

Childhood & Education

Nelson Mandela was born in the Transkei, South Africa on July 18th 1918. He lost his father, who was a councilor- at the age of nine when he died of tuberculosis. Hearing the elder's stories of his ancestors' bravery during the wars in defense of their country, he dreamed of making his own contribution to the freedom struggle of his people. He was the first member of his family to attend a school and was given the English name 'Nelson' by his teacher. After receiving primary education at a local school, he enrolled at the University College of Fort Hare for the Bachelor of Arts Degree where he met Oliver Tambo and the two became lifelong friends.

At the end of the first year of the college Nelson became involved in a boycott by the Students' Representative Council against the university policies, and was told to leave the college. Then he went to Johannesburg to complete his BA through correspondence and entered politics while studying there by joining African National Congress in 1942. After completing his B.A. he started with his law studies at the University of Witwatersrand. During this period Mandela lived in Alexandra Township, north of Johannesburg. Later, when he was in prison, Mandela studied for a Bachelor of Laws from the university of London external program.

Political Activities

Mandela's approach was influenced by Mahatma Gandhi. Nelson Mandela was elected as the secretary to the youth leadership in 1947. The ANCYL aimed at getting full citizenship and direct parliamentary representation for all South Africans. The policy making process paid special attention to the redistribution of the land, trade union rights, education and culture. Mandela as an important co – author of the policy document aspired to free and essential education for all children, as well as mass education for adults. When the ANC launched its Campaign for the Defiance of Unjust Laws in 1952, Mandela traveled to places to discriminatory legislation as Volunteer-in-Chief. Though Mandela had constantly advised their followers to avoid violence, he was charged and brought to trial for his role in the campaign.

Later, he was convicted of contravening the suppression of communism act and given a suspended prison sentence. He was also stopped from attending gatherings and confined to Johannesburg for six months. During the early 1950's, Mandela played vital role in leading the resistance to the Western Areas removal and to the introduction of Education. In the late 1950's, he made efforts to stop the exploitation of labor, pass laws and the segregation of the universities.

In 1961 Umkhonto we Sizwe (translated as Spear of the Nation, also shortened as MK), was formed with Mandela as its commander in chief. He coordinated a sabotage campaign against military and government targets, and made plans for a possible war if the sabotage failed to end apartheid. He left the country unlawfully and traveled abroad addressing the conferences and was warmly received by top leaders of many countries. Initially committed to a non-violent protest, Mandela decided to use weapons and war as a last resort when government left him no choice. Soon after his return to South Africa he was arrested for illegal exit from the country. Mandela decided to conduct his own defense. He was convicted and sentenced to five years imprisonment.

Life Imprisonment, Release, and Presidency of South Africa

He was convicted for crimes that occurred while he was spearheading the struggle against apartheid. Mandela was sentenced to life imprisonment and sent to the notorious Robben Island Prison, a maximum security prison on a small island near Cape Town, where he spent nearly 18 years of his 27 years sentence. In April 1984 he was transferred to Pollsmoor Prison in Cape Town and later to the Victor Verster Prison near Paarl from where he was eventually released. While in prison, throughout his life sentence Mandela turned down offers for reduction of sentence in exchange for accepting the European policy and renouncing violence.

Mandela refused the offer and said he could not accept personal freedom while his people were not allowed to work together. He stood by his statement that Prisoners cannot enter into contracts-Only free men can negotiate. During his years in prison he gained acceptance as the most significant black leader in South Africa and became a potent symbol of equality and freedom for his opposition to apartheid, while the apartheid government and countries sympathetic to it condemned him as a terrorist and communist. He flatly refused to compromise on his political position to obtain his freedom.

On 2 February 1990, State president F.W. de Klerk allowed his release from prison. He was released on Feb 11, 1990, and the event was broadcast live all over the world. On the day of his release Mandela made a speech to the nation in which he declared his commitment to bring peace to the black majority and give them right to vote in elections. He made clear that the armed struggle was yet not over. Following his release, Mandela returned to political leadership, and between 1990 and 1994 he organized the first multi-racial elections. In 1994 he became the first democratically elected state president of South Africa with the National Party's de Klerk as his first Deputy and Thabo Mbeki as the second in the Government of National Unity.

Family, Retirement, and Legacy

Mandela has been married three times, has fathered six children, and has twenty grandchildren and a growing number of great-grandchildren. His grandson is Chief Mandla Mandela. Mandela became the oldest elected President of South Africa when he took charge in 1994. He was 77 years old that time and decided not to contest for the second time. Nelson Mandela took retirement from Public life in June 1999. He currently resides in his birth place - Qunu, Transkei

Nelson Mandela has received more than one hundred awards over the past four decades for his struggle for democracy, equality and learning. He never answered racism with racism. He won international respect for his advocacy for reconciliation of white and black. Leading a life that symbolizes the triumph of the human spirit over man's inhumanity to man, Nelson Mandela accepted the Nobel Peace Prize in 1993 on behalf of South Africans who suffered and sacrificed so much to bring peace to the world. His life is an inspiration to all oppressed and deprived and to all who are opposed to oppression and deprivation.