

## (THE FIRST TRAIN)

### A STORY OF JOHANNESBURG BY THERESA AICHINGER

*...it was also a radical change, and I could imagine that not everybody agreed with this change.*

Even from afar I could hear it. Drums, singing, clapping. I followed the crowd through the streets. Dry, dusty air surrounded me while passing known concrete blocks, glass buildings and few older buildings. The noise got louder. A mass of people had built a circle around a group of drummers - directly beside the new and modern escalators into the ground. 'What a contrast', rushed into my mind. I was curious about what it would look like down in the earth but the beat of the music distracted me. I tried to cleave a way through all the people to see more. Many of them moved to the rhythm. Also my body started to rock slightly from one side to the other. As I reached the front I saw around ten men beat their drums following a well prepared choreography while singing and dancing at the same time. I did not know where to look first. Fluttering and colorful dresses, incredibly fast moving sticks, painted and decorated instruments. Happy faces everywhere. Their smile was infectious.

After a while, I don't know any more how long I stood there and just watched, I wriggled my way out of the crowd towards the entrance. The building looked strange. Somehow unfamiliar, new. The last years a huge construction site has covered the whole square. And not only this one. There were construction sites all over the city. They became part of everyone's daily life. But not necessarily positive. The continuing noise of all the excavators and trucks disturbed every conversation near the sites, cranes shaped the cityscape, fences hindered me to watch what was going on, and construction vehicles exacerbated the anyway present traffic jams. While looking at the entrance, I knew that this was all gone now. And there had been moments when I thought that I may not live to see this. What was built resembled a big shell that tries to cover the hole. The white color and the glass of the side walls should invite everyone to go inside. But in my opinion it looked too futuristic even though they tried to decorate it traditionally with small flags, garlands and flowers. The symmetry, the slightly tapered roof and the minimalistic design did not fit properly to the rest of the city. But it sharpened my curiosity. And apparently not only mine. A flood of people already walked towards the stairs. In front of it they slowed down a little.

Only two escalators existed to transport the mass downwards. I queued along the others and were slid closer and closer to the ground. It was warm, I felt somewhat cramped and uncomfortable between all the different shoulders. While placing my feet on the first step I was surprised by the speed and the push, and I clung to the railings to feel safe. I glanced down. A second escalator followed the one I stood on to connect the square above me with the tunnel under me. It looked somehow strange, one visitor after each other, lined up. I was prepared as I took the next escalator and tried to relax my body. Everything smelled new and a bit like construction at the same time. Halfway, in the middle of the stairs, I had a great overview. The tunnel was long, I guessed about 300m. It was not very wide and on each side, left and right, the floor was lowered. But a glass fence with closed doors prevented people to go down. I could identify tracks behind the glass. The sidewalls were slightly rounded. Again everything was white. Lamps with a huge round shade projected big cones of light on the floor. The space was not high. Since the mass of people was slowly filling the whole platform, it felt confined. Hopefully they don't let in more people. I had never had a problem with crowds but for a few years now I felt unwell, probably due to the fact that my body became weaker with age.

I looked around the people who surrounded me. There was this colored woman dressed up with a red cloth robe, printed all over with big blue flowers, tried to keep together her four children. The youngest was tied on her back, screamed and cried. A small group of wealthy-looking white men were talking excitedly. Their black suits seemed a bit overdressed to me. Two teenagers with big loose shirts and white caps on their dark cropped hair tried to cover

their curiosity with coolness. There were hardly any people at my age. But in this moment it did not matter how old you are, from where you are or where you go.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, dear fellow citizens, I am glad to welcome you here!’ I tried to figure out from where the voice came. A bit further ahead I could recognize a small stage. Behind a microphone stood the mayor. A South African flag was fixed as background. Again garlands and flowers were used to decorate the space. ‘This day marks a significant change in everyone’s life in our city. We no longer live in an age of backwardness. From now on comfort, rapidity, punctuality and safety are describing the quality of life in the whole area. This newly built underground metro train system connects every important square, every important part of the city. It connects your home with your work, with your friends and your family, with your favorite park, with the coffee shop you always go and with the football ground where your children train.’ The audience applauded enthusiastically.

