PBS frontline: the long walk of nelson mandela: interviews: amina cachalia & rica hodgson

There's a line from Shakespeare when Hamlet says to Horatio, "Give me that man who is not passion's slave and I will wear him in my heart." A lot of people think Mandela is the consummate expression of a man who is not passion's slave ...

Yes, Mandela is an interesting man. He is a man of many moods. A man of a great many seasons, too. His love for Indian food started very late in life. He was not a man that had Indian food as a young lad in the Transkei when he first came here. But when he first met the Indian men at university and became accustomed to eating with them, I suppose he was introduced to Indian food.

Later on, and specially early '50s, there was a restaurant in Court Street in Johannesburg that used to cater for all of us, for mostly black people, and Mandela used to go there very often and have an Indian meal. That's where he first probably had briyani.

Subsequently he loved the food and I used to cook it for him from time to time and I still do.

Are there any stories which you can recall which illustrate this driving desire to consume briyani ...

... any time he feels like having some, he would phone people, not me, but other people and say, "May I have some briyani?" I remember one day I was working at the ANC offices ... with Rica, in her office. I was planning the veterans party ... and he was phoning from his office and he said, "Go home and cook me some food. I'm coming to have lunch." And I thought to myself, "What a thing to say--president or no president." Just like a chauvinist man who says go home to a woman to cook food for him. But I did come home and I cooked some food, and he came home that afternoon and had it ...

He likes to portray himself as being very much in tune with the women's liberation times. Are you suggesting that maybe he pays lip service to that ... and in practice tends to be rather despotic in the old style?

I think all these old men do. They absolutely are not so in tune with women's liberation. They talk a great deal about it, but a lot of them are still very, very chauvinist in their habits.

Let me narrow us down to one particular occasion I would like you to talk about--your first prison visit when Mandela was at Pollsmoor.

Yusuf and I went to Cape Town. Of course, the press got hold of it, and that night just about everybody phoned to find out what I was

going to say to him. I said, "I haven't a clue." I had a million butterflies in my tummy. I was worried and excited--this man I hadn't seen for so many years. The last time I saw him was when he was sentenced in 1962 ... I didn't even know what he looked like anymore.

We were taken to Pollsmoor that day, kept in a little waiting room ... until they fetched him... he looked so different from what I imagined. He was very frail, tall and just very thin looking. And he had a strange color. He wasn't black. He wasn't brown. He had sort of a pale grayish color. I said to him, "Are you ill? What's the matter?" He said, "No, no, no, I'm fine. Let's sit down and talk." Well, there were policemen all over the place. Yusuf and I sat on either side of him, and then policemen sat on either side of us, and others sort of in the room all over the place. We talked about the children, his children and my kids and family and friends ... but I kept thinking this man is not well. He doesn't look well. I asked him two or three times but he assured me, "You are just worrying for nothing. I am very well." But a week later, he did collapse with tuberculosis. So he couldn't have been well when I saw him, and he was very ill after that.

What do you recall of Victor Verster?

It was a bungalow, quite a nice little cottage, with a little swimming pool and a verandah where he sat very often. He told me he watched the birds every morning ... and he would talk to the birds. There were two people in the house with him, a Mr. Swart, he was the cook and there was someone else, as well. But it was so strange. I told friends that I was going to see him, and everybody said you must take a photograph of him. I thought, "Well, I'm gonna try." So I was given a little camera by the Weekly Mail editor, tiny little thing, and they said to try and take a picture of him because the world was waiting for a picture of this man. I said, "Okay." We went in. They didn't search me. I had the camera in my bag, and then they served us lunch. We went to sit at the table. Yusuf and I, and Mandela and it was a very nice lunch, and they even asked if we wanted wine. Then the guys left us alone ... and I zipped out this camera and I said, "I'm going to take a photograph of you." He held my hand and said, "Don't." I said, "Why not?" I couldn't understand it, I mean we were alone in the room. I put it away again, and then I looked at him very puzzled, and he said very loudly, "Mr. Swart will you bring me something or other" ... Mr. Swart said, "Yes Mr. Mandela, I'll be there right away." And Mr. Swart's voice sounded as though it was coming right here behind me. So I think there was some sort of bugging devices where they could hear everything we were talking at the table ... then I realized that must be the reason that he is stopping [me] ... He took me to the bedroom afterwards to

show me his bedroom, and I was in there alone with him, and I sort of said, "Why don't you want me to take a picture?" He said, "Because, don't take a picture." That was it. Many years later I said to him, "You stopped me from being a millionairess. I could have had this picture" ... But he did say that everything he had said and done would have been taken note of. So they must have bugged him all the time, even though he was supposed to be partly free in the Victor Verster house.

