

Judy Hails
10/11/2018

Reception at the U.N.

The invitations arrived in the mail from the embassy in Washington, D.C.:

*THE PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF ALGERIA
CORDIALLY INVITES YOU TO A
RECEPTION AT THE UNITED NATIONS
TO HONOR THE 15TH ANNIVERSARY
OF ALGERIA'S INDEPENDENCE.*

*7:00 P.M.
NOVEMBER 1, 1979*

We were entitled to two invitations because my husband was an Algerian national with a scholarship for a master's program at New York University funded by the Ministry of Education. After the invitations were distributed to the other Algerian students at NYU we had two extras, so I invited two students from the graduate division of NYU Law School where I was studying: Gordon, a friend from law school days in Los Angeles who was currently a student at NYU, and his roommate Bob.

Splurging on a cab, we headed north on the Avenue of the Americas and then east to the stately United Nations building on First Avenue. Fashion wise, we were starving student chic: Ahmed in a white suit reminiscent of John Travolta in Saturday Night Fever, Gordon with a sport coat stretched tightly, barely concealing the muscles he used to maintain his dominance in the national hammer throwing competition (senior division), slender Bob in a non-descript business suit, and me in an inexpensive dress with a flower print.

The buffet tables were covered with delicacies from many countries. Expensive French champagne flowed. In the tradition of the United Nations, the lavish dinner was served without regard to the poverty of the nation, religious prohibitions, or the wars that had once been fought between nations.

The receiving line was assembled. We dutifully shook hands, made polite comments and had our pictures taken with the ambassador, a scholar in his own right. Then we found ourselves alone in a long corridor. Someone suggested that we walk around. Ahmed and Gordon took the lead with me trailing behind, unaccustomed to high heels and getting them tangled in my long skirt. As we passed art treasures I recalled comments the docent had made during the standard tour when I visited the U.N. upon arriving in New York the previous year.

Our footsteps echoed through the deserted building. The Battle of Algiers established the model for urban guerrilla warfare, but no one was cognizant of security that night. Finally, we stopped. The sign on a door said **GENERAL ASSEMBLY**. Someone tried the door knob. It was unlocked. "You guys," I said in a stage whisper, "we shouldn't go in there." My curiosity overcame my caution and I ran to catch up. The room was cavernous and totally quiet. "Let's find our countries," Gordon said. It was easy: looking up at the tiered rows of seats you could see that the countries were arranged in alphabetical order. Ahmed relaxed in the chair designated "Algeria" while Gordon, Bob and I took turns sitting behind the sign that read "United States."

Walking further down the hall, we approached another door. It was marked **SECURITY COUNCIL**, and it, too, was unlocked. The chamber was intimate compared to the General Assembly. In the center was one large table. The position for each member was marked. We sat down. A sense of power emanated from the surroundings. In a few weeks this room would be engulfed in frantic activity trying to free hostages from the U. S. Embassy in Teheran, but on the night of November 1, four graduate students from NYU were acting like Goldilocks, trying out the chairs, and no one noticed.