

C H A P T E R F I V E

Nelson Mandela: Freedom for His People



It was a clear, sunny February day in Cape Town at the end of the African summer in 1990. The prisoner awoke at 4:30, did his usual exercises, ate breakfast and telephoned some friends. He was given a brief physical checkup, and then stood among some crates of papers and books as he waited to be released after twenty-seven years of confinement. The inmate embraced the officials of the prison, thanked them and proceeded to the gate. Much to his surprise, he was greeted by a huge crowd of people who were cheering and yelling, as well as hundreds of reporters and television cameras. Stunned by all the chaos, the man recoiled when a furry object was thrust toward him, thinking the object was a weapon. He was told that it was just a modern microphone.

The prisoner was Nelson Mandela, and he was experiencing freedom at the age of seventy-one, after ten thousand days in prison. He raised his clenched right fist in the power salute and a roar went up from the crowd. He was taken to city hall in Cape Town and spoke before a sea of celebrating people. He proclaimed:

Friends, comrades, and fellow South Africans. I greet you all in the name of peace, democracy and freedom for all! I stand here before you not as a prophet but as a humble servant of you, the people. Your tireless and heroic sacrifices have made it possible for

me to be here today. I therefore place the remaining years of my life in your hands.¹

Mandela had entered prison as a vigorous young man, and now was coming out an old man, although still fit and healthy. For his struggle to free his people from oppression, he had spent one-third of his life in prison. Now, he would begin the final stage of his efforts to lead his people to freedom.

Tribal Background

Nelson Mandela was born on July 18, 1918, in a small village that was part of the Transkei area, located in southeastern South Africa. This beautiful area of green rolling hills and rivers was the home of the Thembu people, part of the Xhosa nation into which Rolihlahla (Nelson's tribal name) was born. Nelson's more common name was "Buti." His father, Hendry, was a tribal chief, who acted as a counselor to several tribal kings. He was known for his stubbornness and rebelliousness, characteristics that Nelson believed were passed on to him. His mother, Nosekeni, was one of the chief's four wives and was known for her loyalty and quiet wisdom, also aspects of Nelson's character.

When Nelson was still a baby, his father was deprived of his position and lost his income, land and cattle. All this was a punishment for refusing to recognize a white magistrate's authority over him. Nelson had learned an early lesson about opposing white domination. He and his mother were forced to move from their comfortable thatched hut and well-stocked homestead to another village, where they had to live in a mud hut with a cow-dung floor. Their diet now also would be simpler—usually corn, beans and pumpkins. Village life was difficult. The men were generally away working in remote farms or in the goldmines. The women carried water, did the farmwork, cooked, and looked after the babies and children.

Nelson remembers his childhood days in the village as happy ones. At five he became a herd-boy, tending the sheep and cattle in the fields.

He discovered the mystical attachment that his people had to their cattle, seeing them as a blessing from God, and he also acquired a love of nature and open spaces. In his free time he played with his friends, learned stick-fighting, and swam and fished in the cold streams. In the evenings, his mother would fascinate Nelson with the tribal legends and fables, and if his father was visiting he would hear heroic stories of Xhosa warriors. He learned to cherish a strong sense of community with the people of his village, the importance of custom and tradition, and the value of honoring one's ancestors.

Often around the night fires, the elders would tell Nelson stories of the good old days before the arrival of the white man. Those were the days when his people lived peacefully under the democratic rule of their kings and could freely move throughout the country and enjoy the forests, the rivers and the mountains. The land, the main means of production, was owned by the whole tribe and not by individuals. There was no such thing as a rich class or a poor class, for all were equal and this was the foundation of their governmental system. All participated in "council" discussions and decisions, whether they be chief, subject, warrior or medicine man. Hearing of these so-called "primitive" days, where there was freedom from servitude and poverty, would be always remembered by Nelson in his later struggles for political freedom.²

The Mission Mentality

In those days conversion to Christianity was synonymous with being civilized. Nelson's father did not buy into this and remained faithful to his native religion, acting as a priest in the traditional rituals, such as harvest, weddings, funerals. This religion celebrated a cosmic wholeness and did not see the distinction between the secular and the sacred. Nelson's mother, however, was attracted to Christianity, converted and had her son baptized into the Methodist church. When he was seven, Nelson was enrolled in the mission school to receive a British education. To attend school the boy had to exchange his native blanket for his father's pants, cut off at the knee, and when he showed up the first day he was given the name he would carry for life: Nelson.

