

frontline: the long walk of nelson mandela: interviews: joe matthews

INTERVIEW WITH JOE MATTHEWS ABOUT MANDELA, BROADCAST BY PUBLIC BROADCASTING SERVICE IN THE UNITED STATES

What do you remember about your first sighting [of Mandela]?

... on the Fort Hare campus, where my father was a professor, so almost all the students who came through Fort Hare, I got to know ... All I can remember at the time, is that he and Matanzima [Mandela's cousin] were these tall, handsome Thembu gentlemen, always well dressed ... they were very striking, even then as young men ...

The way he dressed ... half of the people who knew him in those early days comment on that. Can you give a sense of what this dress was, what was it that was so striking about it? You were all students, how did he stand out?

A lot of the students, especially some of the senior chaps, would wear suits. But they would be ordinary suits. They wouldn't have any distinction. They wouldn't look as if they are from a tailor or anything like that. Mandela's clothes always looked as if they had been specially picked, or they had been tailored to fit him exactly. Therefore, he was different.

... we regarded it as a sort of a mystery ... what I can tell you is that a white silk shirt on Nelson Mandela is different from a white silk shirt that we have. His is really white, and yours is not quite the right white. He is a meticulous dresser ... and he picks his clothes, so it means he gives it thought. Whereas as most of us, you go into a shop, you buy a suit. You don't really consider whether it matches something else ... but with Mandela it was different. Even when he was supposed to be casually wearing a khaki trouser, it would be a "khaki" trouser. It wouldn't be gabardine. It would be the genuine thing. And this is very striking. That's why you'll find almost everyone speaks about this. Yet, all of us were dressers. We all were fond of being well dressed and so on, but we were trying to emulate people like Nelson. Now he was like that even as a young person ... Where he picked it up, I don't know, because you wouldn't regard Transkei as the kind of environment in which people would be looking out for the best kind of clothes ... I think it's just a characteristic of his, and maybe it reflects a kind of ego as well, wanting to be the best dressed.

Did he show signs of being something of a political firebrand as far as you were aware?

No, not at all. Far from that. There was absolutely nothing, because already that year, '41, when you had the strike [at Fort Hare] ...

it was a very well known strike against the boarding master, who had kicked one of the maids working in the dining hall ... it was led by Tambo ... so Tambo already emerged before Mandela, whose political consciousness really began in Johannesburg and not at Fort Hare. It's traditional throughout the world for people to develop political consciousness at the university. Would it be fair to say Mandela was a political late developer?

Well, of course, remember that he was from the royal house. He had grown up in the Thembu royal house. He, Matanzima and others were brought up by the Thembu paramount chief, Dalindyebo. And the people who grew up in these royal houses tend to be very superior in their attitudes towards others, and really to assume that they are going to rule people, or govern people and so on. They are brought up like that. And I think he was totally indifferent to the sort of modern political movement, and I am certain that he didn't feature in the strike. I mean, the strike went on for some time, and big speeches were being made by the various leaders of the strike, which eventually ended with a negotiated sort of settlement. But he didn't feature ...

There must have been one first encounter of political substance that you had with Mandela later on ... any images you remember...

... in April 1944 the Youth League was formed. Among the names of those who were at the first meeting, was the name of Mandela. So all of us, as young men, at the school, were obviously interested in the Youth League and its establishment. We all were aware of the people who were on that list. I think there were 14 of them who were on the list of the founders of the Youth League, and he was one of them. That's when I first became conscious of him as a political figure. I had seen him at the Bantu Men's Social Center, just walking up and down there, but the first time I saw him in a political role was when the Youth League was established in '44 ...

One gets the impression that Mandela, during the '40s, was the kind of hot headed, firebrand type that today he has had to restrain.

Yes, we all were, at the time. There was, to begin with, a fierce battle against the communists at the time.

This communist point--tell us about that.