So he never gave you a full explanation subsequently of why he stopped you from being a millionairess?

No, he just laughed when I told him. But he thought I understood that that they would have known if I had taken the picture and they would have probably taken the camera away in any case. And also, stopped visits, perhaps.

The day of the release ... what do you recall of that day?

Oh, that was just such an emotional day for so many millions of people. Me included ... India had sent a team of television artists here, especially for his release. Until then India had nothing to do with South Africa. But they sent this group of people ... we arranged everything for them ... and my son and I and the crowd went to Cape Town, and we stayed at a friend's house.

The day of his release we went to stand outside Victor Verster prison in the street. There were crowds of people, and we all stood there, and it was a blisteringly hot day. It was so hot. Scott McLeod of Time Magazine was standing next to me. We waited and waited and waited, and Mandela made no appearance. Finally, everybody said, "Oh, Winnie must be keeping him waiting" ... But she wasn't. We had the wrong idea at that time. Anyway, we waited and I got so tired. Eventually I said, "Look, if he doesn't come out in the next five minutes, I think I'm going to leave, because it's so hot. I just can't stand it." Scott said, "No, please don't go, because if you're here, your the only one he'd recognize, and then at least we get a picture." Scott gave me a cap to wear for the heat. We stood and stood, and finally he came out. Well, when he made his appearance, I mean, never mind me, the entire crowd made a rush for him and I was just trampled to bits almost. I couldn't get anywhere near him, and didn't see him. So I went home and looked at the television for the rest of the day. I didn't even go to the parade.

But the next day there was suppose to be a press conference at Bishopscourt and these chaps had the credentials, and they were gonna go for the interview. So they all went off and I was at home in the morning ... when my son called and said, "Ma, will you bring one of these gadgets for the television." They forgot it and needed it very badly ... So off I went with this gadget, and my friend drove me there ... they knew I was coming and they allowed me in ...

I gave the television gadget to this man, and then Trevor Tutu came up to me. He says, "Oh I am so glad you're here. Come upstairs" ... So off I went ... there was a whole crowd sitting in the sitting room--Walter, Winnie, Mbeki (Thabo's father), and various other people. Nelson was sitting in an armchair and his eyes were sort of half closed. He looked as though he wasn't aware of anybody else in the room. I greeted the other people, and I went to stand near him. For a few seconds, he just didn't realize there was anybody there. I said, "A penny for your thoughts." He opened his eyes and he says, "Good heavens, where did you come from?" And he jumped up and hugged me, and I said, "Where were you a few minutes ago?" He said, "I've just been thinking." So I said, "What about?" He said, "Everything that's in store for me" And he sort of sank back into the chair and we had a chat ... it was just so wonderful.

One heard of tensions within the ANC, concerns about Mandela talking to the government ... was he selling them out ... There was the whole issue, the relationship with Tambo, which was terribly close, but also there was this tension, it seemed, as to who would be president ...

Ja, I don't think there was tension, as such. But I think by the time Nelson was released from prison, Tambo was already a very ill man. He was sick. He had the stroke and he was being nursed in Switzerland, I think ... one of [Mandela's] first visits was to go and see Tambo. He related this me afterwards. He said when he saw Tambo in this hospital ward, Tambo's face lit up and he said, "I am so happy to see you." He said, "Now the ANC presidency must go to you. You must be president of the ANC." From that moment he wanted to relinquish his leadership of the party. Nelson said he said, "No, you are the ANC president, and will remain as such until much later on." And Tambo sort of sunk back in his bed again and he smiled and I think it probably was a smile of relief, in a sense. I don't know. But Nelson said he wanted him to feel that he is going to get better, and he is still going to play a very wonderful role in the leadership position ...

Talking of presidents, you must have had some sense of his relationship with F.W. de Klerk. It's a very interesting thing how in the eyes of the world ... these are two Nobel Peace Prize winners. Yet, there's an awful lot of tension.

