



CHARACTER
COMRADE
LEADER
PRISONER
NEGOTIATOR
STATESMAN

In the years after joining the African National Congress (ANC) in 1943, Mandela – together with his young comrades, Oliver Tambo, Walter Sisulu and Anton Lembede – believed that the liberation struggle should be led by black Africans alone. They were suspicious of comrades from other races, and wary of the Communist Party. Over time, this narrow Africanist position was to change.



Mandela's shift away from an Africanist position is well illustrated in this photograph. Taken in 1952, it shows Mandela during the Defiance Campaign flanked by the top leadership, Dr James Moroka, President of the ANC, and Dr Yusuf Dadoo, President of the Indian Congress and senior member of the South African Communist Party.

Mandela is in the centre of the action. He has clearly embraced non-racialism – working hand in hand with comrades from other races – and seems comfortable with his communist comrade, Dr Dadoo.

How did this change come about? Why did Mandela broaden his idea of what makes a comrade? Who was to influence him on this path to political maturity?

Mandela's friendship with Sisulu blossomed and was to become one of the most important relationships in both men's lives.

MEETING SISULU



When Justice and Mandela arrived in Johannesburg in 1941, like so many young African men before and after, it was to the mines that they made their way. At Crown Mines, Justice was employed as a clerk and Mandela as a mine policeman. He was provided with a whistle, helmet and knobkerrie.

"It was a simple job. I had to stand guard at the compound entrance under the sign that read, 'Beware: Natives crossing here'."

Nelson Mandela

But their career on the mines was short-lived. Before long, the two young men were exposed as absconders from Jongintaba's court and were dismissed. Mandela went to stay with his cousin, Garlick Mbekeni, at the George Goch hostel in Johannesburg.



Mandela's real ambition was to become a lawyer. In 1942, his cousin introduced him to "one of our best people in Johannesburg".

"A few days later, I found myself in a crowded office in downtown Johannesburg. Behind a cluttered desk sat a man who looked to be in his late twenties. He had a kind and thoughtful face, and was dressed in a double-breasted suit. His name was Walter Sisulu."

Nelson Mandela



Sisulu, who ran an estate agency business, won the immediate admiration of Mandela. Besides his business interests, Sisulu was also involved in politics. He chaired a local branch of the ANC, then a body with only a few thousand members, concentrated in the big cities.

Mandela also made a strong impression on Sisulu when they first met in 1942. Sisulu regarded him at once as a man with great qualities.



Sisulu assisted Mandela to obtain articles at a firm of attorneys called Witkin, Sidelsky and Eidelman. Until he was accepted at the attorneys, Mandela worked for Sisulu on a commission basis, earning two pounds 10 shillings a month for collecting rent.

Mandela's enduring respect for Walter Sisulu is illustrated in an incident that was to occur more than 50 years later. The story is told of how Mandela's security advised him that it was not safe to go into KwaZulu-Natal during the period of violence between the Inkatha Freedom Party and the ANC, prior to the 1994 elections.

"Mandela insisted that he would go. The security officials were making no progress and secretly decided to phone Sisulu. Sisulu had a word with him and firmly indicated that he should not proceed. Mandela cancelled the visit and laughingly scolded them for 'reporting' him."

Raymond Suttner

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THE DARK CITY

After his short stay at the George Goch hostel, Mandela moved to Alexandra Township, where he lived in a room at the back of a house in Seventh Avenue.

"In spite of the hellish aspects of life in Alexandra, the township was also a kind of heaven. Instead of being Xhosas or Sothos or Zulus or Shangaans, we were Alexandrians. This created a sense of solidarity; differences were being erased." Nelson Mandela

THE BUS BOYCOTT



Mandela met Gaur Radebe on his first day of work at the law firm. A court interpreter, clerk and messenger, Radebe was also a member of the ANC and the Communist Party. As a key leader of the successful Alexandra bus boycott in 1943 to protest against the price increase in bus fare, Radebe drew Mandela into participating in his very first act of protest in Johannesburg.

