he "learned an important lesson: Always kill a man before throwing him out of a helicopter.")

Image 10: Colombian Roman Catholic priest, Hector Gallego.



Source: Authors files

After training in Santa Fé, the Peace Corps sent Jack to Las Palmas, a small Veraguas farming community with dirt streets and electricity by generator between 6 p.m. and 9 p.m. The village was surrounded by communities of an indigenous peoples called Guaymi, who were around when Christopher Columbus contacted northwestern Panama. The "airport" for the weekly mail plane was a nearby pasture.

During his free time, he visited the closest Peace Corps volunteer, Doug O'Brien, who lived in a tiny community off the Pan American highway called El Piro. Doug was finishing his two-year stint and wanted to see South America before returning to marry his Panamanian girlfriend, Maritza. Jack agreed to go with him.

When they reached Montevideo, Uruguay, they were stopped several times by police searching ID papers. They had arrived in early August, 1970, which coincided with the dramatic search for an abducted American police adviser named Dan Mitrione. Police and soldiers seemed to be everywhere.

Mitrione had been kidnapped by the leftist guerrilla group, Tupamaros, whose members said he had taught local police torture methods to extract information. They threatened to execute him if the government didn't release 150 political prisoners. The government said no to their demands and Mitrione was later found in a car shot to death. (Movie director Costa-Gavras told the story in "State of Siege," a 1972 French film starring Yves Montand as Mitrione).

Doug and Jack agreed that it was time to leave Uruguay, but for where?

João Batista Neto Chamadoura, a Brazilian schoolteacher they had met in Peru, said they could stay at his apartment in São Paulo. Doug -- anxious to see Brazil – accepted the invitation. That forced Jack to think about his pledge to the Peace Corps lawyers. He rationalized that the risk would be minimal since they would be crossing into Brazil over a land border without the vigilance of an airport. And if he stayed just a week in a city of more than 10 million people – that would be enough time to eat feijoada, drink a few *chopps* and *caipirinhas* and *matar saudades* ("kill the nostalgia") as Brazilians say. Then he would return to Panama.

But once in São Paulo, he thought about Charles, who was about to marry his Bahian fiancée, Sonia, seen here in the doorway of Charles's home in Santo Amaro in February, 1970. With her Tia Olga, she had come to celebrate the feast of the *Lavagem da Purificação*.

Image 11: Charles's future wife Sonia inspecting his finished home in 1970.



Source: Taken by the authors

Jack had received a pro forma invitation in Panama and knew the date of the ceremony – August 12 – was just days away in Salvador. When he saw a long-distance bus pass by with Salvador as its destination his thinking – or lack thereof – abruptly changed. It had been a year since his expulsion. Why would the military care if he went to his friend's wedding? And so far, so good. Nobody had bothered him. He then bought a ticket the next day for the 36-hour, 904-mile slog to Salvador.

Aboard the bus, a small world story ensued.

Jack sat next to a chatty middle-aged woman who told him that she was going to Salvador to attend her niece's wedding. He told her that he was also going to Salvador to attend a friend's wedding. She said her niece was marrying an American. He said his American friend was marrying a Bahian. They both stared at each other.

"Charles?" She asked. "Sonia?" he answered.

When they arrived in Salvador on the eve of the wedding, Tia Olga invited him to share a taxi to Sonia's parents' home. When they arrived, Olga asked him to carry her bags. Charles answered the door and gave her a huge hug. Then Jack piped up: "Charlesie, where do you want me to put these bags."

His jaw dropped.

That night Jack attended Charles's bachelor party at the swank British Club with many Peace Corps volunteers in attendance, including Massey and LaFleur. Massey told Jack that he would set up a meeting with the American Consul and that Jack must see him as soon as possible.

Years later, LaFleur claims a Brazilian colonel friend of his had informed him that Jack had crossed into Brazil and was heading north.

"I was not surprised when Jack showed up at the party," LaFleur said recently. "I told him that the military knew where he was and that he was in danger. Jack did not listen and later went to the wedding. I really believe that Jack has a guardian angel or two taking care of him."

After the wedding at Salvador's Igreja da Nossa Senhora da Vitória, Jack went to see the U.S. consul, 31-year-old Alexander Watson.

Jack told Watson that he didn't want any problems with the government but now that they knew he was back in Bahia, he wanted closure by visiting Valença to say goodbye and explain to people why he had abruptly disappeared. Then, he would return to Panama.

Watson didn't try to talk him out of the visit. Instead, he gave him a letter that said "Jack Epstein is a Peace Corps Volunteer in Panama, who is on vacation and intends to return to Panama. If there are any problems, please contact me." He then stamped it with the official Consulate seal.

Yes, Jack indeed had guardian angels named Lefkowitz, Arango and Watson.

