

# Mandela: Man, Legend And Symbol Of Resistance

By ALAN COWELL, Special to The New York Times

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JOHANNESBURG, Sept. 4 — Percy Qoboza remembers the days fondly. One of them goes like this: In the early 1960's the man was on the run from the police, and Mr. Qoboza, a young black reporter, was following the story.

“He would disappear and then turn up, somewhere, at a public telephone, and call in with a statement. Of course the police would trace the call, but by that time, he was long gone. We had our own pimperl.”

Mr. Qoboza is now a prominent newspaper editor. The man he was talking about is Nelson Mandela, the imprisoned leader of the African National Congress, whose days as the pimperl ran out in August 1962, when he was arrested for sabotage because of his role in the militant wing of the congress. He has been in prison ever since and has become, through incarceration and steadfast defiance from within the prison walls, South Africa's leading black hero, the man, according to a recent newspaper survey, whom 90 percent of the nation's black people want unconditionally freed.

“I think,” Mr. Qoboza said in an interview today, “that he symbolizes black determination to be free.”

The symbolism, from a black nationalist point of view, is evident. Pollsmoor prison, outside Cape Town, where Mr. Mandela is held, represents the system against which he rebels. His rebellion, from within, is the ambiguous emblem of defiance in a society where the rulers seem to call the shots.

The enigma, however, seems to be that, invisible and unheard, removed by white authority from black political activism, Mr. Mandela has captured the spirit and devotion not only of those who knew him at the time of his incarceration, but also of those who have, in the last year of upheaval, assumed the custodianship of black resistance — the teen-agers who were not yet born when he was jailed.

If Mr. Mandela, 67 years old, was released tomorrow, said Michael Morake, 18, in an interview in Soweto, Johannesburg's sprawling black satellite, “I will probably pass him by because I would not recognize him.”

“But it is his ideas and commitment to the struggle that make even us youths regard him as our leader,” he said.

“Anyhow,” he added, “I do not worry about not knowing what Mandela looks like right now, because the day has come closer where I will see him with my own eyes.”

“If the system does not free him,” he said, “the people’s revolution will set him free. And that day is not far away.”

Mr. Mandela is seen as an inspiration whose physical presence means less than his message and example.

“He is the symbol of our struggle,” said Mzwakhe Kubheka, 19, a high school student. “To me he is like Jesus Christ.”

“How many people would rather stay in jail than be free at the cost of their integrity,” he said.

“For the struggle to go on,” he said, “we do not need Mandela to be around. We, the youths, will do the job the way our leader would have wanted. And he knows that we are carrying on from where he left off 23 years ago.”

Mr. Mandela was jailed and was supposed to become, thus, a nonperson, banished, initially to the harshness of Robben Island, off Cape Town. But the myth was stronger than the prison walls and it grew across the generations.

There were other heroes, but many have been detained or otherwise neutralized. Mr. Mandela filled the emptiness at the heart of black yearning for leadership. Who, then, is he? Mr. Mandela was born in 1918, the eldest son of a chief of the Tembu people, inheriting a mantle of royal self-confidence that defied white relegation of blacks to second-class status. He studied law at South Africa’s Fort Hare University, an academy whose alumni include Robert Mugabe, now Prime Minister of Zimbabwe.

As in Mr. Mugabe’s case, the university seems to have honed political views. Mr. Mandela is said to have been expelled from it for organizing a student strike.

In Johannesburg, he and Oliver Tambo, now the exiled leader of the African National Congress, formed a law practice. In 1944 Mr. Mandela joined the congress, then far less demanding of white concessions than it is today, and played a leading role in its nonviolent campaigns against apartheid in the 1950’s.

Those actions caused him to be detained, along with 155 others, in 1957, in a four-year treason trial that ended, in 1961, with all the defendants being acquitted. That was the start of the pimperl whose credentials were strengthened, Mr. Qoboza said, by the fact that Mr. Mandela never chose self-exile to secure comfortable dissent.

It was at this time, too, that a great change came over black resistance in South Africa. On March 21, 1960, the police shot dead 69 black protesters in Sharpeville, a

black township south of Johannesburg, and, in the wake of the massacre, leaders such as Mr. Mandela decided to turn to violence.

Mr. Mandela was a central figure in the formation of Umkhonto we Sizwe — the Spear of the Nation — the military wing of the African National Congress, and he became its first commander. On one of his trips outside South Africa, he was said to have visited Algeria, to organize training bases, and to have undergone training. The name of Umkhonto we Sizwe is feted, still, in the songs that young blacks sing at the gravesides of slain township activists.

In August 1962 the authorities caught up with Mr. Mandela and, after the leadership of Umkhonto we Sizwe was rounded up, put him on trial for sabotage. His final address to the court that jailed him for life is burned into the soul of black resistance.

