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## NELSON ROLIHLAHLA MANDELA



COURTESY OF THE NELSON MANDELA FOUNDATION

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**R**OLIHLAHLA MANDELA was born into an aristocratic rural family in the Eastern Cape of South Africa and grew up the son of a chief and the ward of Thembu royalty in Mvezo, Qunu, and Mqhekezweni. He was given the clan name “Madiba,” the circumcision name “Dalibhunga,” and the Christian name “Nelson.” From 1934–38, he attended Methodist mission schools before studying at University College of Fort Hare. In 1941, he arrived in Johannesburg, having fled from both the university (his studies incomplete) as a consequence of protest action and the Thembu regent, who had attempted to arrange a marriage for him. His thinking and values were a fusion of the traditional and the modern, the indigenous and the Western. His political awareness was, as yet, largely unformed.

In the townships of Johannesburg, Mandela was exposed to the poverty, deprivation, and brutality of black urban life. His earliest political influences were Gaur Radebe, Walter Sisulu, and Anton Lembede. Sisulu would become his most important mentor and a lifelong comrade and friend. It was at the Sisulu home that Mandela met and fell in love with Evelyn Mase, a cousin of Walter’s. They were married in 1944. By 1944, he had joined the African National Congress (ANC), becoming a founding member of the ANC Youth League. He aligned himself with the Africanists, who resisted co-operation with the Communists and organizations representing “non-Africans.”

By the late 1950s, he was a prominent public figure and a thorn in the apartheid regime’s flesh. He was the Volunteer-in-Chief during the 1952 Defiance Campaign. Frequently arrested, banned, and charged, he was a trialist in the Defiance Campaign trial, the Treason Trial (1956–61), and in his own trial (1962). After qualifying as an attorney in 1952, he set up the first black legal firm in South Africa with O. R. Tambo. Most of their work involved defending black victims of the apartheid system. In 1961, with the ANC banned, Mandela went underground and became “the most wanted man in the country.” Known as “The Black Pimpernel,” he was appointed the first Commander-in-Chief of Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), the armed wing of the ANC.

From the late 1940s, the struggle for liberation had become Mandela’s life, and the ANC had become his family. Under the tutelage of Walter Sisulu and influenced by Communists, Mandela shed his Africanism and embraced the non-racism and broad-church strategies of the Congress movement. By the late 1950s, he became convinced that armed struggle was necessary as an instrument to bring the regime to the negotiating table.

Mandela sacrificed domestic life to the struggle. His marriage to Evelyn collapsed during the Treason Trial. In 1958, he married

Nomzamo Winifred (Winnie) Madikizela, with whom he had two children. His new family also felt his absence keenly.

In 1962, he was sentenced to 5 years in prison for leaving the country illegally and for inciting a strike. The next year, from prison, he became accused number one in the Rivonia Trial, which saw most of the senior internal leadership of Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) sentenced to life imprisonment for sabotage. Mandela would be a prisoner for more than 27 years. By the time he was released, he was the most famous political prisoner in the world and a global symbol for the anti-apartheid movement. Mandela used his time in prison to further his studies, read widely, reflect deeply, and learn as much as he could about Afrikaner histories and cultures. He became proficient in the Afrikaans language, engaged his jailers intensely, and nurtured deep friendships with fellow long-term prisoners. From the outset, he was regarded as the leader and representative of ANC prisoners, a position he used to sustain unrelenting pressure on the prison authorities to improve conditions. In addition, he led ANC engagements with new generations of political prisoners from Black Consciousness and other persuasions.

In the first decade of his incarceration, Mandela lost both his mother and his eldest son. He was also devastated by the apartheid regime's relentless persecution of his young wife and his children from both marriages. Using every means available to him, from letters to interventions by his lawyers, from prison visits to financial assistance from supporters, Mandela reached out to his family, nurturing them both collectively and individually.