With Watson's letter in hand, Jack returned to Valença and spent several days visiting friends in town and in the *favela*. Along the main drag, he spotted Sgt. Jehovah giving him the stink-eye. Jack assumed the sergeant was ordered to leave him alone for he did not approach him.

Charles, meanwhile, focused his efforts on four projects: the aforementioned-adult literacy program, a health center, filling in muddy streets with quarry sand, a social club and garnering support for youth soccer teams. The pursuit of those ends featured endless fits and starts, countless City Council sessions, extended periods of discouragement during long intervals when nothing happened along with the nagging notion that nothing would ever come to fruition. American "can do" had grudgingly yielded to Brazilian acquiescence, "*se Deus quiser*" ("if God wills it"). Charles then hit upon the idea of opening a medical center stocked with sample medicines from doctors in Santo Amaro and Salvador. He then coaxed the mayor, the local Lions' Club and the Rotary to pay the rent for the new center.

Image12: Charles's street in 2003.



Source: Taken by the authors

By 1978, even though Peace Corps had ended its presence in Brazil, Maricá had undergone notable infrastructure changes including paved streets and electrical transmission lines, and other improvements.

Years later, Charles finally returned for a brief stopover visit to Maricá in 2003. Water contamination has been one of Brazil's more stubborn challenges, primarily in Rio's Guanabara Bay, São Paulo's Tietê River, and Bahia's All Saints' Bay. Since 1950, the quality of Bahia's bay waters has competed with the effluents from an oil refinery, industrial park, petrochemical complex, and the rural sugar cane runoff that spills into smaller rivers, such as the Subaé, that empty into Brazil's second largest bay.

Image 12: In Santo Amaro, Subaé River in 2003.



Source: Taken by the authors

During his Peace Corps time in Maricá, Charles had been oblivious to the effects of the French-owned lead factory just two kilometers upstream on the other side of town. It operated on the banks of the river from 1960 to 1993. Lead and cadmium slag extinguished most life in the river except for some crabs that mired in the mud downstream adjacent to his shack.

By 2003, as an evaluation officer with the Inter-American Development Bank, Charles was responsible for the assessment of Bank-supported projects in water decontamination in these waterways. This evaluation took him once again to Santo Amaro to witness some of the changes that had taken place.

The Subaé was still muddy but finally free of the effluents from production of 900,000 tons of lead ingots that during operation caused the death of 940 workers and contaminated and crippled a minimum of 18,000 people. The poison and the effects generated by the plant would undergo highly-publicized scrutiny and measures meted out by the Senate's Human Rights Commission in Brasília.

Twenty-three years after Jack's ouster from Brazil, he moved to Rio de Janeiro with his wife, Katherine Ellison and a Samoyed named Clea, where he worked as a reporter primarily for the Associated Press and TIME magazine. Katherine, who had shared a Pulitzer Prize with two other reporters in 1986 for International reporting on the Philippines, had been named Rio bureau-chief for the Miami Herald after spending five years as bureau-chief in Mexico City for the San Jose Mercury News.

It was 1993 – eight years since the end of the military dictatorship – and Brazil was a different world. No more DOPS, or paranoia for speaking out. Former jailed "subversives" like Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff would later become presidents of the republic. The military seemed content to stay in their barracks.

In 1999, Katherine and Jack decided to return to California. But before their departure, Jack told her he couldn't leave without seeing what had happened to his Valença neighborhood.

He traveled there with Carolyn Kazdin, who had also been a community organizer in Valença and had since become an AFL-CIO activist. They had kept in touch and she wound up spending 11 years in São Paulo as an adviser to a major Brazilian union.

Valença had also changed. With some 60,000 inhabitants in 1999, the town had become the gateway to the gorgeous white sand beaches of Morro de São Paulo island, a short boat ride away. It had also become the largest city on the so-called Dendê (palm oil) Coast and had dozens of inns and hotels to meet the annual demand of tourists in the summer months. (Its population is currently 82,000).

Jack found his house still standing and vastly improved and his next-door neighbor, Dona Naí, in the same home. When she saw him, she smiled, grabbed his face, then told him to wait while she changed into better clothes.

The changes to the neighborhood were stunning. The once muddy street had been paved and, while the neighborhood was still poor, it now had the basic necessities that the association had fought for -- lights, running water and real streets.

When Jack asked the then-Valença mayor, Ramiro Campelo – whom he had known previously as a town councilman and owner of the Pirelli tires franchise– how these changes came about, he answered in one word: "Democracy."

Image 13: Jack's neighbor, Dona Naí, still lived next door 30 years later in 1999.



Source: Taken by the authors

Image 14: Jack's house had vastly improved.



Source: Taken by the authors

It turns out the neighborhood is now Valença's largest voting bloc in a nation where voting is obligatory. If politicians want to stay in power, they must pay attention to the community or risk being voted out of office, Ramiro said.

