

Margaret Fearey

Like many others, I joined the Peace Corps right after college intending to be of some service to others, but also, to be honest, to travel and experience a very different view of life. I also wanted to go to Turkey specifically, both because of a family connection of sorts (my great aunt had worked with Greek and Armenian orphans in Turkey and Greece just after WWI) and because I had written a senior paper on a 10th c. Turkish church on Achtamar, an island in Lake Van.

I signed on to a public health project which involved working with folks living in the slums in Ankara. Our training was in Portland, Oregon and its regimen included many hours of language training (excellent), some cultural background, calisthenics (5:30am) and psych interviews/testing. We were being vetted for suitability; and those found wanting were “deselected.” The evaluators seemed to be looking for “normal,” red-blooded Americans, not for folks who would fit in with Turkish life.

Before the end of training, our project cratered. The PC Country Director had pressured the Turkish sponsor to accept our large group in order to get the PTs and medical paraprofessionals he had wanted. He got cold feet and hived us over to the anti-TB campaign with a few slots for technical work. An additional month of training in Portland followed, including lessons on how to give injections (prohibited for foreigners in Turkey).

Finally in Turkey, I was off to Izmir with a number of others; though I had the only real job, in a bacteriology lab screening sputum samples. We were there for three months. Finally, the TB campaign demanded our removal and the Foreign Ministry was about to declare us persona non grata. PC intervened, allegedly with a covert threat to reconsider Turkey’s AID budget, and we were called back to Ankara to be trained in ESL.

The good news: I was assigned to Ataturk University in Erzurum, not far from Lake Van. A great assignment with good people, both Turkish and American. I taught both Chaucer in modern English and ESL, lived in an old Ottoman house with a coal stove – and showers provided by a tank of water we heated up by burning wood. In the late 60s transportation was still by horse-drawn phaeton, wheels in the summer, sled runners when the snow was coming down (much of the year).

And thanks to all the disruption, we enjoyed more leisure time than other, better organized projects.

I was able to finally visit the church on Achtamar Island and to travel to Tehran, Isfahan, Shiraz, Persepolis, by raft to Basra, to Baghdad and back to Turkey. Those were the days before 1967 War and we were also able to take a long trip to Beirut (then still “The Paris of the East”), as well as to East Jerusalem and Bethlehem (both then in Jordan). We were in Jerusalem for Easter and crossed over through the Mandelbaum Gate and no-man’s land to West Jerusalem, Israel.

I’ve often wondered how much deeper my experience of Turkey would have been had I been teaching ESL in a village or a small town. I think that was a loss for me. However, I did come away with a profound interest in and commitment to Turkey. The country and its people are so little known here, and much of the information is either tragic or untrue, that I think part of our service is to spread our knowledge of the country and its people, one hopes with positive results.

After PC, I went to graduate school at the University of Michigan, first in Islamic Art History, and then Turkish and Persian. Back to Turkey as a contract teacher at Middle East Technical University in Ankara. That was 1968-1969, and things were as politically disrupted in Turkey as in the US. It became impossible to teach because of the student strikes and unrest, so I returned to the US, eventually to a Ph.D. program in Turkish and Persian at Michigan. I spent a year in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, doing research for my dissertation; and then a year in Jerusalem continuing the research. The upshot: no jobs in this country (mid 70s), the existing ones having been tenured up with 40-year-olds.

So I went to law school, eventually became a judge, and was able to use my Turkish and Persian in minor ways, including assigning a delinquent before me, of Iranian origin, to memorize an appropriate poem of Hafez as part of his probation.