"Gaur was one of the leaders, and I watched him in action. This campaign had a great effect on me. I found that to march with one's people was exhilarating and inspiring. But I was also impressed by the boycott's effectiveness: after nine days, the company reinstated the fare to four pence." Nelson Mandela

“One day, at lunch-time, we were sitting in the office when Nat unwrapped a packet of sandwiches. He took out one sandwich and said, ‘Nelson, take hold of the other side and pull,’ he said. I did so and the sandwich split roughly into two. As we ate, Nat said: ‘Nelson, what we have just done is what the Communist Party is all about. We believe in sharing everything that we have.’” Nelson Mandela

NEW FRIENDS, NEW INFLUENCES

The bus boycott was just the beginning. Throughout the 1940s, community organisations, trade unions and the Communist Party led strikes and protests against wages, housing, transport, food prices and the tyranny of the pass laws.



Through his first white friend, Nat Bregman, Mandela met other fellow communists who had an important influence on him. One of these was Michael Harmel (standing, second from the right), one of the party's key thinkers.



Mandela attended the Communist Party night school in Fox Street, where Harmel taught. He also accompanied him to Party protest meetings on the City Hall steps.



During this period, Mandela also spent a lot of time at the home of Walter and Albertina Sisulu in Oriando. It was a welcoming place where you could always get a warm meal and hot political discussion. It was at the Sisulu home that Mandela met Anton Lembede, a young leader of the ANC with a brilliant mind and powerful personality.



At the beginning of 1943, Mandela enrolled at the University of the Witwatersrand to study for a law degree. Here he met new friends – such as Ruth First, George Bizos, Harold Wolpe, J N Singh and Ismail Meer – all of whom were politically active and who were to become close comrades in the years to come.

“Harmel’s unassuming manner belied his intellectual authority. At Mandela’s first meeting with him he was dressed shabbily and wore no tie. It took some time for Mandela to discover that this ‘simple and soft-spoken man’ was a ‘live wire loaded with current’. Mandela quickly grew to admire his new friend’s modesty.” Tom Lodge

"The colour of my skin is beautiful like the black soil of Mother Africa." Anton Lembede

THE YOUTH LEAGUE

In 1943, Mandela joined the African National Congress and quickly became part of an extraordinary generation of young people who discussed the need for the youth to take the lead and reignite the ANC. These included Oliver Tambo (pictured here at his desk), Walter Sisulu, AP Mda, Anton Lembede and Wits medical student Lionel Majombozi, who proposed the formation of a Youth League.



Anton Lembede, a lawyer with a master's degree in philosophy, preached self-reliance and self-determination, and called his philosophy Africanism. The Africanism championed by Lembede struck a chord with Mandela, who had witnessed the many humiliations meted out to black people in the city.



On Easter Sunday in 1944, about 100 young men crowded into the Bantu Men's Social Centre in Johannesburg to launch the ANC Youth League. The Youth League was to mark a turning point in the history of the ANC. They were to transform the "respectable" movement into a militant, mass-based liberation movement of grassroots activists.



An aspect of Africanism was its emphasis on collective and consensus decision-making. The close and co-operative comradeship that developed was to encourage a cohesion that helped to overcome future differences and shape the character of the ANC in years to come.

"The historic Youth League Conference is burned in the memories of those of us who were participants in 1944. That single gathering made a momentous contribution to the development of our struggle. It was the youth of the 1940s who took part in the defiance campaigns of the stormy 1950s." Oliver Tambo

In 1946 over 60 000 black miners went on strike. Mandela was impressed at the capacity of the African Mineworkers' Union to organise mass action. However, the strike was crushed and 12 miners were killed.

THE RISE OF APARTHEID



In the late 1940s and early 1950s, Mandela experienced a number of critical events that were to shape his political views.

In 1946, the South African Indian Congress launched the Passive Resistance Campaign to protest the Asiatic Land Tenure Act which restricted the movement and property rights of Indians. This protest was modelled on Mahatma Gandhi's famous campaign in South Africa in 1913.

