



CHARACTER COMRADE LEADER PRISONER NEGOTIATOR STATESMAN

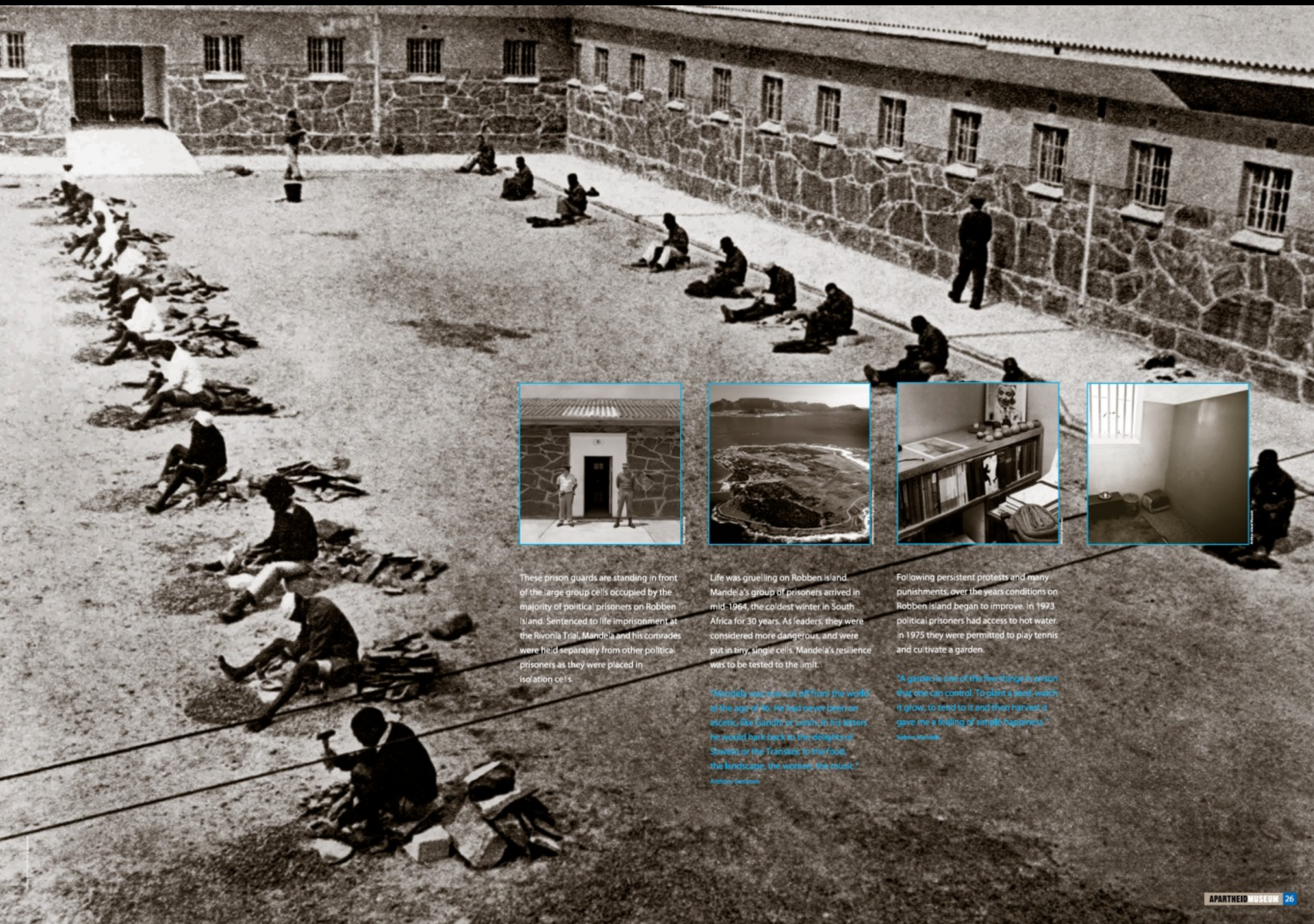
Until his release from prison in February 1990, Nelson Mandela's life was a tale of recurring restrictions, periods in jail, life in hiding and, ultimately, life imprisonment. What insights did Mandela take from these continuing restrictions and imprisonment? How did he and his comrades transcend the ordeal of life on Robben Island?