Yes, when the Youth League was founded it was very nationalistic. African nationalism was the slogan of the Youth League, and it was very anti-foreign ideologies--as they were called. That included, of course, the Communist and the Young Communist League. There was fierce competition for the allegiance of the youth, between the Youth League and the communists. But it was ambivalent, because on the one hand, the mother body, the ANC itself welcomed anybody, including the communists, in its ranks. But you had this undercurrent of Youth League demanding that the ANC should put forward an African nationalistic policy which is anti-communist.

The Youth League even tried to get a resolution through at the ANC national conference in 1946, which would have the effect of removing communists from the ANC. The resolution was heavily defeated by conservative politicians ... Mandela was in the forefront of the anti-communist groupings, although he was at Wits [University] and a lot of the young communists were at Wits. Even many of his friends were members of the communist party. People like Ismail Meer, J.N. Singh ... But on the political platforms he was well known as one of the people who was opposing the influence of communists in the ANC. Do you have any recollection of the sort of things that he used to say from political platforms about communists?

I can't really be specific. It was the general sort of Youth League propaganda against foreign ideologies, against people trying to hijack the struggle of the African people. That Africans must stand up for themselves and that the strategies and tactics of the struggle should be determined by the African people themselves, and not by others. These were the sort of things that would be said in all the meetings. It was not easy because you had prominent communists who were in the ANC. J.B. Marks, and Moses Kotane and others who were leaders of the communist party and were on the executive of the ANC. So this was frequently a source of a lot of friction ... and the Youth Leaguers were regarded as a very big nuisance because of their attitude.

This African nationalism also included a certain hostility towards Indian people in the struggle, like Yusuf Cachalia and so forth, who later became his friends ...

Well, you see, at Wits he had Indian friends ... but they were communists ... that's why I say there's a great deal of ambivalence in the whole attitude of the Youth League, because here they were forced to work with people and yet they were going around, especially among Africans, condemning any relationship with Indians or whites, which had the effect of depriving the Africans of their own control over strategy and tactics and so on. This was the whole idea, that we had to be independent in the formulation of policy and not be influenced by others. Yet, practical campaigns demanded that in the fight against white rule and segregation and so on, you had to work with others, and that did, in fact, happen. But the Youth League would say that cooperation is okay provided that the Africans have got their own independent body, the ANC, to which others were excluded. The ANC, at the time, excluded non-Africans from their membership.

Did you observe the transformation in Mandela? He evolved and matured--did you witness anything in Mandela?

I think that the transformation of the Youth League from an exclusive African nationalist organization into one with a broader outlook, affected all of us, not just Mandela personally. The Youth

League was confronted by this problem as a result of practical struggles that had to be waged against white rule. Remember that in the beginning, the country was governed by the United Party. And there were some people who still hoped that changes would occur in a peaceful manner.

Later on it became clear that this was not going to happen. In the course of campaigns that were waged, when you had the Indian passive resistance campaign, which influenced us a great deal. We were outside it, but we observed what the Indian people were doing--how they had organized themselves and the way they were going to jail. So the passive resistance campaign had a big effect. The miners strike of 1946, which was led by J.B. Marx, a communist, had a very big impact. And then, of course, the National Party comes to power in May 1948, presenting a challenge to everybody, to reposition themselves. Because the National Party came in with a very strong anti-communist policy, very strong anti-Indian policy. They wanted the Indians out of the country--back to India. So the African movement was compelled to reckon with the realities of the South African situation, and indicate where they stood. Could you be anti-Indian when the white government was demanding that Indians should be expelled from South Africa, and sent back to India? What is your position? What is the position of the movement on communism when the National Party made everyone a communist? Not just those who were members of the formal communist party. I think that those campaigns, the May 1st strike in 1950 was a particularly fierce battle between those who felt there should be a more progressive outlook, and those who considered that we should still stick to an exclusivist African nationalistic position. So that 1950 was a kind of watershed, that May strike, in this process.

Could you talk about that strike and the issue of the Indian question as it might have affected Mandela at the time.