His words were exaggerated. But in essence he was right. Until now getting from A to B was often problematic. There was no appropriate formal public system. In my almost 70 years there was hardly any change. Yes of course. There was this train they built, and also normal buses they used. But the coverage of this system was totally insufficient. No one wanted to use them. Everyone who could not afford a car, including me, was dependent on minibuses, these vans used as taxis. And every single of these citizens know the hand signs for every district in the city to show where one want to go. It would be interesting how long I already stood on roadsides while waiting for them without knowing when the next in my direction would come. Or how long I sat in them, shoulder to shoulder, in the middle of traffic jams. But since I was a pensioner I was not often out in the city. I felt stressed in the traffic. And all I need was in my closer surroundings. Although Soweto counts to the poorer regions in Johannesburg I was happy to live there. Over 40 years ago I bought one of the matchbox houses for me and my wife and over time we continuously improved it and added new parts. Neighbors became our friends, our children raised there. As my wife died I started to take care of our small garden, growing fruits and vegetables. While doing this it was possible for me to forget the time. Yes, it felt like home there. Having these thoughts in the middle of all these strangers remembered me how far away all this was and I longed for my home.

‘...and welcome with me the first train.’ The microphone voice and subsequent applause brought me back to reality. The mass of people turned right. Everyone wanted to see the train. And apparently everyone wanted to take advantage of the free travel that was only valid for this day. I was glad to stand in the back. In front of the glass wall people started pushing and jostling. Even the security men could not change that. There were just too many people down here. The crowd clapped louder and also started to yell and scream. Finally, the first train pulled into the station tearing a big poster which bore the words ‘Johannesburg Metro 2070 – Start the Future’ and stopped so that the doors of the train were on the same position as the doors of the glass wall. The train was white with a big red stripe on and characterized by huge glass windows. There was no driver in the front of the train. Impressive to see what is possible with technology!

Apparently the doors opened because a bunch of people pressed towards the train without really moving. It took several minutes until loud beep sounds warned of the closing doors. The first train drove away, well-filled, into the dark tunnel. Again applause. I did not know if I would want to be in the first train. Somehow I did not trust the construction and the computers controlling and steering the trains. I had the feeling that there were some test rides needed until I would step in this vehicle.

However, there was not any chance for me to get in one of the first trains. Still I was pushed rather backwards than towards the train.

Yes, such an underground train system did make sense. It was a great improvement for the city, for the citizens, and an advantage and attraction for tourists. But it was also a radical change, and I could imagine that not

everybody agreed with this change. Especially minibus companies would lose lots of people who were so heavily reliant on them. And as a consequence they would lose a huge amount of money too. Especially for this reason there was barely no change or improvement within the city's transportation system in the past decades.

The next train slowly entered the final position on the tracks. Again everyone tried to get in the train without looking to their left or their right. As the door were closed I stood for the first time closer to the tracks. But still not yet close enough to get one of the next two or three trains. Even I had time on this day waiting annoyed me. It still was too crowded and there were too many people in my direct surrounding.

It was the same for the next trains. I was always pushed a little further to the train but could not board one. Almost directly in front of the glass door the mass of people were tighter. To wait there for the next train felt much longer. When the train finally arrived, it became turbulent around me and I was moved a bit away from the door. A boy, he was at most eight years old, stood right next to me. I saw the glint in his eye and knew that he absolutely wanted to get into the next train. I smiled at him and gently pulled him in front of my legs so that he could jump as one of the last ones in the anyway brimming wagon right before the doors closed. Through the glass of the window I saw his shy and thankful smile and a nod in my direction. I winked at him.

The train departed but braked suddenly after it had not even driven one meter. I saw in the shocked eyes of the small boy. Also the people with whom I was still queuing on the platform confusedly looked towards the train. Nobody knew what was going on. It made me a bit nervous as even the security men next to the glass doors did look alarmed and it seemed like they would not be able to control the situation. One of them started to mumble in his headset. The trains' doors were still displaced between the doors of the glass fence. After a few minutes the train started again. And once more it stopped with a jerk after around one meter. I was wondering who was responsible for this. There was no driver in the train. Now I saw the boy only out of the corner of my eyes. He convulsively tried to grab the handle of the door in front of him. Also the people surrounding him in the train tried to hold on somewhere, although it was so crowded that nobody would fall anyway.