"This photograph of Mandela was taken during a visit by journalists to Robben Island in 1977. The caption on the back of the photograph, in Afrikaans, reads: 'A prisoner in the garden'. It is full of irony. Nelson Mandela was not simply 'a prisoner' but the most famous political prisoner in the world. Neither does the photograph depict him as a 'worker'; instead, the body language of the man in the image makes a mockery of the spade on which he is leaning." *A Prisoner*

in the Garden, Nelson Mandela Foundation

The photograph shows Mandela standing erect and unbowed, imprisoned in body, but free in spirit and in mind, with a steely determination to survive and overcome.



These prison guards are standing in front of the large group cells occupied by the majority of political prisoners on Robben Island. Sentenced to life imprisonment at the Rivonia Trial, Mandela and his comrades were held separately from other political prisoners as they were placed in isolation cells.



Life was gruelling on Robben Island. Mandela's group of prisoners arrived in mid-1964, the coldest winter in South Africa for 30 years. As leaders, they were considered more dangerous, and were put in tiny, single cells. Mandela's resilience was to be tested to the limit.

"Mandela was now cut off from the world at the age of 46. He had never been an ascetic, like Gandhi or Lenin. In his letters he would hark back to the delights of Soweto or the Transkei; to the food, the landscape, the women, the music."
Anthony Sampson



Following persistent protests and many punishments, over the years conditions on Robben Island began to improve. In 1973 political prisoners had access to hot water. In 1975 they were permitted to play tennis and cultivate a garden.

"A garden is one of the few things in prison that one can control. To plant a seed, watch it grow, to tend to it and then harvest it gave me a feeling of simple happiness."

Nelson Mandela



DIGNITY IN ADVERSITY



The prison system was based on total control, minimal, terrible food, hard labour in silence in the lime quarry, and a code of punishment and manipulation. Mandela and his comrades had to dig deep into themselves to survive the physical hardships. But the harder struggle, perhaps, was how to survive spiritually. Fortunately, they had each other.

"It was in our determination to remember our ancestors, our stories, our values and our dreams that we found comradeship."

Nelson Mandela



From the beginning of 1965, a number of other prominent political prisoners, including Mac Maharaj, were moved to the same section of Robben Island that housed the Rivonia trialists. Maharaj was to become a lifelong friend and comrade to Mandela.

"Man can adapt to the worst conditions if he feels he is not alone; if he feels he has support in what he is doing." Mac Maharaj

Together the political prisoners developed a strategy on how to conduct themselves; they avoided provoking the warders but insisted on retaining their own dignity.



"When I went to Robben Island in August 1964, it was winter. Mandela arrived, wearing a pair of shorts, no socks, rough shoes, on the back of a bakkie. I snaked through the two warders and embraced him. The warders were deeply shocked. And what did Mandela say? 'George, this place has made me forget my manners. I haven't introduced you to my guard of honour.' And he proceeded to introduce each one of them by name." George Bizos



"Mandela began to believe that our occupation of the moral high ground could make it possible to turn some of the thug warders around. He realised that the warders were not all homogenous."

Michael Dingake

"The cell is an ideal place to know yourself. People tend to measure themselves by external accomplishments, but jail allows a person to focus on internal ones, such as honesty, sincerity, simplicity, humility, generosity and an absence of variety. You learn to look into yourself." Nelson Mandela

"The apartheid regime was determined to control, distort, weaken, even erase people's memories. This attack on memory was felt deep within us – the physical yearning to touch loved ones, breathe in the smells of home, feel the texture of a favourite jersey." Nelson Mandela

ROBBEN ISLAND UNIVERSITY



Robben Island is often referred to as "the university" by former prisoners. There was a heavy emphasis on study and self-improvement. Leaders like Walter Sisulu, Govan Mbeki and Harry Gwala were popular and respected educators, giving courses on a variety of topics.

"Walter, perhaps the greatest historian of the ANC, gave a course on the history of the organisation. Kathy (Ahmed Kathrada) gave a course on the history of the Indian struggle. Mac gave a course on Marxism. I gave a course on political economy."

Nelson Mandela



Mandela and the other senior prisoners achieved a position where they virtually dominated their guards – an extraordinary record in the psychological politics of a jail.