Jack was also happy to see that homes now had numbers and his street an official name -- Avenida Rua Senhor do Bonfim. Dona Naí said that some residents had wanted to call it Rua Joaquim, the Portuguese name that Jack used since folks had trouble pronouncing Jack.

But that didn't happen. He lost out to the neighborhood cachaça vendor.

2. Epilogue

Today, local community organizers are as badly needed in Latin America as they were in the 1960s. The region remains the world's most unequal in income inequality, undermining its economic potential and health of its population. About 62 million of its inhabitants live in extreme poverty, which means a lack of access to such basics as food and shelter. The impact of COVID-19 is expected to increase the number of the very poor to 96 million, according to a recent U.N. report.

In Brazil, President Jair Bolsonaro, the far-right former Army captain, has broadened the powers of the military and former generals in his administration. His most ardent supporters want a military takeover that would enhance his powers — and Bolsonaro has even attended their rallies.

3. The characters

After the Peace Corps, *Charles* returned to the United States and Madison, Wisconsin, to complete his graduate studies in urban planning. In Jacksonville, Florida, he served as planning director for neighborhood improvement in low-income areas.

In 1974, he returned to Brazil, where he taught for nearly 18 years and coordinated the graduate program of urban and regional development at the Federal University of Pernambuco in Recife. During that time, he received a doctorate degree in International Development at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) from the University of Sussex in the United Kingdom.

In 1995, he departed for Washington, D.C to work as an evaluation officer with the Inter-American Development Bank responsible for the assessment of the environmental impacts of Bank-supported programs and projects. In this capacity he traveled to nearly every Latin American and Caribbean country to evaluate projects, which included living conditions in Santo Amaro. Later, as an independent consultant, he focused on evaluation of OAS (Organization of American States) anti-drug training programs throughout the region and assessments of natural disaster risk management initiatives in the Caribbean.

He is the author of "Rights of Way to Brasília Teimosa, the Politics of Squatter Settlement." (Sussex Academic Press, 2015). Today, a member of the Local Planning Agency, he lives in Dunedin, Florida with his wife, Lisa, a former executive of the Baltimore County Public Library System.

Jack Epstein's travels throughout Latin American became a book: "Along the Gringo Trail, A Budget Travel Guide to Latin America" (And/Or Press, 1977).By 1980, he had begun a journalism career, free-lancing from Central and South America mainly for the now defunct Pacific News Service (PNS), a San Francisco alternative wire service.

In 1982, he received a grant from the Fund for Investigative Journalism to research the links between Central America's Miskito Indians and the CIA, spending four months in Nicaragua, Honduras and Costa Rica, producing a series of articles with another reporter for PNS and the *National Catholic Reporter*.

In 1989, he moved to Mexico City to teach journalism at the American School and free-lance for numerous newspapers, including the San Francisco Chronicle, Los Angeles Times, Houston Chronicle, Seattle Times, Cleveland Plain Dealer, Christian Science Monitor, Fort Worth Star-Telegram and the Dallas Morning News.

Upon his return to the U.S. in 2000, he joined the San Francisco Chronicle as its Foreign Service Editor. He is still there editing foreign news. He lives in San Anselmo, California with his wife, Kathy and two dogs.

The former Peace Corps official, John Arango**,** is still fighting the good fight. In the 1980s, he was coordinator of the Haitian Refugee Pro Bono project, which recruited lawyers to help refugees seeking political asylum. In 2017, he resigned from the Sandoval County Planning and Zoning Commission in New Mexico after it approved oil and gas fuel use on unincorporated areas without giving notice to adjoining property owners or giving the public an opportunity for public review.

Bernard Lefkowitz: Before his death from cancer in 2004 at age 66, he worked as an investigative reporter, a true-crime author, an assistant editor at the New York Post and as a journalism professor at Columbia University.

Alexander Watson: The U.S. Consul in Bahia later became U.S. Ambassador to Peru and was tapped by President Bill Clinton to be U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs. In 2004, he joined Diplomats and Military Commanders for Change, a group of retired diplomats and military commanders who supported John Kerry for president over George W. Bush for the latter's failure of "preserving national security and providing world leadership".

Romeo Massey: In 2007, Massey re-joined the Peace Corps as country director in the Dominican Republic after 13 years at Florida State University, where he served as director of the Center for Information, Training and Evaluation Services. In addition, Massey has held various contracts with the U.S. Agency for International Development and C.A.R.E. in Uganda, Belize, and Honduras. He remained Peace Corps director in the Dominican Republic until 2011.

James LaFleur: For years, LaFleur worked as an economist and as a consultant in Maputo, Mozambique for Booz Allen Hamilton, the accounting and consulting firm, where he is the American liaison for business-sector development projects developed by the United States Agency for International Development for the Mozambique government. He currently lives in Takoma Park, Maryland. His wife, Socorro, once worked as Dom Helder Câmara's secretary.