Suddenly a big bang. The train in front of me moved only little but due to a heavy blow and an incredible power the trains' inmates were literally catapulted forward. Heads slammed against the windows and walls, people fell to the ground. I looked back to the back of the train. A second, still empty train had rushed into the still standing train. I heard screams. Panic took over. Some of the people inside the train tried to push towards the doors. Thereby they shoved others. More people fell down. Many of them were wounded. The one who already lied on the floor could not get up because others tried to climb over them. It was a terrible sight. Also the people on the platform started to get worried. Everyone saw the chaos directly in front of them but it was impossible to help. Both the glass wall and the closed doors of the trains hindered every access to the injured. I saw as a little bit further ahead one of the inmates opened the door of their wagon using the emergency handle. But this did also not help. The gap between the train and the glass door was too narrow. Nobody would fit through this extremely limited space. Additionally, the train stood still so that the doors were not at the same position as the doors of the glass door. The train would have to be driven a few meters further so that the passengers could get out. But the wheels of the last wagon did not stand correctly on the tracks anymore. Due to the collapse it derailed. Thus, the situation seemed hopeless. Some of the security men stood together, discussing. But they did not act. I stood there as if I was paralyzed. Like a film would run in front of my eyes.

I wrinkled my nose. It smelled of smoke. My eyes were looking for the origin of it. At the place where the both trains were wedged, whiffs of smoke drifted up. The people next to me also noticed it and immediately started to run in panic towards the stairs to get in a safe place. Like a wave the panic was spread over the all the waiting people. In chaos and hectic pace everyone tried to maneuver themselves and their loved ones towards the stairs in

hope that they reach the surface as fast as possible. The escalators were still moving. But people tried to run up faster, several fell down and blocked the narrow space on the stairs. A siren sounded. Apparently someone triggered the alarm.

Only now I saw the fire. The bottom of the least wagon of the overfilled train burned. My feet wanted to follow the others towards the stairs and towards safety. But something in me forced me to stay. I glanced in the train. Frightened faces, terrified eyes, crying children. All of them were not able to see the fire but because of the screams they did notice what was going on. In the meantime the lighting in the train turned off.

My eyes scanned the train to find the boy. He was standing a few meters further ahead, clamped between humans and the closed door of the train. His face was pale. Above of his eyebrow was a wound. Blood ran over his cheek. With the pale of his hand he started to hammer against the door as he noticed me. His body trembled. His sight begged for help. Intuitively, I ran to the glass door which was the closest to him and tried to pull apart the both halves of the sliding door. Despite of the adrenalin rush my strength did not suffice. My body slackened off in the last years. Another young black guy appeared to help me. Moreover two of the security men pitched in to move the door. It proceeded only slowly. As soon as we managed to pull apart the doors about a few centimeters, the two halves automatically slid together again. But it was necessary to open the door completely so that a gap of an arm length overlapped with the gap of the trains' door. It was the only chance to save the passengers.

I felt that the heat came closer. The fire spread very quickly, also the second wagon already burned. However, only the chassis. The space in which the people were staying seemed undamaged. Other people also tried to open the glass doors next to the fire.

The smoke slowly filled the whole tunnel. I had problems breathing, started to cough. After a moment that felt like an eternity we succeeded to open the doors as far as possible and to hold it in this position. A tall man also reached to open the trains' door. First, a petite woman managed to step out. She literally wormed through the crack of the doors. A teenager followed her. One could see the blind panic and fear in his wide open eyes. Both of them ran immediately towards the escalators. 'My' little boy was still caught in the burning train. He was always pushed back by taller people when he tried to move towards the gap. In this moment everyone acted selfish and only thought of himself. The next that could rescue themselves were two men. 'Damn it. Let the children o---', I screamed angrily. My last word was drowned by a loud bang. A fireball filled the whole ceiling of the tunnel. Glass splintered. I felt the heat above me, my eyes were burning on account of all the smoke. I felt a soft hand on my leg. The little boy managed to get out the train. I took his hand and pulled him towards the stairs. He was weak. His body shook. The escalators did not move anymore. Step by step we ran upwards. Fast. Too fast for him. He stumbled. I helped him to get up. Carried him on my arms. Actually, he was too heavy for my arms. The visibility was poor. The smoke blew up the shaft. But I could already see the daylight from above. The last steps. The boy clung his legs around my hip. We arrived. No drummers anymore. But fire trucks. I did not see any of the fire fighters down in the tunnel. It was hectic. Smoke was still rising out of the entrance. But we were safe. Only a few meters away was a bench. I placed him and sat down next to him. We said nothing, only stared at the hustle in front of us. After quite a while he took my hand. His light, soft and small fingers were in my dark and wrinkled hand. 'Thank you', he whispered.