

Double Decker Buses by Bella Brom

As a girl born and growing up in South Africa, I could not go anywhere alone. It made me jealous of my brother; being male, he could go unaccompanied wherever he wanted. I always had to wait for my father, brother, nanny, or black driver to escort me. I had no freedom of my own.

One day, I decided to run away from all these guards of mine and go to town by bus without an escort. I must have been about 13 or 14—a huge adventure and challenge. We had double-decker buses. The top part of the bus was allocated for all colors, black, white, colored; one could probably be yellow or green, I suppose, too. The bottom part was 90% for white passengers, and if I remember correctly, there were four places for blacks by the stairs going up. I observed carefully, unsure of the 'correct' place to sit. I chose a seat next to a white being. At the next stop, an old black woman climbed cautiously and with difficulty onto the bus, carrying lots of bags. She could not climb the steps to the upper deck, and old colored people occupied all the 'black' seats at the bottom. Without much thought, I stood up and offered my place to her.

A typical, expected gesture, don't you think? Well, not in the apartheid days of South Africa. Someone shouted at me: "Can't you see she is black, and you are offering her a 'white' seat?"

Tons of questions went through my brain. Have you ever had pins and needles in your brain? Well, that is what it felt like. How can I sit down and leave her standing? Is it

not accepted that I, a young girl, would stand up for a person who was old? It is just a seat, and she cannot keep her balance standing up in a moving bus and cannot climb the stairs to the 'black' seats. What is all this about? What is expected of me to do? To sit? To stand? And my little intuitive human being self said: "Just get off the bus; there is no way you can sit and leave her standing. I got off the bus, tears in my eyes. I started walking as fast as I could to escape that terrible feeling of right or wrong, what should or shouldn't be done. White or black. But mainly the big question of my identity, feelings, and thoughts. I cried I ran, I walked, and I felt bamboozled. My whole adventure felt like a wolf had eaten me in a forest, and I was unsure how to get out of the scary black place and find my way home again. But then I decided I would rather walk than retake the bus. And that is what I did. After this incident, I never took another ride on a double-decker bus, and on a single-decker always stood and never sat, even if there was a place. So many meanings to that one bus ride, taking people from here to there.

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### **A word about me:**

Born 1942. Lived in Cape Town. Not a very good student at school. Good sportswoman. Head girl of Herzliya 1959. Aliyah: 1962. Went to do a physical training seminar, in Givat Washington at the age of 35 with 4 children and taught sports in high school. Second degree in education from Bar Ilan. Now living in Jerusalem and have a private clinic teaching children with what is called learning disabilities, but I call them learning abilities.

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