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# Paris: Armistice Day, 1995

By Gerda Bikales

November 11 is a somber day in the French national calendar. It marks the end of a bloody war, waged over four long years, and won at the price of a million young men felled in battle for the honor of France. One of these young men — his unidentified remains buried at the very center of the glorious *Arc de Triomphe*, his grave marked by an eery blue flame that burns eternally — receives throughout the year a steady stream of formal visitors carrying floral tributes, but never as many as on that anniversary. He is *le soldat inconnu*, the Unknown Soldier, a mighty hero in a nation that knows how to honor its heroes.

It was a gray day here in Paris, not very cold yet but with a hint of approaching winter, and enough wind to really whip the gigantic French flag flying within the *Arc*. Our country's flag was there too, next to that of Canada and of Great Britain — symbols of the Grand Alliance that defeated the German army seventy-seven years ago, and which would be called upon to do so again twenty-seven years later.

The President of France was there to pay his respects, and so was the usual coterie of politicians. They made speeches that no one heard because the loudspeakers malfunctioned. The military bands played and soldiers from all service branches and the elite military schools marched proudly in practiced drills, their ceremonial uniforms resplendent. The crowd watching was small, but appreciative. They applauded the marchers as they went by. This was the new French military, men and some women, whites and a few blacks, sharing for a moment the sense of history that flows so elegantly from the twelve broad avenues converging upon the *Arc de Triomphe*, bearing the names of Napoleon's generals and victorious battles.

November 11 was also the start of the Algerian presidential election, the first of three days of voting by citizens of that country at Algerian consulates across France. With a logic all its own, the Algerian consulate in Paris is located on the *rue d'Argentine* — Argentina Street — just a block away from the *Arc de Triomphe*. The lines of eager voters formed at dawn and quickly spilled out to the *Avenue de la Grande Armee*, named for Napoleon's army. There the waiting Algerians could hear the military bands, and catch a bit of the action in the distance.

The number of Algerians showing up at their consulates across France clearly took everyone by surprise. No one had expected such crowds — not the

consulates, and certainly not the police. The metros constantly disgorged people, and numerous chartered buses brought in others from small towns all over the Paris region. In the wake of several terrorist attacks in Paris and in other cities, the police quickly called for reinforcements, put up barricades, lined up ambulances, and controlled the flow of a line that grew steadily longer as the day went on. Despite the long hours of waiting, the crowd was largely peaceful. Most police and medical intervention resulted not from overheated political disagreements, but from pushing and shoving in the final stretch leading to the entrance of the consulate.

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What surprised this observer was the large number of women among the voters. There were older women wearing the traditional headcovering, and younger ones in stylish short skirts, puffing on cigarettes between carefully rouged lips. Overheard conversations were in Arabic and French, with French more dominant. For these voters were not only Algerians born abroad, but also their French-born sons and daughters.

About 620,000 Algerian immigrants were counted in the last French population census, in 1990. Over the years, some of these immigrants have become French citizens. Their French-born children, most of whom have dual Algerian and French citizenship, do not appear in any separate census category — their number is unknown. The venerable newspaper *Le Monde* estimates that in all there are a million Algerians living permanently in France.

Judging from the outpouring of eager voters that went on for three days, interest in the affairs of their home country is extraordinarily high in this population, among the French-born as well as among their elders. It is an interest that is implicitly encouraged by the French government, which in fact counted on these very voters,

familiar as they are with the ways of democracy, to help bring about a measure of political moderation and stability in Algeria.

Among the voters, immigrants and French citizens alike, many had served in the Algerian military. In France, where a period of military service remains obligatory for all its young men, the law now permits citizens with dual nationality to choose in which army they want to discharge this obligation. And so it is that, with the blessing of the French government, its citizens now carry arms to defend the interests of other nations.

By noon on November 11, the ceremonies at the *Arc* are finished, the marchers and onlookers have dispersed, and the Unknown Soldier is left alone under a blanket of elaborate bouquets. We know very little about him, except that he was surely French — and only French; that he never served in the armed forces of any other country, friend or foe; and that he gave his young life for a country known the world over for its high conception of civil liberties, its relative openness to the contributions of others (including in its military through the legendary Foreign Legion), and, until not long ago, its confidence in itself and in the value of French citizenship. ■