

## PROTESTING PETTY APARTHEID:

# White Riders In the Black Car

by Lois Forrest

For eighteen days we had toured South Africa as a delegation of U.S. Friends—another white woman, two black men, and I—all members of the Religious Society of Friends. We had had many conversations with men and women of all racial backgrounds and walks of life, from government officials who defended *apartheid* and separate development to black Africans who were active politically. Nevertheless, as the end of our trip grew near, we began to realize we were deficient in one respect. We had experienced the life of white South Africans (our black members were given special status as international visitors). We did not know how it felt to live as a black South African, although this was the experience of eighty percent of the population. We thought of one small way to correct this deficiency: taking a train ride on the car reserved for blacks.

Up until this time we had been riding on the "whites only" car. In deciding to travel in the black train, none of us considered the fact that this would be seen as a serious violation of the law. Rather we saw it solely as a way of being sensitive to the black experience.

We were to travel to Pretoria on a Thursday to speak to some government officials. We decided to make this trip the subject of our experiment. At a Quaker discussion meeting the night before, one of our members told the group about our plans. Several South African Quakers, both black and white, volunteered to join us.

The experiment began badly. I missed a bus and got to the station later than I intended to, though there was still time to catch the train. However, when I began to inquire about the black section of the station, I was repeatedly given wrong directions. Even the black porters did not answer me, and when I was finally sent to Information, I was directed to the back of the building, exactly opposite

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to the place I should have been. The result was that we all missed the train, and one of the South Africans had to drive us to Pretoria to make our appointments.

It was early afternoon when we were through seeing government officials, and we thought that instead of going back to Johannesburg we would take time to witness a portion of the public trials against three young blacks accused of taking over a bank in a white suburb. We took a taxi to the court and found out that the trials were not being held that day. We then looked at our train schedule and realized that, if we hurried, we could just make the next train to Johannesburg. We took the taxi to the station and the black gates. There was a little confusion at the gate, but one of our members had already purchased our tickets, and in the general excitement of our late boarding no one challenged us.

When we boarded the train, we took scattered seats. I was alone in one seat facing the door, with two whites behind me. The rest of the delegation were scattered throughout the car. Immediately the black conductor said that we would have to ride on the white car. I replied that we were an integrated delegation, people of the same religious faith, and didn't want to cause any trouble, but we had been together in Pretoria seeing government officials and we wanted to ride together. The black conductor said that the white conductor would take care of the matter, but, from the expression on his face, I saw that he was not displeased.

Among the black passengers on the train there was an immediate reaction. They were extremely interested in what we were doing, and they began to change seats so that they could take turns talking with each one of us, telling us about their experiences under *apartheid*. I did not expect the degree of openness with which they shared their feelings, some very bitter, nor their deep concern to find out what had motivated us to act as we had.

One man who sat beside me asked our names and where we were from. I gave him the information, and he wrote it down, and it worried me a little bit. In the climate of South Africa one becomes paranoid. Was this a man who might pass on this information for money? Or did he simply want to be able to share this experience with his friends? It is a sad commentary on human relationships under a system of oppression that we can't have the normal amount of trust in simple human contacts.

While we were having these conversations, the train started up. A white conductor opened the door to the car, looked at us, and closed the door. Then at the very next train station another white conductor entered our car and said that we would have to move to a different car. Again we repeated the statement that we were a group of the same religious denomination and wanted to travel together although we did not wish to cause any problems. The train started up, and he left the car. The black man

