

As far back as I can remember as a little girl my parents were speaking out about the imprisonment of Nelson Mandela, apartheid and participating in the boycott campaign. Nelson Mandela was already imprisoned when I was born. My mother would go to a greengrocer and order her purchases and add 'And. Not. South. African' glaring at the seller as she did so. When I was old enough to be sent to the shops she would give me a list and add 'and make sure you tell them you don't want South African products'. I listened and learned as my mum argued with and told off shopkeepers for stocking South African goods. I remember one particular local shop which was owned by an Asian man. My mother was telling him that it was a disgrace that he had South African tinned fish and he ought to be ashamed as somebody who was not white himself. He tried to defend his position in stocking the products but my mother was having none of it. She told him about apartheid in South Africa and how not just black people were treated and categorised but Asian people too. She asked him how he would feel if his family were there and subjected to horrific racism and brutality. Finally she threatened to not only never purchase anything in his shop again but inform all her neighbours and people in the local community not to shop there –effectively staging a boycott of his shop. He gave in and agreed to remove the offending items. I am sure it was a lesson for him but it was also my introduction to campaigning, and debating to bring about change. I was about 5 years old.

One day an old colleague of my dad's visited our house. He had been working on a ship which stopped in South Africa for a few days. He was white but had initially refused to get off the ship because of apartheid. I sat and listened to him as he told my parents the story of how he had got bored on the ship and with another worker decided to go into the nearest town one afternoon. As he waited at the bus stop it began to pour with rain. A bus came and pulled up at the bus stop and they started to get on but were told they could not board the bus as it was for 'coloureds only'. There was thunder and lightning and the rain was pouring down. Drenched to the bone they were pleased when another bus came along but were told by the driver 'blacks only'. They pleaded with the driver to let them on but were told that he would like to let them on but if he did he would be in trouble and be punished if he let them on. They turned back and returned to the boat refusing to travel on a whites only bus. I was less than eight years old but listened with interest. I had known that there was segregation of races in South Africa and horrific racism but hearing this story horrified me – it dawned on me that had we been in South Africa my mother who was black, my father who was white and I who would be categorised as coloured could not travel together but worse still we could not live together as a family. I had a bad dream about being taken away from my parents and never seeing them again that night.

So this was my introduction to campaigning against apartheid. I joined the protests outside South Africa House and became more active in the campaign against apartheid and it was through the Anti-Apartheid Movement I gained strength and determination to challenge the racism I experience and had always experienced growing up in England. My mother worried about me joining the protests outside South Africa House as she feared the police would target me for brutality but this did not put me off.

At the age of fifteen, my father's work took him to live in Lesotho, a landlocked country surrounded by South Africa. My father worked for United Nations Development Project (UNDP) and I spent school holidays with him where ever he was living in the world. But on this occasion my mother was reluctant to allow me to go as it would mean changing planes in South Africa which my mother did not feel was safe. Because of the hostility by the white South African government at the time towards Lesotho as a country that helped those escaping apartheid, brutality and

persecution, through their borders my mother was concerned about what would happen to me. The only other alternative was to go to Botswana, stay in a hotel overnight and then take a flight to Lesotho the next day. My father told us that apartheid was not allowed in International airports and on that basis it would be safe to change planes. Eventually it was agreed after much discussion that I would travel via South Africa. The plane stopped in Germany on the way and a woman and her grandson got on and sat next to me – I gritted my teeth sick to the stomach as the white German grandmother told me how her and her grandson were going to live in South Africa joining his parents and about the wonderful life they were looking forward to. At the expense of black people I thought. When I arrived in Johannesburg airport I discovered that the departure gate for planes to Lesotho was not in the International airport but in the domestic part of the airport. This made absolutely no sense as it was a separate country but was I am sure an attempt to undermine Lesotho. As I made my way there I could feel stares on me and it made me feel uneasy. In the departure lounge for flights to Lesotho (of which there was only one a day so I had to wait for several hours) there was apartheid – I believe that is why it was in the domestic part of the airport – there was separate seating and toilets for 'blacks' and 'whites'. None for coloureds or Indians. In South Africa I knew I would be categorised coloured so effectively there was no seating area for me. I sat in the black seating expecting somebody to approach me and tell me I could not sit there but nobody did – in fact there were not many people around at all with only one flight a day. Eventually I needed the toilet and in the blacks only toilet there was a cleaner who jumped out of her skin when she saw me. I greeted her and went into a cubicle. I was relieved to board the plane to Lesotho and get away from the little bit of South African apartheid I had encountered first hand and even more relieved to spot my father behind the fence as I got off the plane waving to me. In Lesotho I discovered that the majority of men worked in South African mines some commuting daily to nearby ones but the majority living away from home in horrific conditions for many months at a time not seeing their family in Lesotho. My dad's girlfriend had been widowed when her husband died in a mine leaving her to raise 5 children and a younger brother alone. The people of Lesotho were warm and welcoming but the government was very cautious of white people at the time because the South African government were bombing and raiding homes in Lesotho. Because of this the Palace had banned white people from visiting. My dad's good friend was the cousin of King Moshoeshe of Lesotho who lived in the palace but my dad could not enter the palace because he was white – however I was allowed and was invited to meet the son of the King who was around my age. He and his siblings became lifelong friends. My father joked that he had been there all those months and never once been invited to the palace and I had been only after a couple of weeks. But the security in place was for a serious reason.