"The Indian campaign became a model for the type of protest that we in the Youth League were calling for. It instilled a spirit of defiance and radicalism among the people and broke the fear of prison."

Nelson Mandela



In 1948, the National Party won the whites-only elections. Prime Minister D F Malan rapidly began to pass a range of laws to ensure the separation of races in all aspects of social life and to control the movement and economic activity of blacks.

"Afrikaners face a new trek – to the city. There black and white compete in the same labour market. The task is to make South Africa a white man's land." Dr D F Malan



Following a 1950 May Day stay-away, the government banned the South African Communist Party. At a Day of Mourning, led by the ANC, Oliver Tambo uttered these prophetic words:

"Today it is the Communist Party. Tomorrow it will be our trade unions, our Indian Congress, our African People's Organisation, our African National Congress." Oliver Tambo

At the ANC conference in 1951, a Defiance Campaign was launched to defy unjust apartheid laws. This was to be done in partnership with the South African Indian Congress.



The Defiance Campaign marked a decisive shift in Mandela's definition of comrade, one which was broadened when the non-racial Congress Alliance and the Freedom Charter were launched in Kiptown in 1955.

"One of the outstanding features of the Freedom Charter campaign was the way in which the collection of demands helped build non-racialism. You say 'Afrika!' and they return it: 'Mayibuye!' Straightaway, you're a comrade." A S Chetty

THE ANC FAMILY



In 1944, Mandela married Evelyn Mase, Walter's first cousin and a nurse. The couple had four children, though tragically their second child, a girl, died at the age of nine months.

Mandela was already involved in politics when he married Evelyn. Within ten years of their marriage, their relationship had broken down and ended in divorce.



Mandela may have lost the closeness of his immediate family, but he gained a larger and more extended family – the ANC.

"Walter and Albertina Sisulu's responsibilities to the 'ANC as family' are well known. Albertina saw herself as a politiciser of her own children and caregiver to a wide range of others whom she embraced as 'sons and daughters'." Raymond Suttner



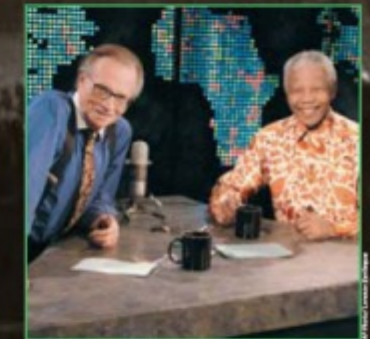
"One woman cadre, in explaining to her children that she had to leave them behind in Tanzania to carry out an ANC assignment, told them, 'Although I may be your mother, your real mother and father are the ANC. The ANC will look after you.'" Z Majodina

A DISCIPLINED COMRADE



Mandela was imperious and strong-willed; he found it difficult to bow to the views of others. It was on Robben Island that he was able to subdue his willfulness and learn to respect the will of the collective.