A Turning Point

When Nelson was nine, his father died suddenly of an apparent lung disease. Soon after, the regent of the Thembu people offered to become Nelson's guardian. It was an offer Nelson's mother could not turn down, so she took her boy by the hand, trekked for a whole day to the regent's royal residence, and handed her son over to his new home. Though Nelson and his mother were very close, the boy quickly got into his new world as a member of the royal family. He received new clothes, attended a good school in a crude building, dutifully performed his chores as a plowboy and shepherd and was excited about going to dances.

At this point, Christianity began to become more a part of Nelson's life. The church provided education and a future for this life as well as security in the next. Nelson recalls the minister's booming fire-and-brimstone sermons and women kneeling and begging for salvation. In the world of the regent, religion was an integral part of life, and Nelson was expected to attend services with the family every Sunday. Although Nelson would hold a respect for the church, he usually kept his distance from organized religion.

Learning to Be a Leader

Nelson learned a great deal about leadership during his years with the regent. He was able to attend the tribal meetings and noticed that the regent would gather with the elders and anyone else who wished to attend. During the meetings anyone who wished to speak was given a chance. Conversations were candid, and even the regent himself was not above criticism. Only when all had had their say would the regent say his piece and work toward some kind of unanimity. If that could not be achieved, the meeting would be continued or another meeting would be held until there was a consensus. Nelson would later sum up how his own leadership would be affected by all this: "I always remember the regent's axiom: a leader, he said, is like a shepherd. He stays behind the flock, letting the most nimble go out ahead, whereupon the

others follow, not realizing that all along they are being directed from behind.”³

Nelson always valued his close relationship with his household and clan. From prison he once reflected how wonderful it had been to be accepted as a beloved household member “where you can call at any time, completely relaxed, sleep at ease and freely take part in the discussion of all problems...”⁴

At these meetings Nelson had more opportunities to hear about African history. He listened to the stories of how the white man shattered the fellowship among the tribes, divided them against each other and took their land from them. He heard stories of how the brave African patriots fought and died in wars against Western domination. He learned that he was part of a conquered people who were slaves in their own country and lacked any power or control of their own futures. Nelson later pointed out how these indictments against the white man angered him and made him feel cheated of his birthright.

Leaving Home for School

At sixteen Nelson left home for secondary school at Clarksbury with a pound note in his pocket and brand-new boots on his feet. In his first Western school with degreed teachers, he began to see his abilities measured against those of others. He also became close for the first time to white people—Reverend Harris, the head of the school, and his wife. Still a country boy, a Thembu through and through, Nelson began to broaden his horizons slightly.

At nineteen Nelson moved to Methodist College at Healdtown, where he joined over a thousand students, both male and female, in order to receive an English-Christian liberal arts education. It was a rigorous institution, where Nelson was able to meet students from all over the continent, and he began to sense his identity as an African. It was here that he met Oliver Tambo, who would be his close comrade for the rest of his life. In college, Nelson began to take up the sports of long-distance running and boxing. On Sundays he taught Bible classes in the surrounding villages.

During this time a Xhosa poet came to the college and made Nelson deeply proud of his tribal heritage, as well as stirring him with the possibility of standing against the white man. The poet said: "We cannot allow these foreigners who do not care for our culture to take over our nation. I predict that one day, the forces of African society will achieve a momentous victory over the interloper. For too long, we have succumbed to the false gods of the white man. But we will emerge and cast off these foreign notions."⁵

On to University

From Healdtown, Nelson moved on to the elite University College of Fort Hare, home of some of the greatest African scholars. Here he continued his studies and did further research on how the British had suppressed the African tribes, tricking them out of their land with fake documents and false promises, tearing down their houses and killing those who resisted.⁶ Nelson also continued his interest in athletics, got involved in acting, and became an enthusiastic ballroom dancer. On one occasion he sneaked out of the dorms to go fox-trotting, spied a lovely young woman and began dancing with her, only to learn that she was the wife of one of his professors. Nelson quickly apologized, conducted her back to her husband and made a hasty retreat.

Early on at the university, Nelson began to get into conflicts with the authorities over student rights. He was elected a student leader, and soon found himself involved in a controversy with the principal. He returned home for the summer with the understanding that he change his view or be expelled.

Over the summer Nelson's benefactor informed him that he had arranged marriages for both Nelson and one of the regent's sons. Neither of the boys found the decision acceptable, and they decided to run away from home together. They ended up in the huge and bustling city of Johannesburg, where Nelson's life was about to be dramatically changed forever.

Life in the Big City

When Nelson came to Johannesburg in 1941, it was a sprawling metropolis with much industry, particularly gold mining. Hundreds of thousands of Africans, unable to sustain themselves in the barren reserves, had migrated to the city for work. While there were jobs, there was little housing for blacks and most had to stay in crowded barracks in the “non-European” township. The “lucky” ones were crammed into fenced-in compounds of municipal housing.