Because Lesotho was isolated being landlocked by a hostile South Africa you could not buy everything you needed there. My father's work as a handicraft and textile advisor required materials that he had to go across the border to South Africa to purchase. I found it ironic that all the years I had been raised to boycott South African goods by him and my mother that he was now going to South Africa to purchase products. One day whilst I was there he needed to make such a trip and prepared for me to spend the day with friends whilst he was away but I told him I wanted to go too and witness the apartheid of South Africa first hand – I wanted to use the experience to campaign back in the UK against apartheid. I was a bit afraid but I knew that my father's white privilege would protect him and travelling with him I would have some protection too. I also knew my mother would have been really upset and angry if she knew but my father understood why I wanted to go and agreed warning me that it would be an unpleasant experience as we would be travelling to Bloemfontein one of the worst places in South Africa for apartheid but also the nearest city with the items

he needed to Maseru where we lived. Bloemfontein was a predominantly Afrikaner settlement. It was a long drive and I knew as my passport was scrutinised and stamped at the border that I would need to get a new one as the stamps with in it would bar me from entering some other African countries that were supporting the campaign against apartheid but also reflected on the fact that at least I could go in and out, thinking about those who had tried to escape and the consequences for Lesotho for helping those who escaped and all the others that had sacrificed their lives for the struggle. It was a long drive and at one point my father got a bit lost and stopped an elderly couple in a car to get directions. They were Afrikaans and the woman looked at me curiously as my father spoke with her husband then patted me like a dog and put her fingers in my hair which annoyed me immensely and told me in a patronising tone 'haven't you got nice hair dear'.

It was a long journey but we did not stop. As we got close to Bloemfontein, a couple of miles outside the city centre my father pointed out a bus stop telling me this was the bus stop for black people who were required to walk the rest of the way into town. In contrast to the bus stop for black people which was just a pole with a sign on the side of the road with no paving the bus stop for white people was right in the centre of town with a shiny polished bus stop, lots of seating and a good shelter to protect from the elements. I remember feeling really angry about this. In town as my father did his errands nobody acknowledged my existence let alone talked to me but I observed all around me. The segregation, the way black people were treated by white people and the different jobs that black and white people did. My father said that people probably thought that I worked for him. I wondered what white people would think if they knew we were daughter and father. Finishing his errands he decided we should stop for lunch. However as he usually came along he did not stop to think about how this would be possible today and suddenly announced let's go to this place for lunch and pushed open the door of a restaurant before I was able to stop him. I followed him inside and was greeted by a deadly silence. A moment ago the restaurant had been filled with conversation, laughter, the clattering of cutlery and crockery. Now all eyes were on me and the restaurant resembled a freeze framed clip in a film. My father and I stood in the entrance of the restaurant as equally as stunned as the diners and staff within it. I was the first to break the silence. I grabbed my father's arm and said 'dad I want to go'. We were both hungry as we had had not eaten several hours since an early breakfast but suddenly I had lost my appetite. In the car my father suggested that if we drove out of the town centre a few miles there were some 'black only' restaurants that had a separate counter that white people could purchase food from or a place where I could go and purchase food from and bring it back to the car. I decided that if we could not sit down and eat together then we would not eat at all in South Africa. I told him no dad let's just go home and eat there. It was a relief to cross the border back into Lesotho but not before another interrogation at border control by the South Africans. A complete contrast to the friendly manner of the Lesotho border control workers. I watched the wearied Sesotho men crossing the border on foot and wondered how many miles they had to walk to and from the mines that day in order to feed their families and under what horrific conditions. Today as I am supporting the campaign for compensation for the many miners dying of silicosis as a result of working in those mines I think about those miners and their families who suffered severe poverty when they got ill or worse still died whilst the mine owners made huge profits.