Well, the ANC in 1949 December had adopted a program of action, [which] was seen as a victory for the Youth League and for the African nationalist position ... Yet, shortly after that program was adopted in December 1949 ... the Defend Free Speech convention was called by a large number of different organizations including the communist party, the Indian Congress, the non-European Trade Union Federation, the Transvaal ANC (that is the provincial branch of the ANC in the Transvaal). The purpose of the Defend Free Speech convention was to register a protest against the bans that had been imposed on certain leaders by the Nationalist government. They had imposed a ban on ... four leaders. That was the main attack by the Defend Free Speech convention. But the conference then went on to take a decision to have a strike on the 1st of May 1950. The Youth League responded to this by saying it was an attempt to divert attention from the program of action, to introduce a new program

which was the different from the 1949 program of action. So there was a split in the ranks. Some members of the Youth League supporting the May 1st strike, and others strongly opposed to the May 1st strike. Mandela was prominent among those who went round opposing the strike. He was really the main Youth League person who went round opposing this strike all over the Transvaal.

The strike and Mandela ...

So ... Mandela was a leading figure against the decision to hold a strike on May 1st ... and attempts were made by Yusuf Cachalia to go and persuade him to support the strike ... but ... he appeared on every conceivable platform preaching against the strike. Well, he was under terrific attack from the communists ... and many others who were against his point of view. Now it's a turning point because it is that strike and that fight which eventually led to the emergence of the Africanists ... whereas, Mandela didn't go along with the Africanists. He eventually went with the other side, with those who felt that it had been wrong to oppose the strike, because the strike was a mass movement against the oppressors. And the feeling was that whenever the masses are on the march, against oppression, then you should support the mass movement, and not be against it. This is really how people reacted ...

During the '50s, you ascended to the top of the Youth League, and then you were involved in the treason trial.

Well, first in the Defiance Campaign, that's your next important landmark.

You must have developed a closer acquaintance, as time unfolded, with Mandela.

Yes, well I was his secretary. Remember he became president of the Youth League in 1951 and I was the national secretary. So we obviously had to work together ...

Can you remember, around that time, any particular encounter in which you developed a sense of the man?

Yes, well I had to have contact with him because I also had ambitions to become a lawyer. That's how we actually first became quite personal friends, when he was articled to Helman and Michel ... and I also was keen to go into the legal field. There were so few of us who were trying to become lawyers, and so we had that aspect as well, apart from the political. Then I was quite close to Sisulu, and Sisulu was close to Mandela. I had more contact with Sisulu, in fact, than with Mandela at the time. But gradually we got to work together.

Do you remember any particular first encounter?

Well, you must remember it's difficult for me to find anybody fascinating. I was Z.K.'s son, you know. That was the only fascinating man in South Africa as far as I was concerned. We were at the top of society at the time; therefore, we didn't think any

other people were so important. So I could never say one was inspired by any of the people whom one met like Tambo and Mandela and so on, because they had been students and I had been the son of the professor, and we were ruling the campus as it were ... so in the beginning one was not really aware of the merits of Mandela. I was very conscious of the merits of Tambo, because he was our teacher, and a very brilliant teacher ... therefore, we got to know him very well, and we regarded him as the inspiring figure rather than Nelson Mandela. And also at the time ... Sisulu was the one who was in the news more than Mandela. You heard all the time of Sisulu, the new secretary general elected in 1949, and he was the leading figure rather than Mandela.

Are there any moments in that Defiance Campaign where he might have made an elaborate show of burning his pass, for example ...

Well, we can start off a bit earlier. After the 1950 national strike, we then had a joint planning council established by the South African Indian Congress and the ANC to try and work out a joint program of struggle against the policies of the Nationalist party and the Nationalist government ... when we went to the conference in 1951 ... the person who introduced that program was not one of the members of the council, but was Mandela. He dressed up in his favorite brown suit. He had a favorite brown suit, which he loved, and he introduced the joint planning council report, and, of course, that made him the key figure at that 1951 conference, as the man who had introduced the campaign for the defiance of unjust laws. And he was the first person the following year to volunteer to go to prison as a person who was going to defy unjust laws, and was in fact appointed as the national volunteer in chief to establish this core of volunteers who were going to defy unjust laws. So I think that that moment, December 1951, marks a very important step in the movement of Mandela towards leadership of the ANC. Tell me about a meeting where you formed an impression of who this guy was.