For a time the young men were able to fake their way into jobs at a gold mine, but eventually the regent tracked them down and they were forced to leave the mine. A cousin took in Nelson and introduced him to a prominent businessman and black leader, Walter Sisulu, who would be a close associate for the rest of Nelson’s life. Sisulu secured a job for Nelson in a large Jewish law firm. There he met many bright and well-formed people and enjoyed the vibrant social life of the city. His living conditions, however, were substandard, for he could only afford a room in a boarding house with a dirt floor and no electricity, running water or heat. His income was so low that he often had to walk the six miles back and forth to work, study to finish his degree by candlelight, and wear a tattered, patched suit to work. The room was located in a township that was a noted slum with a high crime rate. Eventually, he was able to move in with a family of his tribe, and things improved.

Nelson enjoyed the urban life, with its vibrant politics and its exciting African subculture, fueled by local writers and musicians along with American movies and jazz. Nelson met many Africans who held professional careers, as well as doctors, lawyers and educators. They were determined to see the promises of Western culture to be realized on their continent. A new spirit of African nationalism and freedom was in the air!

Entering Into Politics

It was during these early years in Johannesburg that Nelson was first introduced to the African National Congress in 1944, and then had his

first taste of taking part in a protest and boycott against the raising of bus fares. He began to change his goals from preparing for a successful career and a comfortable salary back in Transkei to “see that my duty was to my people as a whole.”⁷ His interests now shifted to racial oppression, the few opportunities for his people, and the laws that subjugated them. To follow this mission, Nelson enrolled in the University of Witwatersrand. There he experienced deep prejudice, and although he did not do well in his studies, Nelson met several key white people who would play roles in his future: Joe Slove, an ardent communist, and Bram Fischer, a brilliant lawyer and freedom advocate. This period opened his mind to a whole new world of ideas and political positions. He also encountered many who were dedicated to the freedom of the Africans. He was moving from his African exclusivist views and coming to see that if his country was to be liberated, all of its citizens would have to have an international mentality.

A Freedom Fighter

Nelson had been discriminated against and oppressed all his life, and gradually he came to the point of having enough. His anger and rebelliousness deepened, and he began to be resolved to stand up and fight the system that held his people in captivity. He began to realize that his black skin could be seen as beautiful, and that his people had every right to enjoy the beauty and resources of their own country. Nelson became ardently committed to the cause of African nationalism.

Along with Sisulu, Oliver Tambo and others, Nelson helped form the Youth League, designed to moving the “slumbering” African National Congress (ANC) into action. Nelson at this time was a tall, handsome athletic lawyer, but still felt insecure, politically backward and lacking in confidence as a speaker. The league’s goals were to create a nation out of the many tribes, rid their people of their sense of inferiority and overthrow white supremacy. With youthful enthusiasm, they vowed to bring more intelligence and power to the movement for African nationalism, and to use direct actions as a means of protest.⁸

The ANC Youth League Manifesto, which Nelson played a central role in drafting, gives a snapshot of the situation in South Africa in 1944. It points out that two million whites with superior military strength had decided that they had a “race destiny” to rule eight million Africans. The whites had thus claimed ownership of 87 percent of the land and in order to consolidate their position had segregated the Africans in state, church, industry and commerce. This situation was designed to ensure that the Africans would never have any power to resist “white domination.”⁹

The Manifesto goes on to reject the white domination and insists that Africans determine their own future by their own efforts. The Youth League openly rejected foreign leadership in Africa, believed that all Africans must speak against domination in one voice, vowed to oppose discriminatory laws and promised to struggle for full citizenship for the Africans in a democratic society. It set up policy for land redistribution, mass education, the elimination of all color bars in trades and professions, and the establishment of labor unions. The league extended its services to the national liberation movement and expressed its conviction that the cause of Africa “must and will triumph.”¹⁰

At the same time that Nelson was beginning to get involved with the Youth League, he met Evelyn Mase, a student nurse. The two fell in love and were married in Johannesburg. A year later, they had their first child, a son, whom they named Thembi. Nelson’s political involvement, however, left him little time with his family. His little boy once asked, “Where does Daddy live?”¹¹

Nelson continued to watch the oppression in his country. In 1948 the Afrikaner Nationalist government came to power and put in its program of apartheid, designed to separate and dominate the black population. The Afrikaners took away colored representation in parliament, made it illegal for whites and nonwhites to have sexual relations, and segregated each racial group into separate areas.