Even though it was a relief to be back in Lesotho it was not safe. It was a few years after Donald Woods had escaped to England via Lesotho from South Africa and South Africa carried out a series of raids and bombings – a bomb went off in Maseru where I lived when I was there. I went to work with my father and we drove across the mountainous terrain of Lesotho often with no roads and a compass for direction –

over the hills we would hear the ululating of villagers before we could see them as we travelled to remote settlements where my dad would work with women to create colourful woven baskets for export with the assistance of his interpreter who was a respected herbal doctor who would treat local villagers with ailments. We were always welcomed at each village with song, dancing, ululating and treated to 'mealy meal', tinned sardines and sweet tea. They generously gave us huge portions which even when I was full my dad would threaten me to finish or it would be disrespectful when their hospitality came at great expenses to themselves.

Back in the UK I told everyone who would listen about my experience of apartheid South Africa. Black people related what I was saying to the struggle against racism and oppression in the UK and wanted to join the campaigns but many white people were indifferent. What made them relate to what I was saying was the story of how it was unlawful for my father and me to eat a meal together in a restaurant, rather than the horrific brutality and oppression experienced by black people. At art school in London I was wary of a white South African student on my course but one day at lunch in a group she told us that she had been come to the UK to escape apartheid that she hated. Because she spoke out against it her parents had cut her off and she did not want to return. She broke down in tears as she told us that she had exhausted her applications for student visas and did not know what she was going to do.

The second art school I went to was outside of London and predominantly white. I had joined the student boycott campaigning in London and in my new town I discovered that the majority of students on my course were banking with the Barclays on the same road as our art school who were offering student accounts. I started a campaign which initially consisted of just me to educate them on the boycott campaign and persuade them to change banks. It was a shock to discover that many of them knew absolutely nothing about apartheid in South Africa. I wore them down with my repeated stories about the horrors of apartheid, Nelson Mandela's imprisonment and my own experiences until they changed their bank accounts. The same was repeated with the local greengrocers where students often went to purchase fruit at lunchtime insisting they did not buy Cape and organising a protest calling on the greengrocer to stop selling Cape. I became friends with a student whose mother was a local Labour party activist and helped to organise protests and boycotts of banks and supermarkets. The student movement, along with trade unions and the Labour Party played an important part in bringing about an end to apartheid and in the sanction and boycott campaigns but like the students that I got on board they had to be persuaded. In 1964 Labour Party leader Harold Wilson told the press that his Labour Party was not in favour of trade sanctions.

Like so many people around the world I was overjoyed, elated, singing and dancing when the news came of Nelson Mandela's release, weeping uncontrollable tears of joy – it was a very different atmosphere in Trafalgar Square that day in February 1990 to the hostile response from the South African Embassy and police at protests held there previously. Protests were organised by the Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM) which was founded in 1959 as the Boycott Movement. Over three decades thousands of British people joined the AAM and within it was a Black Solidarity Committee. The campaign against apartheid and for Nelson Mandela's release inspired and empowered black people both in the UK and in the USA to fight the racism they faced in the countries they lived. I was living on a very small budget on the day Madiba was released but even so I purchased myself a cheap bottle of fake champagne which I could not afford and joined the celebrations. I created a piece of tribute artwork which included a photo of Nelson Mandela as he walked to freedom

taken from the front page of the Guardian newspaper. I still have it and it captures the spirit of my emotions on the day.

Campaigning against apartheid and for Nelson Mandela's release was my foundation for becoming a campaigner against racism and injustice and I applied the lessons I learned and the inspiration I got from Madiba, to the campaigns I formed here in the UK and in my own struggles against oppression. It showed me how collective action, political pressure, boycotting, people power and persistence, perseverance and determination can bring about change.