I'll tell you where he created a very big impression, and irritated a lot of people ... as part of the campaign it was decided to hold protest meetings on April the 6th 1952 against the tercentenary of the arrival of whites in South Africa. They were celebrating this arrival of Jan van Riebeeck on April the 6th 1652. We then decided to hold protest meetings at the same time. The major meeting of protest for the ANC was in Port Elizabeth. And Dr. Maroke, the then president general, my father, who was provincial president of the ANC, and Mandela, who was the president of the Youth League, all gathered in Port Elizabeth to address a huge crowd of protest against the tercentenary. That evening there was a black tie affair ... and Mandela made a speech as leader of the Youth League in that meeting, in which he predicted that he would be the first president

of South Africa. Now, this was quite resented because you had the leader of the ANC there, Dr. Maroke, you had the leader of the provincial ANC, my father, you had the man who was going act for my father, who were all senior and then you had this upstart Mandela getting up in the dinner, and as part of his speech, saying that he is looking forward to becoming the first president of a free republic of South Africa. And it has happened. You see, ja, it's happened ...

Can you recall it in a bit more detail?

Yes, well he obviously had prepared ... he read a prepared speech. It wasn't an off-the-cuff speech ... and he wasn't wearing black tie like the other leaders. He was still in his favorite brown suit. It was a very glittering affair, nothing proletarian about it at all ... The main topic of his speech was the forthcoming campaign, which was due to begin on June 26th 1952, and he was going to be in the lead in that campaign. But it's in the course of that speech that he made this rather startling statement. Of course, everyone thought he was just being an arrogant young man, because nobody dreamed that we would ever reach the day of liberation and freedom in our life time, although that was our slogan--freedom in our life time. But this is something I recall very vividly because a lot of us who were at that dinner, of course, have lived to see his prediction proved correct. So it means, he had strong ambition. That's what was reflected by that speech. The fact that he ignored his seniors, I mean this is what many people thought it would be more appropriate if that speech was made by the senior leaders of the ANC, but here it was made the president of the Youth League. It was quite a memorable moment, which I've never forgotten.

So he must have been seen as a helluva irritating, arrogant, conceited guy?

... even when he didn't hold office, this we must always remember, Mandela always came forward and presented himself as a leading figure in the ANC. He ignored office as the criterion of leadership and very often he did and said things which should have been said by those who held office. Yet, he would say it. It was perhaps a kind of supreme confidence. I don't know if one could call it arrogance, but he was very confident, maybe over confident in himself. He was regarded as fearless. It was known that he was fearless as a person. He was always ready to volunteer to be the first to do something, anything that had to be done, Mandela would volunteer to do it. Therefore, we ... never regarded Mandela as one of the thinkers of the movement, although he wrote articles here and there, of an ideological nature. But where we wrote articles by the hundred, he wrote one or two, over a long period of time. So he was not a theoretician. But he was a doer. He was a man who did things, and he was always ready to volunteer to be the first to do any dangerous or

difficult thing, he would ready to do.

Do you remember any particular dangerous or difficult thing for which he volunteered?

Well ... if you look even at the banning of the ANC, he was the first to say that now we must go underground, defy the ban, and refused to disband ... He was the first to say leaders must go underground, and prepare for armed struggle. He was the first to advocate a violent struggle, and the abandonment of a long held and cherished policy of nonviolence which the ANC had had since 1912. Mandela was the first to say we must break from this policy. So he was an innovator in that sense. But always not on ideological ground but on practical grounds that we must do this, or we must do that

...

In subsequent meetings that you had with him, after that remarkable story that you tell about the speech in Port Elizabeth, did that stay with you that this guy said he was going to be president of South Africa.

Well, I then went and stayed with him. During the treason trial ... after our arrest on December the 5th, 1956, we then had a preparatory examination almost for seven-eight months in 1957 ... I lived with him at the time. He had already parted from his first wife, and we actually shared his room at his house in Soweto. So I was literally ... traveling with him and listening to him and we were having debates and arguments and so on all the time ... But we stayed together for a long time and during that time what emerged as well, was the change in his outlook from an African nationalist position to what you might call almost a left wing position ...