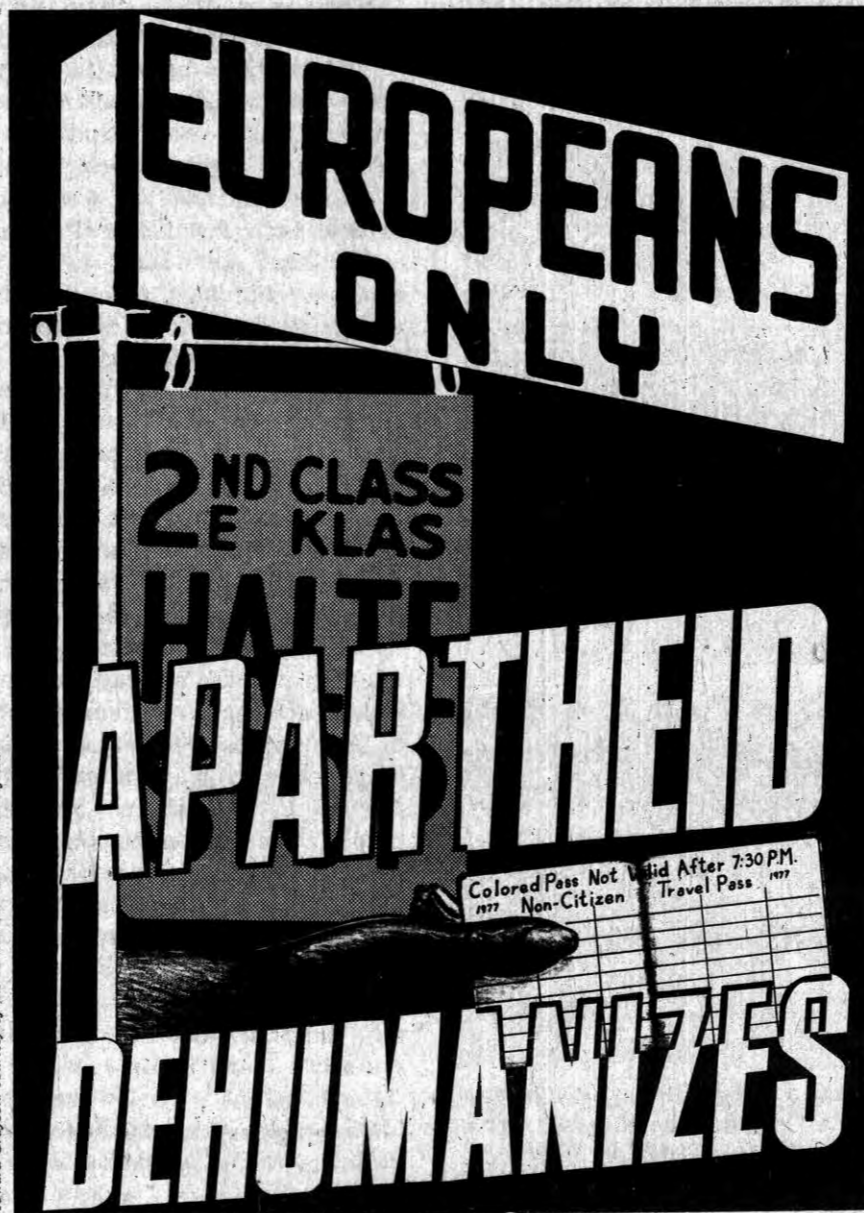
sitting next to me said, "Now they are going to call the police."

I became very anxious inside, but I was able to continue the conversation with the various blacks who took turns sitting beside me. Soon we were pulling into another station, Kaalfontein, and I saw two detectives in plain clothes standing on the platform waiting for us. At the sight of them somehow all my anxiety went away.

They boarded the train, and we once more engaged in quiet conversation. Since I was facing the door, I was the spokesperson. I tried now to keep the conversation going at all times, feeling that, in conflict situations, if you are always talking in a positive, negotiating way, people are less likely to arrive at negative decisions. When I

mentioned that we were a religious group travelling together, one of the policemen said, "I am a Christian, too." I sensed that he was very conflicted in what he was called upon to do. He had been notified because we were on the train, so he felt he had to respond to this in some way, yet he was worried about creating an international incident. He may also have felt guilty and therefore reluctant to force us to leave the train.

The white South African member of our group then said, "We are travelling under God's orders," and the man said, "Show me your orders," and my friend responded, "They are written on our hearts." The conversation continued for about eight minutes while the train sat in the station. I felt afterwards that we had been trying to reach that of God in the officer. However, he



Howard Grayson/courtesy of the American Committee on Africa



evidently finally decided he *must* do something, for he took me and the South African Friend by the arm to conduct us off the train.