Mandela's ability to win over his jailers is well illustrated in a story told many years later, by Sir Robin Renwick, British Ambassador to South Africa, when he attended F W de Klerk's inauguration as President in 1989:

"Mandela's classic approach is to co-opt people. You are in jail, you start working on your warders. At De Klerk's inauguration, the Minister of Justice, Kobie Coetsee, came up to me and said, 'You have to help me persuade President de Klerk to release Mandela!'"

Sir Robin Renwick

PRISONERS WITH A PURPOSE



"We were political prisoners, prisoners with a purpose. And because we shared a purpose we were a community. If I knew that someone was hungrier than I was, I would share my food with them. We took care of the weakest among us." Tony Sze

But every day was about survival, and Mandela developed a tactic of compromising on lesser issues in order to increase control over their day-to-day lives. Mandela was well aware of the impact he had on the prison authorities, and he used it strategically.



"One day in 1968, prisoners were complaining to one of the most intransigent officers that warders were sabotaging their studies. He responded with an insult. Mandela, who was standing at the back, exploded. It was astounding for everybody; they had never seen him losing his temper. When Mandela had subsided, Neville Alexander said to him, 'That was rather heavy,' but Mandela replied, 'No, no. It was deliberate.'" Anthony Sampson

PAIN AND LOSS

During his 27 years in jail, Mandela was plagued by guilt that he had not been able to provide emotional and material support for his second wife Winnie and his five children.



"As I woke up this morning, I was missing you and the children a great deal as always. Your beautiful photo still stands before me. I dust it very carefully every morning. I sometimes touch your nose with mine to recapture the electric current that used to flash through my body whenever I did so."

Letter to Winnie, 25 February 1976



Mandela meticulously duplicated every letter that he wrote, in his clear, firm handwriting, in notebooks. Many of these letters never reached their intended destination.

"Up to the present moment I do not know where Zeni and Zindzi are and who maintains them. Every one of the letters I have written them in the last three months has not reached them."

Nelson Mandela, Letter from prison, 1 August 1970



Despite his anguish around the prison correspondence system and the lengthy process by which the censors examined his correspondence, Mandela never lost hope that eventually he would be able to reach his wife and children.

"To continue writing holds out the possibility that one day luck may be on our side in that you may receive these letters. In the meantime the mere fact of writing down my thoughts and expressing my feelings gives me a measure of pleasure and satisfaction. It tends to calm down the shooting pains whenever I think of you."

Letter to Zeni and Zindzi, 1 June 1970



In 1968, Mandela was delighted to receive a visit from his mother, who made the long and arduous journey from the Transkei, together with his sister Mabel, and his children Makgatho and Makaziwe. He was concerned when he saw how thin and worn his mother looked. Shortly afterwards she died of a heart attack.



The following year in 1969, Mandela's eldest son, Thembekile, was killed in a car accident. He had never come to visit his father, which saddened Mandela deeply. His fellow prisoners remember the intensity of his grief. For weeks, Mandela withdrew.

"Then came '68 and '69 when the skies suddenly fell on me. I lost both Thembi and Ma and I must confess that the order that had reigned in my soul almost vanished."

Nelson Mandela, Letter from prison, 1 August 1970

HALFWAY HOUSE

In 1982 Mandela was moved to Pollsmoor prison. For the first time in nearly 20 years, Mandela was cut off from the collective.



In 1985, when the Commonwealth Eminent Persons' Group visited him, they found him 'isolated and lonely'.

In May 1988, Mandela began a series of meetings with senior government officials at Pollsmoor, including the Minister of Justice, Kobie Coetsee, who decided to move Mandela to a place that would be halfway between prison and freedom.



A cottage on the grounds of Victor Verster Prison became Mandela's new home.