In 1986, Mandela took the fateful decision to inaugurate "talks about talks" with representatives of the apartheid state. He did so before consulting with his fellow senior political prisoners or the ANC president, O. R. Tambo. It was a moment of not only great leadership but also great danger. By late 1985, the state authorities had separated Mandela from his fellow prisoners and were using all their resources to turn him into an asset for the state as negotiations with the ANC loomed. Although Mandela established lines of communication with Tambo and other leaders, comrades outside feared that he might "sell out."

They need not have worried. Mandela managed the process masterfully and ensured its integration with other "talks about talks" processes that emerged after 1987. On his release from prison in February 1990, he quickly took the reins, became the president of the ANC when Tambo stepped down with health problems, and led the formal negotiations with the National Party and its allies. Throughout the period 1990–94, Mandela traveled the world, receiving adulation

wherever he went. He garnered support for the negotiation process, raised funds for the ANC, received the Nobel Peace Prize, and published his bestselling autobiography.

Again, there was little space in Mandela's life for the private, the personal, the domestic. His already troubled relationship with Winnie fell apart, with them separating in 1992 and then divorcing. He found it difficult to restore intimacy with his children. He experienced a deep loneliness.

After South Africa's first democratic election in 1994, President Mandela formed an ANC-led government of national unity. During his presidency (1994–99), he focused on the interlinked challenges of nation-building, reconciliation, and reckoning with the past. Rebuilding South Africa's international reputation also figured highly on his agenda. He relied on Deputy President Thabo Mbeki and his cabinet to look after governance and the nuts and bolts of transformation. The challenges were many: Apartheid socio-economic patterning was resilient; the damage wrought to the social fabric by centuries of oppression was profound; and there was considerable vested interest in avoiding significant restructuring of the state and the economy.

President Mandela voluntarily stepped down after one term in office to make way for a new generation of leadership, but his acute sense of unfinished business would not allow him to retire from public life. He founded charitable organizations to continue his work; he led the Burundi peace process; he made statements about issues as diverse as HIV/AIDS, corruption, poverty, the Iraq War, and Zimbabwe; and when he felt it necessary, he challenged the South African government, most notably on its HIV/AIDS policies. By his 90th birthday in 2008, he was a global icon of unparalleled stature. In 2009, his birthday was declared Nelson Mandela International Day.

In 1998, Mandela married for a third time, to Graça Machel. From 1999, he was able to devote more time to domestic life and was often surrounded by his children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. He died at his home in Johannesburg in 2013 after a long illness.

I worked for Nelson Mandela as his archivist through the last decade of his life. I find it easy to separate in my mind Nelson Mandela the iconic public figure on the one hand, and the human being I call "Madiba" on the other. The former is fundamentally a construct, a tapestrying of fact, fiction, and adulation. The latter is the man I got to know as his employee. The former, ironically, brought out the worst—the allure of association with celebrity on such a grand scale, the desire to use the influence of such association, the temptation to want just

another piece of it—in everyone, including me. The latter, Madiba the human being, I learned to love and listen to with the greatest care.

I don't recall ever being entranced by the icon. Yes, in the 1980s he became the symbol of my aspirations for a liberated South Africa. Yes, in the early 1990s I looked to him as my leader and regarded him as the kind of person life throws up only very rarely. And yes, as a public servant throughout the first post-apartheid government, I revelled in his presidency and savored, for the first time, the patriotism he sanctioned.

However, I had seen the evidence of fallibility, and I had experienced flaws of leadership (almost always at once both individual and collective). For instance, the unseemly haste with which “reconstruction and development” were replaced by neo-liberal macroeconomic strategies; the inadequate response to reports of systematic destruction of records by the apartheid state after 1990; the embrace of a concept and practice of reconciliation arguably geared to a quick-fix rather than a long haul; and so on.

But I became entranced—moved over and over again—by the man. The first time I was introduced to him, he asked: “Don't I know you from television?” I responded: “It's possible Madiba. But I certainly know *you* from television.” He laughed in the way I came to recognize over the years as vintage Madiba. I miss that laugh.

Elected 1994

VERNE HARRIS

Director, Archive and Dialogue  
Nelson Mandela Foundation

