



Bus 18 Now: It's a Wonderful World

Joan Mandell

When I lived in Ramallah in the 1980s I took Bus 18 to Jerusalem for work and pleasure. I loved the old buses adorned with fancy grillwork. Often crowded with talkative passengers heaped with groceries and the delightful smells of fresh-picked greens, the journey usually was a brisk and cheerful half-hour ride, slowing occasionally to an hour or more whenever the Israeli army hastily erected a temporary checkpoint.

Last winter I paid a long overdue visit to Palestine. Nothing prepared me for my first ride alongside the Apartheid Wall. On one side, shuttered homes, empty businesses and dusty sidewalks; on the other, a towering cement barrier that cast a murky shadow through the bus windows.

After the first trip I wanted to avoid Bus 18, full of tired looking passengers, no matter what time of day. At Qalandia, halfway from Ramallah to Jerusalem, we pass under Israeli military watchtowers. The bus disgorges its passengers, except for

Bus 18 in Ramallah.

Source: author collection.

seniors and those with foreign passports. Comatose travelers press through trough-like passageways, offer their bags, fingerprints and documents for inspection by Israeli soldiers behind double-paned Plexiglass. Then they reemerge to find their bus: if unlucky, the bus has already departed with half their family.

Variation 1

Thursday, Jerusalem to Ramallah at dusk, the driver of Bus 18 nears the Qalandia crossing. He assesses the traffic jam up ahead and orders his passengers off the bus. He drops us short of the checkpoint and turns his empty bus back to Jerusalem. Like a photo of refugee exodus, mothers and children from Jerusalem and the Galilee limp along with piles of luggage and unruly children to meet husbands in Ramallah for their Friday day off. The mother next to me asks for help, so I grab one of her bags along with my own two and awkwardly shovel her tiny son through the metal turnstiles. Our raggedy group crosses the checkpoint and we cram our bodies into another Bus 18, already full of passengers and stalled in traffic on the other side. We are now two busloads of passengers in one bus in an enormous traffic jam.

Young Israeli soldiers at the checkpoint do nothing to ease this situation. They loaf along casually, smoking and snacking, letting one car cross towards Jerusalem every now and then. On the Palestinian side of the checkpoint, there are no police in sight to help the traffic heading in either direction. Qalandia camp sends its enthusiastic young boys and middle-aged men to “direct” traffic into a crazy north, south, east and west gridlock with cars perpendicular and crossing lanes.

After two hours of mayhem, our determined driver transforms Bus 18 into an off-road vehicle. We lurch up a mountain of rubble created during construction of the Wall. The driver attempts to steer the bus through the dark without being able to see the ground in front. We are so weighted down with passengers and teetering close to the edge of the mound that it seems to me that we might tip over, taking more than 30 toddlers with us. The woman next to me is on her cellphone the entire time narrating vivid details to her husband. I have a camera in my bag, but I cannot figure out how to explain to people who do this every week why I am capturing their images. Instead I let out a high-pitched hysterical laugh.

People ask why I’m suddenly laughing and I tell them that I feel as though we are on the edge of life and death, and they laugh too. Finally an oncoming truck illumines our path. When we reach the main road again, we are on the wrong side. No problem. Bus 18 revs its engine and zooms 1000 meters into oncoming traffic until the driver finds a gap in the median barrier to cross through to the other side.

When I tell Ramallah friends about the harrowing journey, they scold me: “didn’t you know not to take Bus 18 on a Thursday evening?”

Variation 2

Tuesday morning. I am accompanying a group of British MPs on a fact-finding mission. We are heading from Ramallah to Jerusalem. The Qalandia “terminal” entrance sign greets: “Read these instructions and then obey them... and we wish you a pleasant transit.” The MPs squeeze their bodies through the narrow labyrinth of metal chambers locked and unlocked at no predictable interval.

Palestinians with West Bank identity cards join us in line, surprised to find British parliamentarians among the crowd. Three young people are on their way to work at Israeli restaurants in Jerusalem. Their permits to pass through Qalandia are renewable every three months for ILS1600 (L285) at Israeli discretion. The fee represents two-weeks wages on their 16-hour shifts.

One man wearing an embroidered sweatshirt that proclaims “London” in large script sends a message to people of Britain. “Tell them that Palestinians are proud and defiant, and no matter what the humiliation, we will never give up our rights. Then he jovially offers his shirt to one of the visitors, along with an invitation to *mansaf*, a home cooked meal of lamb and rice.

Variation 3

I am riding Bus 18 with a friend’s daughter from Ramallah to Jerusalem. When we approach Qalandia, the young Palestinian is vociferous: “Don’t walk through the checkpoint with me. You can stay on the bus, since you have an American passport.” I’m thinking she doesn’t want to be seen with her Mom’s older friend, but she continues, “I once saw a British woman turned back to Ramallah because she wanted to go through the search,” she says. So I remain, the only passenger waiting on the bus. I am reading, then startled when my young friend returns five minutes later. “You need to get off the bus,” she mumbles, “They say they found a woman with a knife in her bag and everyone has to be searched.”

So I join about one hundred bodies pressing to get through to the other side. Tonight, instead of the usual indecipherable voices of soldiers shouting orders in Hebrew through bad microphones, we hear music. This evening one of the soldiers has hitched his iPod to the speaker system and we are treated to Louis Armstrong singing, “It’s a Wonderful World.” Surely the irony is lost.

Joan Mandell is a documentary film maker and educator. She is director of Olive Branch Productions in Detroit, Michigan. Her films include “Tales from Arab Detroit” and “Gaza Ghetto.”