

Maggie, the UN and me

By Vimi Bauer, former United Nations Tour Guide (1966 -1968)

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“Six degrees of separation” is not a phrase I use often. On September 2nd, my husband and I picked up the September issue of WestView News. Whilst reading it, my husband, Irv, exclaimed, “You’ve got to see this!”

The obituary for Maggie Capsis, George’s wife, was in the paper. I didn’t know Maggie personally, but we had heard the sad news a few days earlier. However, on reading the obituary I felt a frisson of excitement; a strange reaction to an obituary! I found that Andromache Geanocopoulos, known to friends as Maggie, was 26 when she held the job of supervisor of the UN Guides when the tours at the UN were first started with all of ten guides in November, 1952. I too had been a guide at the UN from 1966 to 1968.

The ‘60s were tumultuous and challenging times with Civil Rights marches, Vietnam, Ban The Bomb protests and the ‘67 War. The promise of the United Nations was the hope of the world. Being a guide during that time was a very special experience in my life. We were idealists and a shared idealism forges strong connections. The bond was not only among us guides but also to the idea of world peace. Each year, the UN hired 40 guides on a 2-year contract, though now there are only half that number. We were from all over the world including, Senegal, India, UK, Ivory Coast, Japan, Mexico, Denmark, Iran, Finland, Haiti, Germany, Canada, Brazil, Egypt, South Korea, and more. All in our twenties, we were young and carefree, and we weren’t going to change the world yet on every tour we led, in a small way, we did our best to do just that. Sometimes, we’d have groups that wanted to argue, sometimes the groups wanted to learn; sometimes they were just tourists out to be entertained.

Yet every group went away with a more communal view of the world.

Most groups were all adults. However, I remember taking a group of high school students who wanted to know what they could do to foster world peace. I replied, “How about becoming a pen-pal with someone from another country,” then I added, “One day, who knows, you may end marrying someone from another country.” The daggers flying my way from the two chaperone teachers still make me smile.

It was a great job. We’d struggle to be on time in the morning for our daily “briefings,” so that we were always up to date and well informed. We had an important job to do. We had to be gracious and engaging, but we also had to be able to handle any complicated substantive issues that came up, which was often!

We made lifelong friendships and many of us have stayed in touch through all these years. My personal contact list includes about 50 former-colleagues. We have met, some of us more frequently than others, for lunches, dinners, and even organized our own anniversary events where many of the 50 were present. More recently, thanks to the Internet, more of us have been able to reconnect despite now being scattered all over the world.

This past November was the 60th Anniversary of the UN Guided Tours and I was coordinating our “decade.” One of the activities planned was for former guides to go on tours given by the current crop of guides. Sadly though, Storm Sandy put a stop to our plans! Despite an alternative date arranged, it involved re-booking flights and hotels which proved too difficult and too expensive. It was

painfully disappointing for us all, as the excitement had been building for over six months! However, as I still live in New York, I had called the UN well before the threat of Sandy and asked if I could join a regular tour, without any former guides, where it would be for obvious reasons, a very different experience.

As I stood waiting at the starting point of the tour, my eyes fell on the large new permanent exhibit of shocking facts and statistics such as “Worldwide \$1630 billion spent on Military Expenditures compared to \$0.45 billion spent on Disarmament and Non-Proliferation and only \$2.7 billion of the regular UN Budget spent on Peace, Security, Development, Human Rights, International Law.”

Our guide emerged a minute later, a lovely young Eritrean woman in her national dress. As we listened to her, I noticed how much more content-driven the tour was now. A good part of the one-hour tour was spent at a large exhibit on “Weapons of War,” cases of grenades and land mines and more horrifying statistics. By the end of the tour, outwardly in control but inwardly holding back my tears, I was flooded with sense memories and images and was deeply touched by the presentation by the young Eritrean. Unexpectedly though, I was also grieving, not just the passage of time, but because I experienced the...failure. We had failed. The UN had failed. The idea had failed. A terrible sadness washed over me. Has the burden of idealism, of individual freedom, the principles of justice and a peaceful world tied us up in knots? Has it only resulted in frustration or worse in paralysis, and too often in calculated organized sectarian massacres and mindless suicide bombings?

There are now 193 member nations. When I was at the UN there were 122. As the legacy of WWII, the UN with its subsidiaries can take pride in many successes since its formation in 1945. There have been treaties and agreements (not all member states are signatories to all treaties) on topics as varied as human rights, the use of outer space and the oceans, countless peacekeeping missions and teams of weapons inspectors. Yet, have we reached a point in history when the world's conflicts loom too ominously, too dangerously?

Ironically, I'm writing this article as we all urgently hope for a viable way forward on Syria to come out of the Security Council. The 68th UN General Assembly convenes on September 17th. Today also marks the 12th year since the tragedy of 9/11. The effectiveness and influence of the world body will be tested again. A convergence, a pivotal moment, to redefine and recommit to the spirit and the most important, the highest ideal of the Charter, "the prevention and removal of threats to the peace."

My days at the UN were heady times. Our private world was the Guides' lounge, a large dingy room in the basement where we sprawled on long saggy couches, waiting to be called up on our fourth, sometimes fifth tour. It was a space alive with the light-hearted fun of our daily lives, stories of romances, and an ever alert intelligence, and yes arguments too, but always with a world-embracing passion. I am sorry I didn't know Maggie; I discovered our common past too late. I am sure we would have had many long talks and undoubtedly lots of laughs.



Vimi Bauer, United Nations Tour Guide, giving a tour of the United Nations to a group of women from the 1967 Miss Universe Pageant