I haven't really seen them together except what the rest of the world has seen in pictures and so on. But at the beginning, he had a great deal of respect for de Klerk, and he absolutely regarded him as the man that has made a lot of things possible, and a man of great integrity. And every time he said that, I have a friend, Helen Joseph, who died some years ago ... and she would phone me every time Nelson talked about de Klerk's integrity. She said, "Tell

Nelson that he's not a man of integrity. He'll soon realize what sort of a man he is." One day I told him that. I said, "You know Helen is very fed up with you. You keep talking about this man and his great integrity, and she doesn't believe in that at all." So he just laughed. He said, "No, de Klerk is a good man ... and he'll do as we want him to do." I think later on he realized after the negotiations started that de Klerk had tried to put spokes in the wheel perhaps, or did something different, and I think a little bit of his faith was lost along the way here.

Talking of his emotions ... Winnie ... do you recall that incident ... when the house burnt down in Soweto ...

Yes, I remember that very well. I heard the burning story on the radio. I was at home and I phoned Yusuf ... We had just seen Nelson. It wasn't so long after we had come back from Victor Verster. Yusuf said to me, "Well, you better go out there and see what you can do for her." So I got into the car and drove out to the house. When I got there everything was in cinders. I mean everything was just blackened out. Dozens of papers were burnt and photographs ... everything was burnt.

She wasn't around at all. I asked where she was and they told me they'd take me to see her. We got back into the car and went off to some part of Soweto ... Winnie was sitting in a chair looking absolutely ghastly, as though she was in a different world. I said to her, "Winnie, what on earth has happened." She said, "I don't know. I don't know what's happening in my life. I don't know" ...

Did you ever get any sense of what Nelson Mandela's response was to the burning of his house?

No, I never got a response from him as such, but I do know that he was very upset and very worried. Soon after that burning of the house, there were so many other things happening. I think the Stompie issue then came to the fore as well, and various other things was happening. That is the time that he had written a little note to me to say I must come to see him immediately. I had a feeling all along that he might have wanted me to tell him about what was happening in Johannesburg with Winnie and all the rumors and what the press was saying, and I didn't know anything further than what I read in the press. Yusuf and I discussed it, and I thought if I was going to get permission to see him, then I must know what to tell him.

I asked some of the "Committee of Ten" to come and see me ... Albertina and Sister Bernard came along, and I showed them the note and I said, "Look, I don't know what this is all about. But I have a feeling Nelson wants to know what's going on here. He feels, perhaps, I'll be the one to tell him the correct things, and I don't know anything about what's happening to Winnie. So you tell me and I can tell him." And Albertina said to me, "Ask him to tell Winnie to

get out of the country for a while, because she is just making a lot of difficulties and a lot of trouble here, and she must go away. She must be away from this country for some time, and she'll only listen if he tells her."

I said, "All right, do you think what is happening ... is Winnie really involved?" They said, "Yes. She's terribly involved in [every]thing, and she's making a lot of difficulties for them in the township, and she must go. She must get out of the country." I said, "Okay. If I do go and see him, I'll tell him that." Well, I never got to see him, because they turned me down. I never told him that. I didn't put that in the telegram that I sent to him. I just said, "I'm unable to come and see you. But we'll continue to try and come."

When Mandela got out of prison did people tell him this sort of thing ...

I'm sure they must have told him. But I gathered ... people were afraid to tell Nelson the truth at times. They were afraid to upset him or to burden him more, or what the reason was I'm not quite sure, but a lot of people, even till this day, will not confront him or tell him things that he should know about the truth, in a sense. They don't mean to be telling him untruths, I'm sure, but I think they feel that they don't want to burden him ... and tell him things that they should not really be telling him.

Do you think that he himself deliberately turned a blind eye?

I don't think he deliberately turned a blind eye, but I do think that he believed so in Winnie that she could never have done what the press and people were saying at the time. He believed in her thoroughly, he believed in her innocence for a long time. Subsequently, he realized that she wasn't so innocent, but all along at that period, he did believe in her. He asked people to go to court to show support for her, at the time, too. In a sort of round about way he asked me to court, also. He didn't say outright, "I want you to come to court and give her support," but he did in a very round about way. Anyway a lot of people did go to court. I just didn't go because I felt it wasn't a political trial. It was a criminal trial and I wasn't going to go either in support of Winnie or not in support of Winnie. I just didn't feel I should go.

Were there people who came to tell him he really should separate from this woman ...