I was proud a few years ago to be elected to the Action For Southern Africa (ACTSA) National Executive Council, nominated by my trade union which also had a proud history of activists campaigning against apartheid, PCS. ACTSA is the successor organisation to the Anti-Apartheid Movement. When apartheid was finally forced to an end Nelson Mandela welcomed and endorsed the formation of ACTSA stating 'so we warmly welcome the transformation of the Anti-Apartheid Movement to Action for Southern Africa.' ACTSA's remit is as follows:

- Works to eradicate poverty, support rights, justice, sustainable development and democracy across southern Africa.
- Encourages individuals and organization in the UK to stand in solidarity with the region.
- Informs and educates; provide information and analysis on southern Africa.
- Helps improve women's rights in southern Africa, particularly in Zimbabwe and Swaziland.
- Campaigns for those suffering from poverty, gross inequality and injustice caused by apartheid.

Through my role in ACTSA I have the privilege to meet and work with some amazing, dedicated and inspirational campaigners against apartheid, those that built the AAM, who stayed strong when they were negatively labelled and attacked but that brought people globally on-board to say no to apartheid.

I was also proud to help organise the vigil that took place outside South Africa House on Friday 6th of December where we said goodbye to Tata and celebrated his life through song, dance and speech and where I had the honour of speaking and reading the poem I wrote as a tribute to Nelson Mandela, 'Now You Are Free'. I had the great privilege of reading the poem again at the official memorial service for Nelson Mandela organised by the South African High Commission at St Martin's in the Fields a few days later. People told me after they felt the emotion in the poem and it had brought them to tears – I think because Madiba has always been in my heart giving me inspiration to carry on and fight racism through my life that feeling came out in the poem.

Madiba was a peacemaker, a leader, a Statesman, a politician, an inspirational role model but he was also an activist, a campaigner, a freedom fighter and a revolutionary who stood against racism in South Africa and around the world including here in the UK supporting the Lawrence family campaign for justice for their son Stephen's murder. Since the news of his passing on we have seen public figure after public figure declare their role in standing against apartheid, for a number of them hypocritically so as they did not oppose apartheid. They are declaring their love for Mandela today where once they branded him a terrorist. I am all for tributes for Nelson Mandela but I do not want to hear fake ones. We must not forget that Thatcher called Nelson Mandela a terrorist and we must not forget the horrors of

apartheid and the many people whose lives were stolen through the brutal apartheid regime in South Africa. If we are to learn the lessons of history we must tell the story of apartheid truthfully.

The best way we can honour Madiba's memory is to continue his legacy and fight racism and injustice globally. With the ever increasing racism in the UK and the forthcoming Immigration Bill bringing a return of the 'No Blacks, No Irish, No Dogs' signs, the UK is becoming more and more like an apartheid state every day. Those politicians who branded Mandela and the ANC terrorist and rejected sanctions who are now declaring their sorrow at Father Mandela's death are the same ones supporting and endorsing racist policies and actions in the UK today.

My organisation Black Activists Rising Against Cuts (BARAC) UK will be organising an event to introduce a set of Nelson Mandela principles which can be applied to the struggles against racism and injustice we face today to continue Madiba's legacy, to remember, to educate and to campaign for equality. You can find out more via our website www.blackactivistsrisingagainstcuts.blogspot.com or by emailing barac.info@gmail.com

ACTSA would very much welcome the ongoing support and participation of Voice Readers in our campaigns. To sign up to our mailing list and receive our newsbriefs or join ACTSA [use this link](#). Nelson Mandela dedicated his life for freedom, justice and rights. We are encouraging all who are inspired by his example and values to commit to do more to make the world a better, fairer, more just place in which the dignity of all is respected and upheld. You can [post your pledge here](#).

'A freedom fighter learns the hard way that it is the oppressor who defines the nature of the struggle and the oppressed is often left no recourse but to use methods that mirror those of the oppressor. At a point, one can only fight fire with fire' Nelson Mandela.

Rest peacefully Tata, the walk to freedom is not over for many of us but we will tread firmly in the footprints you have left us as we continue. Thank you for all that you taught me and many others about what it means to be a freedom fighter, that even whilst in captivity we still have the ability to liberate minds. From the age of 5 years of age you have played a part in my life and thinking and so you will continue to do as I work with others to keep your legacy alive.

Zita Holbourne is a trade union and community activist, a human rights and equality activist and a poet, writer and artist. She is elected to the ACTSA National Executive Council, TUC Race Relations Committee and PCS union National Executive Committee. She is the co-founder and national co-chair of Black Activists Rising Against Cuts (BARAC) UK