**Prisoner** By: Perry, Alex, Time Magazine, 0040781X, 12/19/2013 Special Issue

Serving a life sentence, Mandela suffered through hard labor and petty cruelties. But he transformed isolation into a pulpit for change.

Mandela was transferred to Robben Island after his sentencing. In its ignominious past, the flat, windswept rock off Cape Town, battered by the icy waters of the Atlantic, had been a leper colony, a lunatic asylum and a colonial prison where in 1819 the British banished the prophet-warrior commander of the Xhosa rebel army, Makana. Jail was harsh. The guards imposed punishment for even the mildest infractions of regulations. The inmates were made to pound rocks with hammers to create gravel and to mine lime at a quarry. Apartheid persisted even behind bars: black prisoners were given worse food and clothing, their beds were mats on the floor, and they were forced to address the guards as baas, meaning boss. As was intended, serving a sentence on Robben Island meant almost total isolation from the outside world. Mandela went years without seeing his family. When his mother and eldest son died, he was denied permission to attend their funerals. Rigid routine meant the days were endless but also indistinguishable. "The mind begins to turn in on itself," wrote Mandela.

Partly as a survival strategy, Mandela and his comrades resolved to continue their fight inside jail: "I was in a different and smaller arena, [but] the prison was a microcosm of the struggle. We would fight inside as we had fought outside. The racism and repression were the same." Through protests and petitions, Mandela and his comrades gradually improved conditions. In the 1970s, manual labor was stopped. Mandela began a prison garden and wrote a secret memoir, later the basis for his autobiography *Long Walk to Freedom*. Crucially, while his opposition to apartheid remained fierce, he began to see the humanity in his enemies. "All men, even the most seemingly cold-blooded, have a core of decency," he wrote. "If their hearts are touched, they are capable of changing."

And if Mandela was changing, the outside world was too. On a 1979 trip to a white Cape Town doctor after he injured his heel, Mandela was treated well and thought he sensed a thawing in the relationship between black and white. Mandela was also becoming an international icon for people of all colors. During the Rivonia trial\*, he had been elected honorary president of the students' union at University College in London; dockworkers around the world threatened not to handle South African goods; and the U.N., members of the U.S. Congress and the leader of the Soviet Union all protested the trial. Mandela became a global symbol of injustice, not least because in 1980 the ANC's leaders in exile decided to explicitly personalize their struggle around him. No longer would they march under banners decrying racism in South Africa. Henceforth their slogan would be simply "Free Mandela." The phrase quickly found its way onto T-shirts and posters around the world and even into a pop song.

In 1976, when South Africa's security forces fired on students in Soweto, South Africa who were protesting having to study in *Afrikaans*, the language of the white minority, instead of their own native language, the township of Soweto erupted. After that, townships across the country became no-go areas for the police and army, and in retrospect, the Soweto uprising was the beginning of the end for apartheid, though the end would take a decade and a half. In 1982, Mandela and some of the ANC's top leaders were abruptly transferred to the mainland Cape Town prison of Pollsmoor, where they were given a bed, sheets, their own balcony, a living room and newspapers. In 1984, Mandela was allowed to hug his wife Winnie for the first time in 21 years. In 1985, President P.W. Botha publicly offered Mandela his freedom if he renounced violence. Mandela's response was read by his daughter Zindzi to a crowd of supporters in Soweto. "I am not a violent man. It was only then, when all other forms of resistance were no longer open to us, that we turned to armed struggle ... Let [Botha] renounce violence. Let him say he will dismantle apartheid ... I cherish my freedom dearly, [but] what freedom am I being offered while the organization of the people [the African National Congress (ANC)] remains banned? Only free men can negotiate. I cannot, and will not give any undertaking at a time when I and you, the people, are not free. Your freedom and mine cannot be separated. I will return."