I don't know if there were people that told him that. At that time, he probably realized himself that he couldn't carry on living with Winnie under the same roof. He had been treated very harshly by her, in the sense that she never went to bed unless he was asleep, and she woke up while he was still asleep, or she was asleep and he would wake up, so he felt that she never wanted confrontation. She never wanted him to talk to her about anything. She never gave him

the chance to ... He still loved her tremendously, even at that time. But I think it became unbearable for him to live under the same roof and not being able to be honest and straightforward and talk to her.

What is so fascinating here is what is going through Mandela's mind before he finally made the decision to separate. Did he confide in anybody at all?

No, I don't think he confided. Nelson is a strange man in many ways. He likes to keep a lot to himself. Because I heard that he was going to leave his home from members of his staff and so on, that he was moving out and he was going to live elsewhere. And he came home one afternoon for lunch, there was a meeting at my house ... some of the ANC fellows and he was there. I said to him, "I want to talk to you for a moment," and I took him to my bedroom. I said, "What's this I hear you going to leave your home and going to live elsewhere?" He said, "Who told you this?" I said, "Everybody's telling me this." He said, "No, not true. I'm still gonna live there. I'm still living there. I still share the home with Winnie and I share the bedroom with Winnie." But about two weeks later he left the house. So either he didn't confide in people and me or at that point he hadn't really decided yet. I don't know.

Did you ever see him really crushed and vulnerable during that period, talking about Winnie or was he just too careful?

He was very careful. He controlled his feelings magnificently. He really did. I remember when he separated from her, and he looked so absolutely sad on the television, and I phoned him, and I couldn't get hold of him. One of his secretaries said that he had left already ... I think it was Jessie who said, "Auntie Amina, you must phone him. He's really down and out. He's feeling very bad. You must phone him and talk to him." But I couldn't get hold of him at that time. I talked to him days afterwards only, but he must have felt very pained all that time. He looked very pained.

Do you think there was any particular incident which might have precipitated this decision finally to separate?

There were many incidents that prompted that, but I also think, when she was going abroad to the States and he asked her not to go. She was then taking a friend with her, Dali ... and he specifically asked her not to do that. She said she wouldn't. But that's the story I got, whether that was true or not, I'm not sure. But she did take Dali with her, and I was told when he phoned her one night, Dali answered the telephone and ... I don't know if that broke the camel's back, but that was one of the incidents I think that upset him tremendously. She didn't listen to him.

In the '80s, before the whole football club thing blew up, Winnie was his alter ego outside of prison. She played an important political role, and you were friendly with her. Can you capture

that?

Undoubtedly she played a very wonderful political role because she was the contact that we all relied on. Back and forth from days that he was on the island even. Winnie believed then that she was the person to help the country through the difficult times, and bring us to perhaps liberation. She changed tremendously over those few years. She would be very arrogant to some people. She would talk to you if she wanted to talk to you and if she didn't want to, she didn't think anything of just leaving you standing there.

I never visited her in Brandfort. First of all, because I was banned for many years before, but by that time she had already decided she wasn't going to live in Brandfort anymore, so she'd made excursions into Johannesburg quite often. She was ill a couple of times and was also in nursing homes here. Then, finally, she decided she wasn't going to go back there. I remember Helen Joseph phoning me one day to say that she's at one of the nursing homes, and we should go and see her. So I took some food and I went to visit her, and she wasn't terribly ill, but she was there for some investigation or whatever. And she just looked so different to me. She wasn't the same woman I had known years before. She talked differently. She was absolutely hostile to press people and everybody else. Then she decided she was going to go back to Brandfort for a little while and come back, and she was never going to go back there again. She was just going to get some stuff and come back, and that's what she did, finally.

But subsequently she was one day taken from hospital to Ismail Ayob's house. She wrote me a little note after that and said, "I hate being here." She said, "If I have to choose between Section 6 [prison] and the Ayob's ... I choose Section 6 to be under." I don't know what that was all about. But that was Winnie, you know, she minced no words, and then she just didn't go back to Brandfort.

I remember going with her to Sandton Hotel. One of the American television journalists, one of the famous ones, came down, I forget his name now, wanted an interview with her, and she went there. She said to me to bring some Indian food ... I took her some food and she was having it there ... Winnie was wonderful when she was talking in front of the camera, but before she went to talk, we were in a little room by ourselves, she was lashing at just about everybody. Talking ill of everybody around there, and then I heard the interview, and she was perfect. Winnie has such a strange mind. She can switch on and off at will, and she gave a wonderful interview.

