My First Job

By Linda Osborne

In 1963 – after graduating from college – a group of us girls went to Washington, DC, to look for jobs and be part of the Kennedy era. There were five of us and two actually already had jobs. Lonnie and Debbie had been secretly recruited on campus for the CIA. It wasn’t until 40 years later I learned that Lonnie was, in fact, being trained to be a CIA agent. Carolyn found a job with the Treasury Department and Susan got a job as secretary for Senator Barry Goldwater.

We found a brownstone near Dupont Circle, down from Swan Street… one of the busiest drug dealing alleys in Washington.

And then started our careers.

I found a job at the Korean Embassy. I was one of two Americans who worked there. Hermine was the ambassador’s secretary and I was the political secretary. What this job meant was mostly typing and serving coffee. A lot of coffee. I hated serving coffee. I had to bring it in on a little tray and set it down before my boss, Minister Yun, and try not to spill it. A couple of times I had to serve the Ambassador coffee and that was the worst. He would be sitting on a sofa in a large room with his guest sitting across from him and I’d have to walk across the expansive space, take it off the tray and place it in front of him. I’d get nervous and my hands would shake, so I’d manoeuver as close to him as politely possible before edging the cup off the tray.

But aside from that performing part of the job, I have thought many times that this was the most wonderful job I’ve ever had.

I was included in all the Embassy parties and could bring my roommates. There we would be --

five young women enjoying eavesdropping on Washington’s diplomatic corps.

I became a tutor for the Ambassador’s children. And I studied Korean on the weekends with a handsome Korean-American, Alexander Kim. I learned that during the decades-long occupation of Korea by Japan, it was illegal for the Koreans to speak Korean or use their alphabet. Their alphabet has 21 vowels and 19 consonants - not like our 26 letters -but written the way the tongue moves to make the sound. But it’s missing a few letters, like the English “L”.

They are very proud of their alphabet and one of their holidays is, in fact, Alphabet Day in October. The embassy would be closed and there would be a party at the Ambassador’s residence. No one else I knew had an Alphabet Day Off.

One time Hermine went on a long holiday and I satin for her as the Ambassador’s secretary. During this time a large party was going to be held for some dignitary and Hermine left me clear instructions for what to do. Mostly I had to get the numbers of guests to the caterers and order the booze. It was very important to get the number right. I kept a precise list of all the acceptances and regrets. I counted over and over – a long list of ambassadors, State Department officers and the usual socialites. Finally I gave the all- important number to the caterer.

I was very excited at the prospect of running this party. There wasn’t much of a place for me to advance with this job after all. I couldn’t become Korean and I wasn’t joining the Foreign Service, so any challenge like this was fun.

The night of the party started off fine , except it seemed that there was an unaccountable crush of people around the food table with people trying to get into the dining room. One of the political counselors, Kim Young Duck, came up and said “What’s the matter? So many people!”

It suddenly hit me that I’d made a big mistake. Even though I had looked at the list over and over, I had only counted titles…Under Secretary So-and-So. Deputy Secretary So-and-So. Ambassador So-and-So… ! I had not taken into account spouses. What saved the day was because not everybody could get INTO the dining room, they couldn’t eat. But they could drink. And that they did. It was one of the best parties the Korean Embassy ever gave and no one ever knew why.

To the generational question, where were you when Kennedy was shot, I was at the Embassy. One of the political attaches found me with the ticker tape in his hand with the first report of the shooting. When the news came that Kennedy had died, I was sitting on the back steps going up to the Ambassador’s office, weeping with several of my bosses, Bum Suk Lee, Young Gil Chang and Kim Young Duck.

Ultimately I realized what, of course, I always knew: I didn’t have much of a future at the Korean Embassy because I wasn’t Korean.

I started looking for another job. I got offered a job at the Kiplinger Newsletter and told Minister Yun I might be leaving and that really my $300 month salary wasn’t quite enough. He said, “We can’t give you a raise, but we won’t report your wages to your government.” I had to remind him that they weren’t doing that anyway.

But I was so charmed that I stayed on for another few months and then ultimately left for a “real” job at the American Textile Manufacturers Institute. A bit of a bore really.

People asked how I got the job. I had seen an ad in the paper and just walked over to the Embassy. I was interviewed by a couple of lower echelon officers and then by Minister Pak Yun. He was friendly and nice.

He said, “ I see you have a college degree. Don’t you want to do something more than work in a place where you can be nothing but a secretary?”

I said that was all right with me.

He said, “I see you have a degree in English. Wouldn’t you like a job where you can use your degree? You can help edit our magazine, but it doesn’t come out very frequently. “

I persisted. I was already in LOVE with the idea of working in this embassy.

He finally said with a smile, “You can have the job. But it might get boring with nothing for you to do and ” … he stopped and pointed to a bunch of letters on his desk that needed posting …“there might be times when we say,

‘Rinda, rick those stamps.’”

I accepted the job immediately and was known as Rinda to friends and family for the next two years.

To some, I am still Rinda.