

***Long Walk to Freedom*** by Nelson Mandela, abridged version.

This autobiography of Nelson Mandela was written in 1994 with the abridged version first published in 1996.

Before going to South Africa I had purposely not read the long version of this book because it was indeed very very long. I had also wanted to buy a copy when we were at Robben Island where he had spent a lot of his time. Very surprisingly, there were no unabridged let alone abridged versions in the shop at Robben Island but I got this copy at the Apartheid Museum in Joberg. I read it after I had read and written heaps of other stuff about Mandela so what follows is an abridged version of an abridged book. It either re-enforces some things I already knew or is some new stuff. The book is only 150 pages long, small pages and largish print. It reads like a primary school book but may in fact actually be a cut and paste or more accurately a delete large parts of the original. I am not sure that any new words have been used or comments have been paraphrased – everything is I think Mandela's words.

There is a short letter from Mandela on the back cover : Dear Reader, When I was seven my father decided to give me something he had never enjoyed – an education. Ever since then, I have been able to appreciate the value of reading and lifelong learning. This is a shortened version of my biography "*Long Walk to Freedom*" and has been written so everyone can share my experiences. But it is not just my story. It is the story of all of us and our struggle to be free. I hope you will enjoy reading it".

He was born in the Transkei on 18 July 1918 into the Madiba clan. His father was a chief and a member of the Thembu royal family, and although he could not read or write, he was a trusted adviser to the king. Mandela's destiny was to become a counsellor to kings. ( Me – he was not part of the Royal family as such which some people think he was).

No one in his family had ever been to school but he was regarded as a "clever young fellow" and aged seven went to a local school where he was given a white name because it was more "civilised". He thinks he may have been named Nelson after the great British admiral "but that is only a guess". When his father died, the Regent became his guardian. Soon after his circumcision, aged 16, he went to Clarkebury boarding school and the regent often reminded him of his destiny noted above to become a counsellor to kings. Aged 19, he went to Heraldtown, the biggest college in the country for Africans with over 1,000 students. It was like being at a college in England – they tried to turn us into "black Englishmen". We were taught, and believed, that the best of everything came from England.

Aged 21, he went to Fort Hare to continue with his studies. Fort Hare had only 150 students who were the cream of African society. His closest friend there encouraged him to become a lawyer although he had his heart set on becoming an interpreter or a clerk in the Native Affairs Department. A fellow student was Oliver Tambo although he was not very friendly with him at the time. He was elected as a student representative but resigned because most students had boycotted the election until their demands about food etc had been met. He was expelled because he refused to continue as a student representative which made the regent furious – you must obey the principal and remain a student representative. Soon after, the regent told his son and Mandela that he was about to die and so had arranged marriages for both of them. They refused because they had received an education and been allowed to see the bigger world, a world where people married for love. They both ran away to Joberg and got jobs in a mine. Mandela as a mine policeman but they were soon fired at the request of the regent and ordered back home. They refused and Mandela stayed with a cousin who suggested he contact a young guy in his late twenties about a legal job. Walter Sisulu was a

young businessman and community leader who got a lawyer friend to get Mandela a job as an articled clerk at one of the largest law firms in Joberg. There was only one other black employee, and he introduced Mandela to the ANC and Communist party.

At the end of 1942 he got his BA degree, studying at night, from the University of South Africa. In 1943 he enrolled at the University of the Witwatersrand to study for a law degree. One day, in a rush with some Indian friends, he got on a tram which Africans were not allowed to do, and was arrested. Bram Fischer defended him in the court as he did at the Rivonia trial in 1964. He was acquitted.

In 1944 he helped launch the ANC Youth League as many felt the ANC had become a tired and soft organisation. He was elected to the executive, Oliver Tambo was the secretary and Walter Sisulu was the treasurer. He married Sisulu's cousin who was training to be a nurse with Sisulu's wife. Their first child was born in 1946.

Mandela's first taste of mass action came with the African Mine Workers' Union strike in 1946 which the government crushed ruthlessly, killing 12 miners, and the union was destroyed. There was also a passive resistance campaign against the Asiatic Land Tenure Act which took away many of the rights of the Indian people – they could no longer own or rent land where they wanted. These two campaigns were eye-openers for us in the ANC. We saw that the freedom struggle was not just about making speeches, holding meetings and passing resolutions. We began to see the importance of well-planned organisation and militant action. Above all, we realised that to be in the struggle you had to be ready to suffer and sacrifice.

In early 1947 he became a full-time student to complete his degree. He was also voted onto the executive of the Transvaal ANC. This was a milestone in my political career. As part of the ANC leadership, I was now bound heart and soul to the movement. The next year, my life and the life of the country as a whole was to change forever. In 1948, the Nationalist Party, led by Dr Daniel Malan, won the whites-only general election. The Nationalists brought with them a policy called "apartheid" – a cruel system that controlled and oppressed the lives of Africans, coloureds and Indians in every way. He was shocked and dismayed but Oliver Tambo said he liked it – now we will know exactly who our enemies are and where we stand.

The Youth League drafted a plan of action calling for strikes, stayaways, passive resistance, protest demonstrations and other forms of mass action. This was adopted by the ANC in 1949, a big break with the past. Oliver Tambo was elected to the national executive and Walter Sisulu was elected as the new secretary.

In July 1952, at the height of the defiance campaign, he was arrested and together with 20 others charged under the Suppression of Communism Act. He was found guilty of "statutory communism" and sentenced to 9 months prison with hard labour, suspended for 2 years. He felt he had come of age as a freedom fighter. He was not spending much time at home – his five-year old son asked his mother where his father lived.

In 1952 he opened his own law office and soon after he invited Oliver Tambo to join him. It was the only black-owned legal firm in Joberg and was opposite the magistrate's court in a building which was one of the few places where Africans could rent offices in the city. Although he was a lawyer, he was discriminated against in that he knew he would never be able to become a prosecutor, magistrate or judge.

At the end of 1952 he became First Deputy President of the ANC but could not attend the conference because he had been banned for attending any meetings for 6 months and was also not allowed to leave Joberg. This was his first banning order of many.

He was involved in protests against the forced removal of blacks from the suburb of Sophiatown in Joberg to an area 13 miles out of the city in the 1950s. Sophiatown was destroyed in 1955 and Mandela realised that they could no longer fight the iron fist of the government with peaceful methods such as strikes, stayaways, speeches and marches. A freedom fighter learns, sooner or later, that it is the oppressor who makes the rules of battle. We realised that we had to fight fire with fire.

In the same year there was a major conference of all protest organisations in Kliptown which drew up the Freedom Charter. "We the people of South Africa declare that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white .. and that no government can justly claim authority unless it is based on the will of the people".

In December 1956, he and 155 leaders of the ANC and its allies were arrested and charged with high treason. He was held in Joberg prison for two weeks. The government said at the trial that we had plotted to overthrow the government by violence so that we could set up a communist government in South Africa. At about that time he was divorced from his first wife. At the end of 1957 the government announced that it was dropping the charges against Chief Luthuli, Oliver Tambo and 59 others but not Mandela. At this time he met Winnie Madikela who was a client of Oliver Tambo's'. They married in June 1958. Her father said at the wedding reception that she was marrying a man who was already married – married to the struggle !

Mandela was again defended by Bram Fischer. The initial high treason charges were dropped, because the state had to prove the defendants planned to use violence, but new charges were laid.

In April 1959, some members of the ANC broke away and founded the Pan-Africanist Congress ( PAC ), led by Robert Sobukwe. The PAC believed that Africa was for the Africans and that the struggle was an African struggle – they did not want to co-operate etc with Coloureds, whites and Indians, as was agreed in the Freedom Charter.

The treason trial began again in August 1959, 2 years and 8 months after the initial arrests. During the trial, the Sharpeville massacre of 69 blacks occurred on 21 March 1960. The horror of South Africa was there for all to see. South Africa was never to be the same again. Mandela and others protested but were arrested. In April 1960 both the ANC and PAC were banned. Now just being a member of the ANC was a crime. Members could be punished by a prison sentence of up to 10 years. This banning had been expected by the ANC so Oliver Tambo had already been sent abroad to strengthen the organisation from overseas. His departure turned out to be one of the wisest actions ever taken by the movement. We had no idea at the time how important the external wing of the ANC was to become. It had been illegal to be a member of the Communist party from 1950.

The verdict in the treason trial was delivered on 29 March 1961, more than four years after he had been arrested. During that time he had been in and out of prison. The judge said it was impossible to believe that the ANC had tried to overthrow the state by violence, and that the prosecution had failed to prove that the ANC was a communist organisation or that the Freedom Charter was a communist document. They were found not guilty and discharged. The government was embarrassed by the verdict and would not make the same mistakes again. They would be more ruthless in the future.

Mandela did not return home after the trial. He stayed in hideouts during the day and came out when it was dark. He dressed as a chef, a garden boy or a chauffeur. Before long there was a warrant out for his arrest and there were front –page stories about him in the newspapers. He became known as the Black Pimpernel.

In the same year the ANC, somewhat reluctantly, agreed to use violence, and established a military wing, the MK or Spear, which would be independent of the ANC but under the control of the ANC. This was a historic step for the ANC. We had followed a path of non-violence for 50 years. Now we had chosen a new and dangerous road. We did not know where this road would take us. I had never been a soldier. I had never fought a battle, and I had never fired a gun. But now I had been given the task of starting an army.

He lived underground in various places before moving in 1961 to Liliesleaf Farm in Rivonia in Joberg – the movement had bought the farm as a hiding place for those of us who were underground. He worked and lived there under an assumed name, cooking etc for the workers doing up the place during the day and then leaving at night to attend meetings. In December 1961 he went overseas to a conference in Ethiopia and then travelled elsewhere in Africa and London to gather support, money and arms for the struggle. He also received some military training in Ethiopia.

Soon after his return to South Africa, he went to Natal for a meeting but was captured driving as a chauffeur on his way back to Joberg. He was charged with inciting workers to strike and leaving the country without proper travel documents. Although these “crimes” carried a sentence of up to ten years, I was relieved . It would have been worse if they had found out that I was the commander of the MK.

The trial was set to begin on 15 October 1962. He defended himself and said he did not recognise the court. He asked why he should have to obey laws made by a parliament that he was not allowed to vote for. He also said that it was not possible to receive a fair trial in a court room with a white prosecutor, a white judge and white officials. He didn't call any witnesses because there was no point as he was obviously guilty. He received five years in jail. After an initial period in Pretoria Prison, he was flown to Cape Town and taken by ferry to Robben Island. Green and beautiful, it looked more like a holiday resort than a prison. He was met by a group of white warders shouting “This is the island. Here you will die”.

After 9 months of imprisonment in Pretoria and on Robben Island he was taken back to Pretoria and charged with sabotage along with men who had been arrested as they were holding a meeting at Liliesleaf Farm on 11 July. In one foul swoop, the police had captured the whole of the high command of the MK or Spear. We were charged with sabotage and conspiracy rather than high treason. This was because it was easier for the state to prove sabotage and still get the death penalty. The state had told one of their lawyers, Bram Fischer, that it would be asking for the death penalty. It was possible that we would be hanged.

Winnie was not able to attend court on the first day as she was banned and restricted to Joberg, needing police permission to come to Pretoria. The initial case was thrown out of court but they were re-arrested before the judge had even left his seat. This time they were accused of trying to start a violent revolution and of getting foreign countries to invade South Africa to help us set up a communist government.

Mandela as Accused Number One and said My lord, it is not I but the government that should be in the dock. I plead not guilty. Accused Number Two, Walter Sisulu replied that the government is responsible for what has happened in this country. It was decided that six of the accused would plead guilty to certain charges but there were certain things that we were not prepared to deny, no matter what the cost. We would not deny that we had turned away from non-violence. We would not deny that we had committed acts of violence. But we would deny that we were involved in guerrilla warfare and that we had killed innocent people.

We believed that it was important for us to open our defence with a statement of our beliefs and ideals, and that I would be the first witness. I began by saying that I was a convicted prisoner. From the beginning I admitted to being one of the people who had formed the MK. I told the court that whatever I had done, I had done to serve my people and, in a humble way, to contribute to the freedom struggle. I said that we had no love of violence but 50 years of non-violent protest had got us nowhere. Although we had turned to violence, we did not plan to kill innocent people. That is why we began with acts of sabotage rather than with guerrilla war or civil war.

I also told the court that the ANC was not itself a communist organisation although it worked closely with the Communist Party and had a common goal which was to end apartheid.

I spoke about how Africans suffered under apartheid and how it had robbed the African people of their dignity. All that Africans wanted was just a share in the country's wealth. Above all, we wanted political rights because without these we would never be free.

He concluded with his famous words – During my lifetime I have dedicated myself to this struggle of the African people. I have fought against white domination and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished 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 achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.

The judge took three weeks to reach a decision. All the main accused were found guilty on all accounts. Sentence was passed the following morning. We would know then whether we were to live or die. That night we told our lawyers that we would not appeal against our sentence, even if we were sentenced to death. We wanted to send the message that no sacrifice was too great in the struggle for freedom.

On Friday 12 June 1964, before the judge handed down their sentences, two people pleaded on their behalf. One said that the judge should remember that his own people, the Afrikaners, had also struggled violently for their freedom. The famous author Alan Paton said that the accused only had one choice – to bow their heads and submit or resist by force. He asked the court not to punish us too harshly otherwise the future of South Africa would be bleak.

The judge began by saying that he did not believe that we had acted for the good of the people. People who organise a revolution have personal ambitions, he said. The judge said that he did not have to give us the death sentence. But that was the only mercy he could show us. And then, in one short sentence, he told us of our fate. The sentence in the case of all the accused will be one of life imprisonment.

**To be continued**