Maybe that is one thing that she has in common with Mandela--the great political self control ...

I don't know if she ever had any thorough discussions politically with him, because she tried to see as little as possible of him since he was out of prison, for that period that they were living

together. He had people every day of his life that he had to see and meetings to attend and setting up everything else. So there wasn't very much time that they little time they had they ... she kept well away from topics that would have been confrontational.

Here was Mandela going through something terribly sad and traumatic, he had attached so much hope to her during his years in prison, and in a way she sustained him emotionally. Despite the terrible stuff in his private life, he still continued with his political goal and it seemed as if he was completely unfazed by that ...

Yes, he always gave that impression. He was completely unfazed by his private difficulties when it came to his political life it was absolutely the way he wanted it done, and the way he put himself forward. He was brilliant at that ... he never allowed his private life to unfaze him ... even a teeny weeny bit. He's always absolutely in control of his emotions. But his one great wish was that he would come out of prison, and have a family life again with his wife and the children. Because he's a great family man and I think he really wanted that more than anything else and he couldn't have it.

You say that Winnie changed ...

... Winnie could be so wonderful one moment, and the next moment she could be real witch in a way ... she had these conflicts in her own character. I don't know what the cause of it was. I think along the line when she was in Brandfort, things were very difficult for her, and something along the line might have snapped. She became very difficult. I was told she had turned to alcohol. I had never seen her drunk, but there were all kinds of stories at that time. But most certainly she behaved differently, on many occasions, from the woman I had known all the years before.

Tell us about the woman you had known all the years before.

I first met her when he brought her to the treason trial one day. At the old Drill Hall. They weren't married yet. She was a beautiful young woman and he brought her and introduced her to everybody there. We sat listening to the proceedings and then when he married her, we were invited to the wedding in the Transkei, but we couldn't go. A few days later, when they came back, he brought her to my flat to introduce her again to Yusuf and me. She was so different from the Winnie I knew afterwards. She was wonderfully shy and sort of coy in a way. Beautiful, and didn't have much to say for herself, and Nelson did a lot of the talking.

She carried on like that for some time, until she became politically active. After his sentence, she really became politically active, and we worked together in the Federation of South African Women. She was a very able and very wonderful woman all along. She did everything correctly. She was outspoken. She was a wonderful speaker when she addressed the crowds. She could whip up a lot of emotion.

She was still a very beautiful young woman, and very easy to talk to and get along with. That sort of thing didn't happen in the '80s ... after that, it was difficult to understand Winnie and her whole manner of life then was completely different.

During those first years, she was something of a blushing bride, maybe a bit of a wide eyed country girl in the big city. Would that be an exaggeration?

Well, that might have been it, but she was a very able young bride also. But she learned very quickly the ways of life of the city. She also got into political life very easily, and realized what she had to do, what commitment she had to make, and she did. She did that very ably. But I think the banishment in Brandfort had a lot to do with her complete change within herself ... it was a very harsh period for her. Something went wrong along the way.

You said Mandela dreamed of resuming a family life, but he'd had enough run-ins with Winnie, even when she came to visit him in prison beforehand, to have had a whiff of what was going on ... he must have been a bit apprehensive, he must have been aware it wasn't all going to be slipping straight into a rosy ...

Well, I'm sure he may have had those doubts a little bit, but I also think that he felt once he's out of prison, he would get the family together and things would come right again. He always sort of blamed himself for Winnie's ways ... the forays that she went into and so on. He felt that he was never there to guide her, never there to be with her, and she never had any guidance from him, and he felt responsible for that. All along, even when the trial took place, he

