

# A very happy birthday, Nelson – now we're both 90

**Helen Suzman** recalls her first meeting with her long-standing friend, in 1967, and what he has meant to her and to South Africa

**I** do not think of Nelson Mandela as an icon – I regard him as a long-standing friend and as a courageous man whose leadership qualities I recognised immediately at our first meeting. This was on Robben Island in 1967.

Mandela had already served three years of the sentence of life imprisonment imposed on him and other political prisoners, such as Walter Sisulu and Ahmed Kathrada, at the Rivonia Trial.

During that time I had been trying to get permission to visit the island as newspaper reports about the conditions under which the political prisoners were being held were extremely disturbing. I finally got permission from Piet Pelsier, the minister of justice. I took the ferry to the island, the first sight of which created a very stark impression.

I was taken by the chief warden to the single-cell section where all the political prisoners were kept. I was told by the first inmate of this section not to waste time talking to any of them, but to go to the end of the row where I would find their leader. I did this and was immediately impressed by Nelson Mandela, for whose release I had pleaded time and again in Parliament.

Inside the cell at the bottom of the section stood this tall, composed man who put his hand through the bars and said, "I'm very pleased to meet you." I replied, "I am very pleased to meet you, Mr Mandela, and I have come to get information about the treatment political prisoners are receiving here."

Despite the presence of the chief warden, Mandela had no hesitation in reeling off all the conditions to which the prisoners were subjected. He described the inadequate clothing they wore through the icy winters on the island, poor and inadequate food, and limited visits and correspondence from relatives, including sleeping on bed rolls on the floor.



**SPECIAL FRIEND:** Helen Suzman

They had no access to newspapers. He also told me there was a warden who had a swastika tattooed on the back of his hand and was very tough on them when they were at hard labour in the lime quarry.

Armed with this information, I went back to Pelsier and repeated what I'd learned. I also told Parliament here was a man who not only had great leadership qualities, but whom I believed to be the only man who could bring about peaceful reconciliation in South Africa.

Several years later then prime minister PW Botha announced he was prepared to release Mandela provided he and the ANC renounced violence. By then the ANC had turned to sabotage after the Sharpeville massacre in 1960. Mandela refused Botha's offer because it did not include his fellow prisoners, and because of his loyalty to the ANC Freedom Charter. He wrote a letter regarding this refusal which his daughter Zinzi read out at a mass meeting in Soweto.

Conditions on the island improved considerably thereafter due to repeated visits by the Red Cross, my intervention and more sympathetic wardens. Mandela's imprisonment continued until 1990, during which time he and five other Robben Islanders were moved to prisons on the mainland. All in all, I saw Mandela several times on Robben Island, twice when he was moved to Pollsmoor Prison, once in a

clinic in Cape Town when he was recovering from surgery, and twice at Victor Verster Prison, where he lived in a cottage prior to his release, attended by a white warden. I lunched with him there on one occasion.

In addition, I saw him whenever MPs from different parties in the so-called prison groups paid official visits to the prisons. Shortly after he was released, I was on holiday in Plettenberg Bay when I received a phone call from him. He asked, "When are you coming to see me?" And I said, "As soon as I get back at the weekend."

On the following Monday I went to visit him, still married to Winnie, at his home in Orlando, and we had an emotional reunion. To my great pleasure, since that time we have remained friends and have visited each other in our homes. To their great joy, I took my daughters and granddaughter to visit him.

Three events of my long association with Nelson Mandela stand out in my memory. My first meeting with him on Robben Island in 1967, his invitation to join him in the helicopter that took him to Sharpeville where he signed the interim constitution for a new democratic South Africa in 1993 and his conferral on me of the Order of Merit (Gold) in 1997.

Nelson Mandela is a remarkable man whose friendship I greatly value. It is South Africa's great good fortune to have had him pave the way for peaceful reconciliation in a country torn apart for 40 years, and even before then, by racial discrimination. His contribution thereafter to the worldwide acceptance of the new South Africa – back in the Commonwealth, freed of sanctions and recognised as a leading country on the African continent – has been invaluable.

Happy birthday Nelson – now we are both 90.

● *Helen Suzman was an opposition MP from 1953 to 1989.*