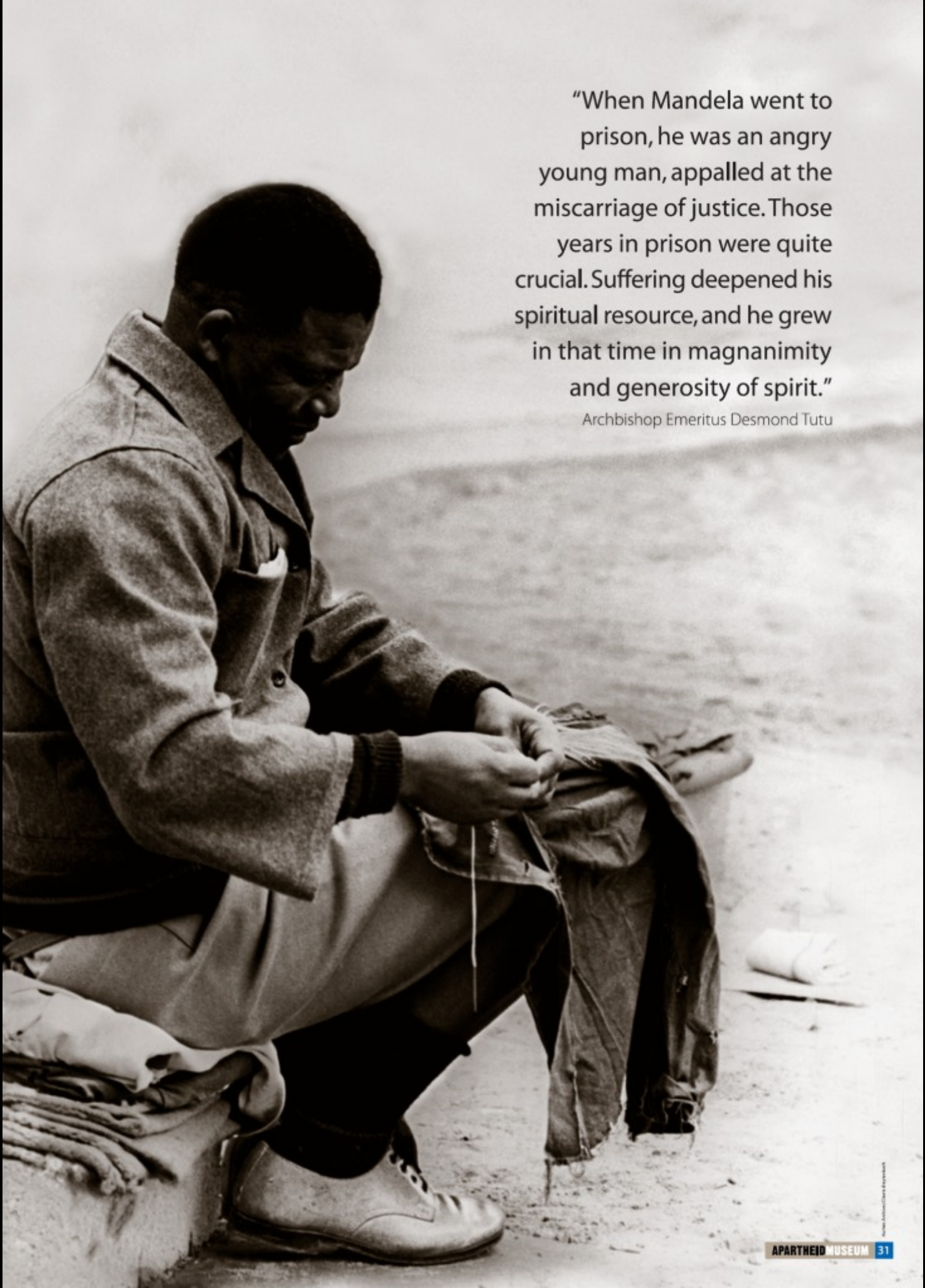
"I discovered a swimming pool in the backyard. The only thing that spoilt the picture was razor wire on top of the walls. It was a halfway house between prison and freedom." *Nelson Mandela*

Mandela was given his own cook, Warrant Officer Swart, a tall quiet Afrikaner, who had once been a warder on Robben Island.



"Officer Swart was a decent fellow and became like a brother to me. He was a wonderful cook, and when I had visitors, he would cook delicious meals. When I was allowed visits from the comrades like Helen Joseph, I often teased them that they only came for the food." *Nelson Mandela*

After 27 years in prison, Nelson Mandela could still make jokes. He came out determined to bring peace and democracy to South Africa. He had no time for vengeance and bitterness. He had truly overcome.

A black and white photograph of Nelson Mandela sitting on a concrete ledge, focused on mending a piece of fabric. He is wearing a light-colored, heavy jacket and dark trousers. The background is a bright, overexposed outdoor setting, possibly a beach or a courtyard. The text is overlaid on the right side of the image.

"When Mandela went to prison, he was an angry young man, appalled at the miscarriage of justice. Those years in prison were quite crucial. Suffering deepened his spiritual resource, and he grew in that time in magnanimity and generosity of spirit."

Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu