

**CHARACTER**  
**COMRADE**  
**LEADER**  
**PRISONER**  
**NEGOTIATOR**  
**STATESMAN**

Until his release from prison in February 1990, Nelson Mandela's life was a tale of recurring restrictions, periods in jail, life in hiding and, ultimately, life imprisonment. What insights did Mandela bring to, and take from, these continuing restrictions and imprisonment? How did he and his comrades transcend the ordeal of a life sentence under the iron grip of the apartheid state?

"This photograph of Mandela was taken during a visit by journalists to Robben Island in 1977. The caption on the back of the photograph, in Afrikaans, reads: 'A prisoner in the garden'. It is full of irony. Nelson Mandela was not simply 'a prisoner' but the most famous political prisoner in the world. Neither does the photograph depict him as a 'worker'; instead, the body language of the man in the image makes a mockery of the spade on which he is leaning. And the 'garden' is a barren strip of land to which some prisoners had been herded during the visit to Robben Island by a group of journalists selected by the authorities."

*A Prisoner in the Garden, Nelson Mandela Foundation*

The photograph expresses the challenge Nelson Mandela posed to the apartheid system during the years of his incarceration. It shows Mandela standing tall and unbowed, imprisoned in body, but free in spirit and in mind, with a steely determination to survive and overcome.

APR 2012

APR 2012



## DIGNITY IN ADVERSITY



Life was gruelling on Robben Island. Mandela's group of prisoners arrived in mid-1964, the coldest winter in South Africa for 30 years. As leaders, they were considered very dangerous, and were put in tiny, single cells. Mandela's resilience was to be tested to the limit.

"Mandela was now cut off from the world at the age of 46. He had never been an ascetic, like Gandhi or Lenin. In his letters he would talk back to the warden, the foreman or the trustee, to the food, the landscape, the women, the music." *George Bizos*



"June and July were the bleakest months on Robben Island. Winter was in the air, and the rain was just beginning... Even in the sun, I shivered in my light khaki shirt. It was then that I first understood the dichotomy of feeding the cold in one's bones. At noon we would break for lunch. That first week we were given soup, which stank horribly. In the afternoon, we were permitted to exercise for half an hour, under strict supervision. We walked briskly around the courtyard in single file." *John Dlamini*



"At the heart of every oppressive tool developed by the apartheid regime was a determination to control, distort, weaken, even erase people's memories. For those of us who spent many years in prison, this attack on memory was felt deep within us, actually in our bodies—the physical yearning to touch loved ones, breathe in the smells of home, feel the texture of a favourite jersey." *John Dlamini*



The prison system was based on total control, minimal, terrible food, hard labour in silence in the line quarry, and a code of punishment and manipulation. Mandela and his comrades had to dig deep into themselves to survive the physical hardships. But the harder struggle, perhaps, was how to survive spiritually. Fortunately, they had each other.

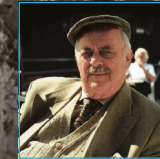
"It was in our determination to remember our ancestors, our stories, our values and our dreams that we found comradeship." *John Dlamini*



From the beginning of 1965, a number of other prominent political prisoners, including Mac Maharaj, were moved to the same section of Robben Island as the Rivonia trialists. Maharaj, a member of SACP, was to become a lifelong friend and comrade to Mandela.

"Man can adapt to the worst conditions if he feels he is not alone; if he feels he has support in what he is doing." *Mac Maharaj*

Together the political prisoners developed a strategy on how to conduct themselves; they avoided provoking the wardens but insisted on retaining their own dignity.



"When I went to Robben Island in August 1964, it was winter. Mandela arrived, wearing a pair of shorts, no socks, rough shoes, on the back of a bakelite. I snaked through the two warders and embraced him. The warders were deeply shocked. And what did Mandela say? 'George, this place has made me forget my manners. I haven't introduced you to my guard of honour.' And he proceeded to introduce each one of them by name." *George Bizos*



"Mandela began to believe that our occupation of the island high ground could make it possible to turn some of the thugs—wardens-around. He realised that the warders were not all homogenous." *John Dlamini*

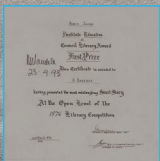
"...the cell is an ideal place to learn to know yourself. In judging our progress as individuals we tend to concentrate on external factors such as one's social position, wealth and standard of education... But internal factors may be more crucial in assessing our development as a human being. Honesty, sincerity, simplicity, humility, pure generosity, absence of vanity, readiness to serve others." *John Dlamini*

## "ROBBER ISLAND UNIVERSITY"



Robben Island is often referred to as "the university" by former prisoners. Leaders like Walter Sisulu, Govan Mbeki and Harry Gwala were popular and respected educators, giving courses on a variety of topics.

"Walter, perhaps the greatest living historian of the ANC, began to tell them about the genesis of the organisation... Syllabus A also included a course taught by Kathy Aa. A History of the Indian Struggle... Mac, who had studied in the German Democratic Republic, taught a course in political economy." *John Dlamini*



But Robben Island was a university not only for its inmates, but also for its warders. Mandela and the other senior prisoners achieved a position where they virtually dominated their guards—an extraordinary record in the psychological politics of jail.

"With junior officers, Nelson was charming and fatherly. Many young warders were friendly to him, occasionally soliciting advice from him in connection with their jobs or social problems. Some brought him greetings from their parents." *John Dlamini*



Mandela's ability to win over his jailers is well illustrated in a story told many years later, by Sir Robin Benwick, British Ambassador to South Africa, when he attended FW de Klerk's inauguration as President in 1989.

"Mandela's classic approach is to co-opt people. You are in jail, you start working on your warders. At De Klerk's inauguration, the Minister of Justice, Kobie Coetsee, came up to me and said, 'You have to help me persuade President de Klerk to release Mandela!'" *John Dlamini*

## PRISONERS WITH A PURPOSE



The daily humiliations Mandela had to suffer when he first got to the island slowly taught him self-control.

"We were political prisoners, prisoners with a purpose. And because we shared a purpose we were a community. I knew that someone was hungrier than I was. I would share my food with them. We took care of the weakest among us." *John Dlamini*



But every day was about survival, and Mandela developed a tactic of compromising on lesser issues in order to increase control over their days—days that Mandela was well aware of the impact he had on the prison authorities, and he used it strategically. This called for both self-restraint and a shrewd judgement on how best to use his influence.



"One day in 1968, prisoners were complaining to one of the most intransigent officers that warders were sabotaging their studies. He responded with an insult. Mandela who was standing at the back, exploded. It was astounding for everybody; they had never seen him losing his temper. When Mandela had subsided, Neville Alexander said to him, 'That was rather heavy,' but Mandela replied, 'No, no, it was deliberate.'" *John Dlamini*



Throughout this period, Mandela took the lead in making repeated efforts to roll back suffocating restrictions and expand the space of freedom.

Following persistent protests, over the years conditions began to improve. In 1973 they had access to hot water. In 1975 they were permitted to play tennis and cultivate a garden.

"A garden was one of the few things in prison that one could control. To plant a seed, watch it grow, to tend it and then harvest it offered a simple but enduring satisfaction." *John Dlamini*

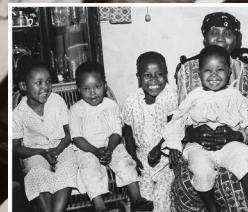




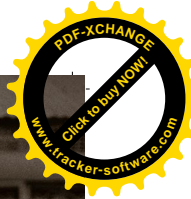
Mandela married Evelyn Mase in 1944. They had four children, though tragically their second child, a girl, died in infancy. Their two sons, Thembekile (1946-1969) and Magkatho (1950-2005), were followed by another daughter, Makaziwe (1953-). Mandela and Evelyn were divorced in 1957.



In 1958 Mandela married Winnie Madikizela with whom he had two daughters, Zenani (1959-) and Zindzi (1960-). Throughout most of her married life, Winnie had to endure a forced separation from her husband. She emerged as a leading opponent of the apartheid regime during the long years of Mandela's imprisonment. As a result of irreconcilable differences after his release, Mandela and Winnie were separated in 1992 and divorced in 1996.







# PAIN AND LOSS

During his 27 years in jail, Mandela was plagued by guilt that he had not been able to provide emotional and material support to his wife Winnie and his five children. Thembekie, his eldest child, never came to visit him, which saddened him deeply.



Mandela meticulously duplicated every letter that he wrote. In his clear, firm handwriting, in notebooks. Many of these letters never reached their intended destination.

"Up to the present moment I do not know where Zoni and Zindzi are and who maintains them. Every one of the letters I have written them in the last three months has not reached them."

Mandela, Mandela, 1964 from prison, 1 August 1975



Despite his anguish around the prison correspondence system and the lengthy process by which the censors examined his correspondence, Mandela never lost hope that eventually he would be able to reach his wife and children.

"To continue writing holds out the possibility that one day luck may be on our side in that you may receive these letters. In the meantime the mere fact of writing down my thoughts ... gives me a measure of pleasure and satisfaction. It tends to calm down the shooting pains whenever I think of you."

Mandela, Mandela, 1964 from prison, 24 June 1970



In 1968, Mandela was delighted to receive a visit from his mother, who made the long and arduous journey from the Transkei. Together with his sister Mabel and his children Makgatho and Makazwe, he was concerned when he saw how thin and worn his mother looked. Shortly afterwards she died of a heart attack.



The following year in 1969, Mandela's son, Thembeke, was killed in a car accident. His fellow prisoners remember the intensity of his grief. For weeks, Mandela withdrew. He would go into his cell and wrap his blanket around himself tightly, to keep his pain inside him.

"Then came '68 and '69 when the skies suddenly fell on me. I lost both Thembe and Ma and I must confess that the order that had reigned in my soul almost vanished."

Mandela, Mandela, 1969 from prison, 14 August 1970



The new prisoners were restricted to one letter of 500 words every six months, all of which were heavily censored. Mandela received one visit from his wife, Winnie, after two months on the island, after which she was not allowed to visit for another year.

# HALF-WAY HOUSE

In 1982 Mandela was moved to Pollsmoor prison, along with Walter Sisulu, Raymond Mhlaba and Andrew Mlangeni. A few months later Ahmed Kathrada joined them. For the first time in nearly 20 years, Mandela was cut off from the collective.



In 1985, after a prostate operation, Mandela was further cut off by being separated from his four colleagues, when he was moved to the top floor of Pollsmoor. When the Commonwealth Eminent Persons' Group visited him soon afterwards, they found him "isolated and lonely."

In October 1987, Mandela began a series of meetings with senior government officials at Pollsmoor, including the Minister of Justice, Kobie Coetsee, who decided to move Mandela to a place that would be halfway between prison and freedom.



A cottage on the grounds of Victor Verster Prison, set in the wine lands of the Paarl Valley, became Mandela's new home.

"... I surveyed my new abode and discovered a swimming pool in the back yard, and two smaller bedrooms. I walked outside and admired the trees that shaded the house ... a halfway house between prison and freedom."

Mandela was given his own cook, Warrant Officer Swart, a tall quiet Afrikaner, who had once been a warder on Robben Island.



"Officer Swart was a decent fellow and became like a brother to me. He was a wonderful cook and when I had visitors, he would cook delicious meat. When I was allowed visits from the comrades like Helen Joseph, I often teased them that they only came for the food."



"When Mandela went to prison, he was an angry young man, appalled at the miscarriage of justice. Those years in prison were quite crucial. Suffering deepened his spiritual resource, and he grew in that time in magnanimity and generosity of spirit."

Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu

After 27 years in prison, Nelson Mandela could still make jokes.

He came out determined to bring peace and democracy to South Africa. He had no time for vengeance and bitterness. He had truly overcome.





"... In the fell clutch of circumstance  
I have not winced nor cried aloud.  
Under the bludgeonings of chance  
My head is bloody, but unbowed ...  
... It matters not how strait the gate,  
How charged with punishments the scroll,  
I am the master of my fate:  
I am the captain of my soul."

The poem *Invictus* by William Ernest Henley gave Mandela strength during his 27 years in prison. In the film of the same title, Mandela offers the poem as inspiration to rugby captain, François Pienaar, in the run-up to the final of the 1995 Rugby World Cup.

© 2008 The Rugby Museum





# THE POWER OF IMAGE

"Across his career he played such various roles as counsellor, lawyer, showman, guerrilla leader and statesman, and allowed himself profigately to be photographed in these guises. In his case, clothes most definitely made the man and the politician." Elleke Boehmer

Mandela was given his first suit by Jongintaba, Regent of the Thembu, when he went to Kimberley. This was the beginning of a lifelong love of clothes. To go with his new suit, Mandela also got a new pair of shoes, which he remembers with some embarrassment.

I had never seen boots before of any kind, and that first day I looked at his neatly shod horse... And I jumped into the classroom... I noticed two female students... The partner of the two looked over to her friend and said: "The country boy is not used to wearing shoes!"