“There comes a time, as it came in my life,” he said, “when a man is denied the right to live a normal life, when he can only live the life of an outlaw because the government has so decreed to use the law to impose a state of outlawry upon him. I was driven to this situation, and I do not regret having taken the decisions that I did take.”

Earlier, when Mr. Mandela launched violent resistance to white rule, a pamphlet was circulated by his organization saying: “The choice is not ours. It has been made by the nationalist government which has rejected every peaceable demand by the people for rights and freedom.”

At his trial, Mr. Mandela talked of “the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities.”

“It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve,” he said. “But if need be, an ideal for which I am prepared to die.”

Mr. Mandela is visited regularly only by his immediate family. This year, however, the authorities have permitted some outsiders to see him.

He is, said Lord Bethell, a British peer and member of the European Parliament, who saw Mr. Mandela in January, “a six-foot-tall, lean figure with silvering hair, an impeccable olive-green shirt and well-creased navy blue trousers.”

“I am in good health,” Mr. Mandela said at the time. “It is not true that I have cancer. It is not true that I have had a toe amputated. I get up at 3:30 A.M. every morning, do two hours of physical exercise, work up a good sweat. Then I read and study during the day.”

The reference to exercise does not surprise Mr. Qoboza. If Mr. Mandela had not become a politician, he said, he would have become a great athlete. “When the world had not discovered jogging, he had,” Mr. Qoboza said. “As an amateur boxer, he packed one of the meanest left hooks in the business.”

Samuel Dash, chief counsel to the Senate Watergate Committee and now a professor of law at Georgetown University, saw Mr. Mandela earlier this year and wrote, in *The New York Times Magazine*, that “he is a tall, slim, handsome man” who appears “vigorous and healthy, with a calm, confident manner and dignified bearing that seemed incongruous in our prison surroundings.”

“Indeed, throughout our meeting, I felt that I was in the presence not of a guerrilla fighter or racial ideologue, but of a head of state,” Mr. Dash wrote.

Mr. Mandela, he said, lived in a cell measuring 25 by 40 feet, with access to the roof of the building.

President P. W. Botha has sought to depict the African National Congress, and Mr. Mandela, as Communists. The Congress has long entertained an alliance with the South African Communist Party, but Mr. Tambo, its exiled leader, has denied that it is steered by Moscow.

In his interview with Lord Bethell, Mr. Mandela was quoted as saying: “Personally, I am a Socialist and I believe in a classless society. But I see no reason to belong to any political party at the moment.”

Mr. Mandela confronts the authorities with a dilemma, one they have sought to resolve for almost a year in a kind of negotiation conducted through newspapers and public statements.

If he were to accept the authorities’ terms for his release — that he renounce violence — then he would be discredited and thus neutralized. But, if he stays in prison, the authorities seem to acknowledge, his aura will grow, as will his stature as a rallying point for black resistance.

Last December, he was offered freedom if he went to live in the so-called homeland called the Transkei. He rejected the offer.

The offer was not publicized, but, in January, after Lord Bethell saw Mr. Mandela, the authorities publicly offered to release him if he gave them an undertaking that he would renounce violence as a means of achieving political goals. That offer, too, was spurned.

His reply, in the strange dialogue between captor and captive, was transmitted by his daughter at a rally in Soweto. “My father says I cannot and will not give any undertaking at a time when I, and you the people, are not free,” she said. “Your freedom and mine cannot be separated.”

Mr. Mandela’s messages are often transmitted by family members who see him in prison. His wife, Winnie, is a “banned” person in South Africa, banished to a remote corner of the Orange Free State, forbidden from being quoted in the South African press.

Their relationship is seen by many blacks as a symbol of resistance since both, in their different ways, are damaged by white authority, but both refuse to be cowed.

From the authorities' viewpoint, Mr. Mandela's incarceration presents special problems. While visitors say he is in vigorous health, his death in prison would cause a massive black outcry. To release him might, officials said, strip him of some glamour. But to release him without conditions might be seen by whites as a sign of weakness, and, moreover, might result in the unleashing of unpredictable forces.

In the latest statement that he has transmitted through Mrs. Mandela, Mr. Mandela has said the only thing left to the Afrikaner white elite is to discuss a handing over of power to the black majority. But he seems to have left open the door to negotiation.

"If the government abandons apartheid," Mrs. Mandela said after visiting her husband, "lifts the ban on the A.N.C., releases all political prisoners, and allows the exiles to return, then Nelson and other A.N.C. leaders would be prepared to sit down and talk."

What inspires the myth of Mr. Mandela seems to be his refusal to compromise.

"All his life has been dedicated to the struggle," Mr. Qoboza said, "and I bet that the first thing he would do if he was released would be to organize a rally in Soweto and re-dedicate himself to the struggle."

In his interview with Lord Bethell, Mr. Mandela said much the same thing: "If I was released, I would never obey any restriction. If they confined me, for instance, to the Cape area, I would break the order and walk to my home in Soweto to be with my wife and daughter."