

NELSON MANDELA

South Africa in the 1950s was a country rich in gold and diamonds. With beautiful countryside, large comfortable houses, and good weather, South Africans had everything they needed for a wonderful life – if they were white.

As a young lawyer, Nelson Mandela learned very quickly about the difficult life of black South Africans – a life with poor houses and schools, and where people could not vote, or travel without a pass. And just as quickly he decided that their struggle was his struggle too.

There were difficult years ahead – years of hiding from the police, or separation from his family, of pain and injustice. But those years made a man who could at last be president of a new South Africa – a country where people of all colours could have equal political rights. This is the story of a man who was truly one of the great leaders of our times, loved by millions across the world.



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Nelson Mandela

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Nelson Mandela



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1 The beginnings (1918–1941)

On 18 July 1918 a baby boy was born to the Mandela family in a small village just south of Qunu, in the Transkei province of South Africa. The child was given the name Rolihlahla, which means ‘troublemaker’ in the Xhosa language.

The Transkei is one of the most beautiful parts of South Africa, with hills and many rivers, beautiful flowers in the spring, and green trees all year round. Rolihlahla was one of thirteen children of a chief of the Thembu people. During his childhood he played games in the fields around Qunu with the other children of the village, looked after the sheep and cows, and swam in the cold river which came down from the hills.

At the age of seven, Rolihlahla went to school, the only one of his brothers and sisters to do so. And it was on his first day at school that his teacher, Miss Mdingane, gave him the English name of Nelson, the name which later became world-famous.

When he was nine, Nelson’s father died and his mother took him to live with his uncle, Chief Jongintaba, the king of the Thembu people. Early one morning, Nelson and his mother left Qunu. It was a day’s walk along rough roads to Nelson’s new home. They did not talk as they walked, but much later Mandela wrote: ‘The silence of the heart between mother and child is not a lonely one. My mother and I never talked very much, but we did not need to.’ At last, when it

was nearly dark, they reached the village of Mqhekezweni. Chief Jongintaba lived in a large home with gardens of apple trees, vegetables, and flowers. This was the Great Place of the Thembu, where Nelson lived with his uncle, aunt and cousins. Nelson saw how a leader should behave. He watched and listened while his uncle met his people in order to discuss the problems in their lives – the dry weather, or new laws made by the white government.

From his uncle, Nelson learned about the history of the

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African people and the arrival of white people. The Thembu people are part of the Xhosa nation. The Xhosa are farming people who moved down from central Africa and have lived in the south-eastern areas of Ciskei and Transkei since the eleventh century.

The first white people arrived from Europe on the most southern coast of Africa in 1652. For the next 200 years the African nations who lived there (the Zulu, the Xhosa, the Sotho, and others) fought against the white people who took their land. But in the end, the old weapons of the African soldiers could not win against the modern guns of the soldiers from Europe.

Two groups of white people lived in South Africa: those from Britain who spoke English, and those from the Netherlands who became known as Afrikaners and spoke Afrikaans, a kind of Dutch. Although the British and the Afrikaners hated each other, these two groups learned to work together against the African people. In 1910, the Afrikaner Transvaal and Orange Free State joined the British Cape Province and Natal to become the four provinces of the Union of South Africa, a nation with a white government although about 70 per cent of the people who lived there were black.

The discovery of diamonds in the British city of Kimberley in 1867 and the discovery of gold in the Afrikaner province of Transvaal in 1886 had changed the history of South Africa. Africans were forced to dig in the diamond and gold mines, but the money from the gold and diamonds went to the white owners of the mines. African miners lived in poor conditions: about fifty men had to live in one room. Each

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black worker had to carry a pass – a paper signed by a white official – which showed that the worker was allowed to be near the mine.

In the 1920s, new laws prevented Africans from getting jobs with good pay and from owning land and houses in the towns. In the 1930s, white workers earned five times more than African workers.

In 1936, while Nelson was at school, the white parliament in Cape Town removed the right to vote from the few Africans who had it. A new law forced all African men to carry a pass in order to travel, to get a job, or to be out late at night. If an African was caught without a pass, he was put in prison. The government also decided that 87 per cent of the land in South Africa must be kept for the 2 million white people. Most of this land was the best land in the country.

The other 13 per cent of the land, most of it poor land, was left for the 8 million Africans.

In 1939, Chief Jongintaba sent Nelson to the University College of Fort Hare (the best college in South Africa for black students) about 100 kilometres away, near the small town of Alice. There were 150 African students at the College, and Nelson made friends with boys from other parts of South Africa, including a student called Oliver Tambo. Tambo was a year older than Nelson and they remained friends for life. At Fort Hare, Nelson enjoyed sport, playing football, and running, and he also spent hours in the evenings listening to music and dancing with other students.

At this time, Nelson's dream was to build his mother a new home in Qunu after he finished his studies. But his days at Fort Hare ended sooner than he had planned. At the end of his second year Nelson was elected to the students' committee, and he joined other students to protest about the food at the college, and to ask the teachers to listen to the opinions of the committee. The college told Nelson that unless he changed his mind about the protest, he could not return to the college for his final year.

During the holidays, Chief Jongintaba told Nelson that he must obey the college. The Chief also told Nelson that he had arranged marriages for Nelson and for his own son, Justice. It was the custom in those days for parents to arrange marriages for their children, but neither Justice nor Nelson wanted to marry the girls chosen for them. They were not strong enough to tell the Chief that they disagreed with him, so they decided to leave Mqhekezweni secretly and go north to Johannesburg, one of the biggest cities in South Africa, about 600 kilometres away.