When Mandela moved to Johannesburg in 1941, he was quick to adopt a smart urban persona, as we can see in this early photograph. But, being short of cash, he was not able to indulge in his passion for clothes. In fact the first suit he acquired in Johannesburg was second-hand, given to him by one of his first employers, lawyer Lazar Siddeky.

I wore that suit every day for almost five years. In the end, there were more patches than suit!

Mandela oozes charisma in this photograph taken during the Treason Trial in Pretoria. Sporting a trendy mid-century, Mandela is, as always, immaculately dressed in the elegant fashion of the times: a tailored double-breasted suit with buttoned-down lapels.

In the 1950s, Mandela was, clearly, the most well-dressed of black public, and he dressed impeccably: the only black man who had his suits cut by the same tailor as South Africa's richest man, the gold and diamond magnate Harry Oppenheimer.

This 1961 image—taken in hiding in the Yeoville, Johannesburg flat or comrade Willie Kodesh—shows Mandela in what appears to be Khosa traditional dress.

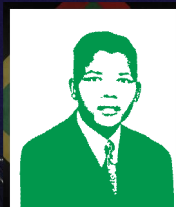
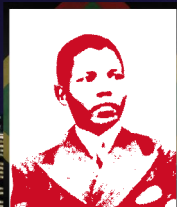
The photograph was deliberately posed to project Mandela's African identity at a time when the ANC was concerned about being support to their Africanist rivals.

The Quik he is wearing here was in fact Willie Kodesh's cardigan bedspread; the amband was newly-bought dog collar and the beautiful neck collar was... the real thing! Genuine Thembu bedwork.

On 29 March 1961, he accused in the Treason Trial were found not guilty and discharged. The ANC leadership decided that Mandela should go underground.

I became a creator of the night. I would disappear and reappear during the day, and emerge to get the news when it became late.

In this image, we see Mandela as the 'Black Panther' modelled on the hero of the Scarlet Pimpernel. Here Mandela sports a new, visionary beard, a new image-befitting his new role.



On 11 February 1990, Mandela was released after 27 years' imprisonment. Two days later, he addressed 120,000 people at Soweto's FNB stadium.

After his release, Mandela surged back on to the international stage. In this photograph, taken on 22 June 1990, we see Mandela addressing the United Nations General Assembly, where he thanked those who had fought for his release.

Nelson Mandela has returned. We are here in order to see him. We are here in order to see him. We are here in order to see him.

After his release, Mandela surged back on to the international stage. In this photograph, taken on 22 June 1990, we see Mandela addressing the United Nations General Assembly, where he thanked those who had fought for his release.

He was lauded there as the moral conscience of the world, and as a unifying force for a tormented country. His image quickly became one of the most widely recognized on the planet.

We have at last achieved our political emancipation. We shake ourselves free from all our people from the continuing bondage of poverty, deprivation, suffering, gender and other discrimination.

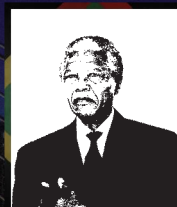
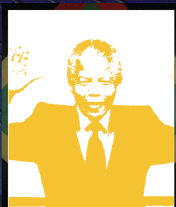
"Never, never and never again shall it be that this beautiful land will again experience the oppression of one by another and suffer the indignity of being the skunk of the world. Let freedom reign. The sun shall never set on so glorious a human achievement! God bless Africa!"

Mandela donned the jersey of Springboks rugby captain François Pienaar for the team's World Cup final match against the All Blacks on 24 June 1995.

"Mandela, in that single act of generosity, carried the entire South Africa into one new nation" they were, however quickly, abandoned when Mandela resigned.

I don't think I ever experience a moment like that again. It was a moment of magic, a moment of wonder. I was the moment I realised that there really was a chance for this country on that day. I was so... so...

During the election campaign, Mandela seemed much more at ease than when he first left prison. He often abandoned his suits to relax in the brightcoloured, loose-fitting shirts which President Suharto had first introduced him to in Indonesia, when he gave him six. When a child asked him why he wore them, he replied: "You must remember I was in jail for 27 years. Now I want to feel freedom."



From early on, Nelson Mandela went about building his image with careful thought and deliberation. He came to realise that image was a powerful weapon for achieving certain goals, particularly in the long struggle to overthrow apartheid.

"In any memoir involving Mandela, this is the keynote that is repeatedly struck: his chameleon-like talent for donning different guises; his theatrical flair for costume and gesture; his shrewd awareness of the power of his own image." Elleke Boehmer