still felt that he was to blame for whatever she had done wrong. Which in a way may be paternalistic.
Ja, well, I think that is the chauvinistic traits in African men and Indian men, for that matter. You always want to take control of your household and the women there and so on. But I have a feeling that he so wanted to just get his children and his wife in a home, and continue his political career with her, but have this wonderful home life that he dreamt of all the years in prison.
Do you think that he was right to blame himself?
I don't know, perhaps, he could blame himself to an extent, but I don't think ... I mean there were so many other women in the political movement whose husbands spent years and years in prison, and they came out unscathed from their difficulties, didn't get into enormous difficulty as Winnie found herself in. So Nelson is being a little bit too blaming ... as far as he is concerned and he takes the blame far too much. Winnie, in some cases, knew exactly what she wanted, and sometimes Winnie felt that Nelson was never going to be out of prison, and that she was going to be the leader of South Africa. I think she really had those ideas, perhaps, tucked away somewhere. She threw all caution to the wind sometimes, precisely because she felt that she would be the person to lead South Africa.
You said that Winnie had the sense, before Mandela's release, that she was going to be the leader of South Africa ...
Oh yes, I mean she must have been very happy that he had been released from jail, but also it seemed to have dampened her wishes to be the leader, the queen bee, in a sense. She definitely had ideas that she was the woman to lead South Africa to a new life, and to be the head of the government, perhaps. She didn't think that Nelson, at the age that he was coming out, would be able to do that. She was happy that he was out, undoubtedly, but I think it dampened her ideas a little bit.
Was she surprised when Nelson [separated from her]?
I don't know. I didn't meet her during that period at all. We haven't been good friends for a long time ... I don't know if she was shocked, surprised or hurt. He was very pained to make that statement, but I don't know how she took it ... I know later on, a lot of people, friends of hers, used to say that they must get together again ... when he is going to be the leader of South Africa, the president of South Africa, we must have a first lady, and only Winnie can be that first lady. A lot of friends kept saying so. In fact, I was told at one of the ANC conferences ... when they greeted each other on the stage, there was such a roar from a section of the public, that gave the impression that they should get together again. I think Winnie, perhaps, deep down or secretly, hoped that they would. That's my impression. I don't know if she did, but I think she secretly did hope that they should get

together, because she realized that he was going to be the president of South Africa, and the man that the whole country wanted to be the ...

Knowing Mandela well, did you think that was a possibility that after the separation announcement that he might have gone back on it.

I don't know. He never really spoke about it afterwards. I mean, he lived down in Houghton. He was quite happy and he realized that there was no getting back with Winnie. But it was strange, I personally thought that at some stage they might still get together, because I knew how much he loved her always, and it was very difficult for that love just to be wiped away. I also thought that perhaps they would get together at some stage. But the day we went to see the old woman, Betsy Verwoerd, we were coming back from there ... by car ... and he was sitting very quietly and almost snoozing and I said to him, "Are you tired?" He said, "No I'm not tired. I'm just thinking" ... and two days later he announced that he was going to divorce her. I just felt that he was making up his mind at that time or before, that he was thinking about the divorce and what he was going to do. Because just two days later he announced that he was going to divorce her.

There you were in the car, he was thinking about it, it was the perfect opportunity just to let go ... any normal person would have seized that opportunity ...

I don't know. He didn't say anything at all about that to me. But somehow I felt I could read his thoughts, in a way, and soon after that he announced his divorce. But that is Mandela ... there's a wall that he's built between him and everybody. Sometimes he lets slip something along the way, but in most cases he's so controlled about his feelings that it's difficult to penetrate that wall.

It's fascinating that you should say that. Even with an old chum like you ... is that maybe what makes him most different from other people ...

Yes, I think it does ... he's different, he can joke and be just like ordinary people are and yet, when it comes to a very personal thing, one would imagine that with your friends, or with your very close relation, you would let go, and talk about these things. But he doesn't.

RICA HODGSON JOINS THE INTERVIEW:

What is your first recollection of Mandela ... what was the first vivid impression he made on you ...

Hodgson: Well it goes back many years to the early '50s. I can't remember the exact date, but my husband was the first national secretary of both the Springbok Legion and the Congress of Democrats ... so my husband had a lot to do with the men and women in the ANC, at that time. Mandela used to quite often come to our home and have

meals with us, and I remember going to his place in Soweto when he was married to Winnie. I knew him well during the treason trial, because my husband was also involved in that, and I worked for the treason trial fund ... Of course, when he was underground I sometimes took Winnie to be with him for a few hours when he was in hiding ... my best memories of him are during the treason trial in court and out of court and so on, and at parties ...

Amina, your first vivid recollection ...

Cachalia: Well, it's also many years ago. I think it was either 1948 or 1949 that I first met him. Either I met him at the Indian Congress offices when he came over there, because Yusuf was secretary general of the Indian Congress, or it was at Kathrada's flat, which I often visited. It might have been there. Ja, I remember meeting him, and looking at him, and thinking he's quite a charismatic, nice looking guy. We sort of clicked in a way. We liked each other and became instant friends, in a sense ... I saw a lot of him because Yusuf worked very closely with Walter for the defiance campaign. They were joint secretaries. And there was a flat in Fordsburg ... we would all go there very often for lunch and dinners and so on. Working lunches mostly ...