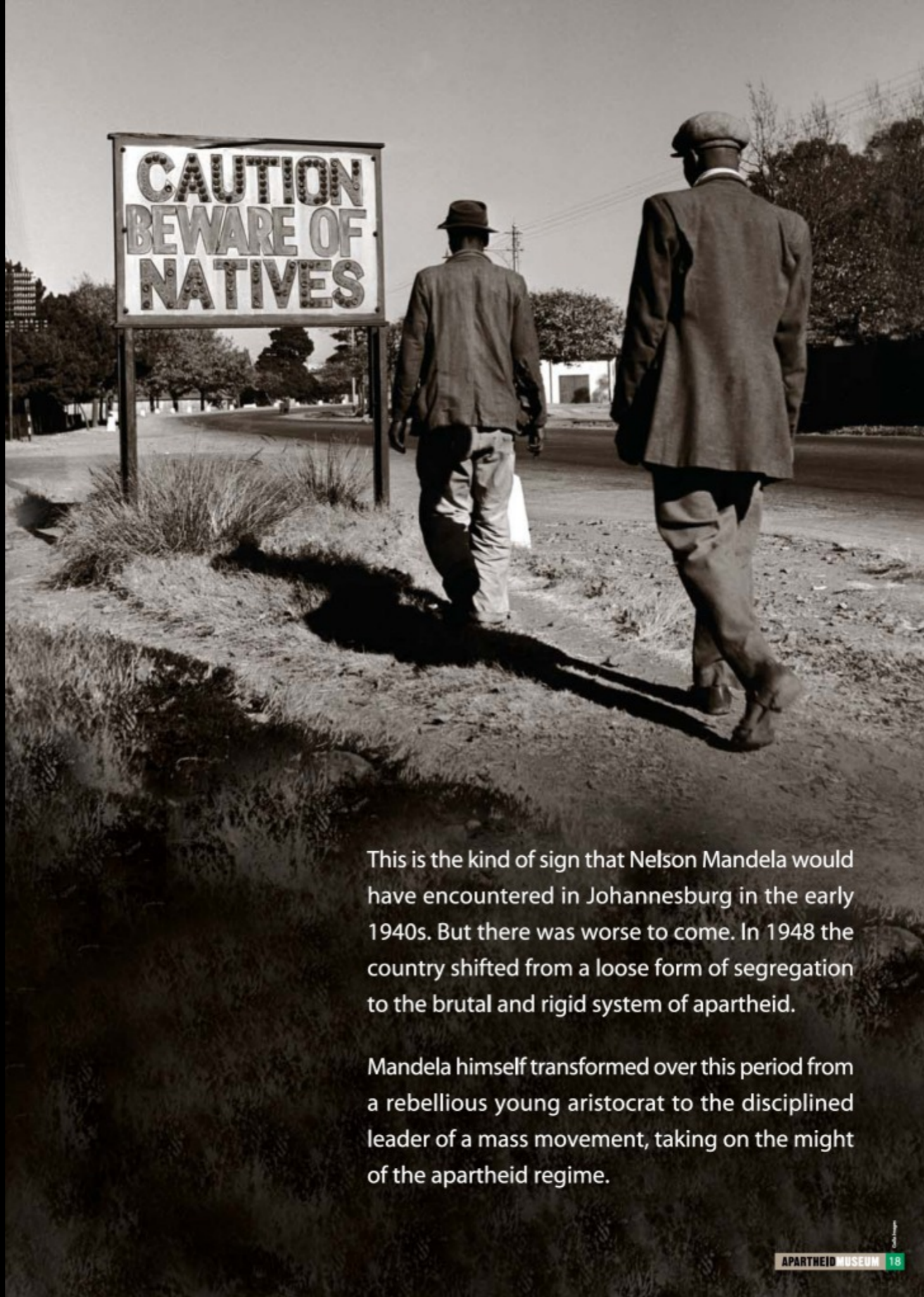
"My present circumstances give advantages my colleagues outside gaol rarely have. Here the past literally rushes to memory and there is plenty of time for reflection." Mandela



Mandela had come to realise that this is the true meaning of what it is to be a comrade. In an interview with Larry King on CNN in May 2000 he revealed his deep commitment to the collective:

"But what happens to your ego?" asked Larry King.
"My ego is shared by all the men and women in the ANC. It does not belong to any one individual." Nelson Mandela

Mandela's understanding of what constitutes a comrade had matured. In the beginning, he had a narrow view of comradeship, believing that only black Africans could lead the struggle against apartheid. Over time he changed this view, embracing people of all races who were committed to the struggle. This would be very important for the development of non-racialism in South Africa.



This is the kind of sign that Nelson Mandela would have encountered in Johannesburg in the early 1940s. But there was worse to come. In 1948 the country shifted from a loose form of segregation to the brutal and rigid system of apartheid.

Mandela himself transformed over this period from a rebellious young aristocrat to the disciplined leader of a mass movement, taking on the might of the apartheid regime.