When you were staying with Mandela in Soweto, one thing we hear about is his exercise obsession ...

I had one very, very nasty experience with this exercise thing. Against my better judgment he persuaded me to join him in his exercises one morning. And I was so sick--I vomited all over the place ... obviously because the exercises were unusual for me and were very strenuous. That was the first and last time I joined him in his exercises. But, of course, they were absolutely regular. The exercises in the morning, running, and then also the boxing usually in the evenings. He would go to his club, to go and box. So this was a routine of his. But he was fanatical about it ...

Eating habits--people have told us he's very disciplined.

Well, everything of his was based on the need to be fit. And he had certain favorite things that he did. I mean Wednesdays was always a visit to the restaurant in Johannesburg in Court Street. We went to this restaurant regularly for lunch, but Wednesdays was the day for briyani. So generally I joined him on Wednesdays to go and have briyani--he knew a great deal about Indian food and Indian curries. The other thing he loved was Italian food. We used to go past one of

these Greek Italian delicatessens and he would buy food from there. So he loves good food and he knows a lot about ... food. And yet at the same time he loved the traditional Xhosa amasi, you know, sour milk [and] a kind of mielie bread, made from mielies and then sour milk. We ate this a great deal, which his mother prepared ... his mother was there at the time ... and when I stayed with them you know, the three children were still there Of course, the eldest son died years later.

You mentioned Mandela's mother. What kind of lady was she?

Well, she was a very strong mother and very perceptive ... she was very unhappy with the marriage between Mandela and Winnie, for example. Of course, she told me quite a bit about that, which she might not say to him. But from the word go, she was not happy. She could really see people for what they were; yet, she was an uneducated woman. But she was a very strong influence on her children ... [she's a] first class cook, especially in all the traditional foods. A very pleasant person. I used to sit with her for hours, talking to her, more than I think he talked to her. I learned to respect her a great deal.

What was it ... that she perceived in Winnie that troubled her?

Well ... one can't say whether she was right or wrong. But remember that Winnie was a very beautiful woman, and was also one who was always beautifully dressed and so on. It could be that the mother didn't think she would be a wife in the traditional sense. Sort of took her to be a urban glamour girl type, and yet she felt that he should have a real help-mate, as it were. I took it that she was perhaps prejudiced in favor of the first wife, and was just reflecting that prejudice. But, of course, as things panned out, some of her fears, I think, were proved correct.

Did the mother ever have a conversation with Nelson or did they have the kind of relationship where it simply wouldn't have been possible.

I have no idea because I never saw it. During the time that I was there, I never saw a sort of sitting down conversation between him and his mother. Of course, she was a traditional mother, who would probably hesitate to hold these kind of personal discussions.

Whereas, she would feel comfortable with me. I was younger than him, but we ... have common family relations ... she would talk about all our other relatives. So she got used to talking about personal matters. But I can't say I ever saw them holding that kind of conversation. We would sit actually outside on the verandah, watching the street as people went by and so on, and then we'd talk. But I could never see Mandela sitting down on a chair with her sitting over there, and with them having a long conversation, about her personal ... maybe they did that when I was not there. After all, I was only there for the period of the preliminary hearing,

which was about eight months. I lived there every day, and then from time to time whenever I visited Johannesburg, if I needed accommodation, I would stay there as well. Even after his marriage, I visited all the time.

Were there traits in Mandela's mother that were clearly inherited by the son?

I can't say, because regrettably I never, of course, knew his father. I know that he greatly admired his Dalindyebo, the paramount chief, and it seems that's the man he really admired. He, himself, was too young to know his father well; therefore, Dalindyebo was virtually his father. But I can't say that one could see any characteristic of his which was inherited from his mother. She was a very gentle sort of lady you know.

Was she shocked by his intense political activity?

No. No. I never detected that. I know that his first wife had that. I knew her as well, and she had that feeling against all this political activity. But I think the mother was ... she would be too loyal to show any signs of irritation at what he was doing.

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