That same year, the prison wardens separated Mandela from his comrades. Mandela was angered, but he also realized "my solitude gave me a certain liberty, and I resolved to use it to do something I had been pondering for a long while: begin discussions with the government." This was, wrote Mandela, "extremely sensitive. Both sides regarded discussions as a sign of weakness and betrayal. The government asserted over and over that we were a terrorist organization of communists, and that they would never talk to terrorists or communists. The ANC asserted over and over that the government was fascistic and racist and that there was nothing to talk about until they unbanned the ANC, unconditionally released all political prisoners and removed the troops from the townships. I chose to tell no one what I was about to do. There are times when a leader must move out ahead of the flock."

Contact with the government began tentatively. Mandela met South Africa's Justice Minister, Kobie Coetsee, in 1985. In 1988 he had a series of meetings with a four-man group from the government, including Coetsee. They demanded that he give up the armed struggle and break the ANC's alliance with the Communist Party. Mandela refused both requests. A third point of contention was majority rule (by native black Africans): Mandela insisted on it; the government worried that it would sideline South Africa's whites forever.

Once talks were under way, the conditions of Mandela's imprisonment improved further. He was allowed out of prison for escorted visits to Cape Town--after his long stretch in jail, there was no danger of his being recognized. Then, in December 1988, he was moved to his own bungalow on the grounds of a third prison, Victor Verster, in the Cape Winelands, where he could hold more talks and receive visits from ANC comrades and others. Most of his ANC comrades were opposed to Mandela's negotiations. But he had a disarming effect on them. The up-and-coming trade-union leader Cyril Ramaphosa, now ANC deputy president, was among those who vowed to demand that Mandela stop talking to the enemy. But once he met Mandela, said Ramaphosa, "what could I do? This old man walks into the room, he comes straight up to me, and he asks me how my wife and my son are doing ... This old man, who knows everything! He just disarms you, mesmerizes you completely, takes you in." On July 5, 1989, Mandela finally met Botha for half an hour at his office in Cape Town. Little of substance was discussed, but that they met at all was a breakthrough. "Now, I felt, there was no turning back," wrote Mandela.

There wasn't. When Botha was replaced by F.W. de Klerk a month later, De Klerk immediately began dismantling apartheid. In October he released eight of Mandela's most senior comrades. Segregation was repealed and the secret service disbanded. In years to come, Mandela and De Klerk would disagree vehemently, but when they first met on Dec. 13, 1989, they had near identical reactions. "From the first I noticed that Mr. de Klerk listened to what I had to say," wrote Mandela. "Mr. de Klerk ... was a man we could do business with." In 2009, De Klerk told Time, "The first time I met Mandela ... I noticed how good a listener he was. I reported back to my constituency and said, 'This is a man I can do business with.'"

On Feb. 2, 1990, De Klerk announced that the ban was lifted on the ANC and all other parties and all political prisoners would be freed. The state of emergency would end. On Feb. 9, Mandela was driven to De Klerk's office in Cape Town and told he would be freed the next day. After 27½ years in prison, shortly before 4 p.m. on Feb. 11, with Winnie by his side, Mandela walked out of the gates of Victor Verster prison. Met by a crowd of supporters and journalists, Mandela raised his right fist in the ANC salute. That evening he spoke to a crowd of thousands gathered outside city hall in Cape Town. "Amandla!" Mandela called out. "Ngawethu!" they responded.

\*The **Rivonia Trial,** named after [Rivonia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rivonia" \o "Rivonia), the suburb of [Johannesburg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johannesburg) where 19 ANC leaders were arrested, was a [trial](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trial) that took place in [South Africa](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_Africa) between 1963 and 1964. Ten leaders of the [African National Congress](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/African_National_Congress) (ANC), including Mandela, were charged (and eight eventually convicted) on four broad charges:

(a) recruiting persons for training in the preparation and use of explosives and in guerrilla warfare for the purpose of violent revolution and committing acts of sabotage;

(b) conspiring to commit these acts and to aid foreign military units when they [hypothetically] invaded the Republic;

(c) acting in these ways to further the objects of communism; and

(d) soliciting and receiving money for these purposes from sympathizers outside South Africa.

Among other consequences, the trial led to the imprisonment of [Nelson Mandela](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nelson_Mandela) (and other convicted defendants) to life sentences, of which Mandela actually served 27 years.