One of our black members said, "Stop and think before you arrest us. You don't want to create an international incident." The police officer paid no attention, but continued to hurry us off the train and onto the platform. The rest of the delegation followed, and we walked down a very long platform. As we passed the train, the blacks leaned out of the cars and windows, cheering us on and expressing their support in a heartening manner.

After we had traversed the long platform, we went over a bridge to the other side. There we saw several cars parked, and I wondered if we were going to be taken somewhere. Would this be our last day in South Africa? I was very glad that the incident had come at the end of the trip for I would have hated to miss the rich experience we had had. I also wondered if the AFSC would ever be permitted to send another delegation.

We passed the parked cars, however, and entered a police station on the other side of the tracks. We were in quite a large room, standing before a police commandant. The arresting officer said that one member of our group had resisted arrest, and this made me very anxious, since in the United States resisting arrest is seen as a fairly serious charge. So I began repeating once more my litany; we were an international delegation in South Africa for a month and had been together in Pretoria seeing government officials and were all members of the same religious group, etc. I thought if I could keep the conversation going along these lines, I could avoid reference to the question of resisting arrest. Finally I came to the end of what I had to say, and the commandant replied:

"Madam, you may ride together on the train, but next time please notify us."

That was all. We were stunned after all the tension leading up to this moment. We said something like, "Can we really go back to the train?" and he said "Yes." So we walked out of the station and followed the route we had taken, back to the now empty train platform. Here as we waited about an hour for the next train, we talked over the events of the afternoon. I was sure that we would have no trouble on the next train, that they would telephone ahead so that we wouldn't have to repeat the whole thing again, and my anxiety was completely relieved.

The experience was not over, however. When the train finally arrived, it was overcrowded with men and women returning from their day's work, and the black car which we boarded was jammed. We were able to get inside, although we had to stand, but there were people hanging out the doors, and even clinging to rods between cars.

Whenever the train went around a curve, and we were thrown against each other inside the car, I thought with anxiety about the safety of those outside. Meanwhile, trains going in another direction were passing us regularly, some cars jammed with black workers, while others, reserved for whites, were partially empty, their few occupants sitting in comfort.

On this second leg of our journey people looked at us and wondered, but there was not the camaraderie and conversation we had had before. Nevertheless, I felt that this part of the trip had a deeper impact on me than had the first. We had set out to share the experience of the ordinary black people of South Africa. Now we were sharing it. And the lack of facilities and the actual danger to which the blacks were exposed were apparent.

When we reached Johannesburg, there was a huge press of humanity going up the stairs and off in separate directions. I knew for most of the blacks there was a second long, difficult, and perhaps dangerous trip to Soweto or other districts, while we who stayed with white families had a much shorter and easier trip. Again the contrast was painful to experience.

The effect of the afternoon stayed with me for a long time. In fact, it is with me still. For one thing my colleagues and I felt very close. We had not planned to commit civil disobedience; we had not been through the unifying experience of prior preparation. Nevertheless, we had felt ourselves led by a great conviction, and we had acted as we felt we must, trusting that things would come out for the best.

What had we accomplished? Beyond following our own consciences, perhaps very little. But because we were international visitors, our experience was written up by one of the Johannesburg papers, and an editorial used it to comment on the folly of petty *apartheid*. Reading that editorial may have helped some South Africans who resent *apartheid*—I am convinced many do—to speak out against it in logical fashion.

I am very much aware that it was easier for us from the U.S. to protest the segregated train than for South African citizens. We could leave in a few days; at worst we risked some personal inconvenience. Their risk can be far more serious. Yet many do resist. Others must decide how much of their energies must go for resistance, how much for fighting the system in other ways. I honor them for their principled wrestling with such dilemmas.

Nevertheless, I could not help wondering if more and more people did resist in a quiet, low-key fashion, would not some changes occur in the way that blacks are treated? I do not say that the big, major changes will come that way, but perhaps small changes with symbolic impact. Thus, for me the lesson of the afternoon is that in simple ordinary ways women and men following their consciences can play a part and make a difference. □