Walter Sisulu told us the first time he met Mandela as being a talent. When you met him in those early days was there a point when one of you sensed that he was a bit different ...

Hodgson: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. I'll tell you a little story about that, when my kid was about five, and my nephew, who was four, used to come and play. Nelson was in the flat one day, and my nephew looked at this man, went home and told his mother, "In Rica's flat there's a giant of a man," and that's how he struck you. He was beautiful. He was big, he was handsome, he was strong looking. He just had a very special presence always. Yes.

Cachalia: Ja, I think he, already at that stage, when I met him, had leadership qualities, most certainly. You felt as though this guy is going places. He is command of things. He knew what to do and what to say, and everybody listened when he talked. He already had that impression and made that impression on a lot of people.

You say you met him early '50s, late '40s. This is a helluva time in South Africa. I find it hard to wrap my mind around the way Indians, whites, Africans were all hanging out together, going to parties ... how remarkable it was that Mandela was sort of strutting around in this environment, being a leader ...

Hodgson: Well, I can't speak for Amina on this bit. For my own part, I joined the communist party in 1946. And as communists, we just knew there was nothing else for us. We were just totally into equality of all people, into freedom and justice and so on. We were prepared to do whatever we had to do for it. I actually worked in "the movement" for over 50 years. Full time work. I never did

anything else. My husband likewise, most of his adult life was committed to that. He was in MK as well, so he had closer ties with Nelson later... I was not popular in my family, none of my family agreed with me on this. Some of them, yes, were sympathetic, but were not active as we were. But most of them were not, and you lost many friends because of your political involvement. You got hit over the head at demonstrations. We went to the city hall steps petrified that you were going to be killed there by the black shirts and the gray shirts and the police, who were in civvie clothes, and so on. But you did it because that was what you believed in, and you couldn't do anything else. That was it. You were disciplined--whatever the movement asked of you, you did. So that's how we came to be with the likes of Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu and all the other political people.

Cachalia: Any excuse for a party was always possible, and we had many of those in quite a number of homes. With the Indian people, with us it was easier to get along with the Africans because we lived more or less in the same places and saw each other. With the white people it was different, and it was only through the communist party really that I met white men and women for the first time. We had the international club upstairs in Court Street, and we used to go there and there's where I met a lot of people that I still know today ...

... it is documented that he was a bit [against] Indians and even whites in the whole movement at a certain stage ... To what degree do you think these wild parties that you folks had contributed to softening that stance ...

Hodgson: I don't think that Nelson's transformation came through the question of different races meeting at parties. I think it rather happened through working together in political organizations like the congress alliance, the treason trial, the passive resistance campaign, and so on.

The relationship between Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu is fascinating ... They seem to complement each other. How would you characterize the differences between them and what makes them such an efficient team despite those differences?

Cachalia: Well, Walter Sisulu is the grand old man of the struggle, really and truly. He was the one that got Nelson into the whole business in the first place. But Walter Sisulu always was and still is, in a way, a back room man. He would say what he wanted to say, he would compel people, in a sense, to do what they should be doing, but he would not be in the limelight or in the forefront of that. Unless it was when he had his role as joint secretary of the defiance campaign and things like that. I think he, in a way, groomed Nelson for the role that Nelson should have been playing today, and they have the most wonderful relationship. Nelson would

consult Walter, even till this day, on something that he wanted to do or that he thought was important to get Walter's idea on. He still does it. And when it's an occasion like Walter's birthday, he would sneak out to Soweto to wish him a day or so ahead ... but it was all done very quietly and just the two of them together. So there's a great rapport and a great strength between them that always existed, and still does.

Hodgson: I think one other thing that perhaps Amina hasn't said, is in those early days, Walter was much more tolerant. Whoever was prepared to work in the struggle was welcomed with open arms, but I think Nelson had reservations in those early days, as did Oliver Tambo and other members of the Youth League and so on. Walter probably helped towards Nelson's tolerance--later tolerance--let's put it that way.

Cachalia: Oh yes, undoubtedly. When Nelson's ... suspicions about the Indians came to the fore, it was Walter who said to him, "These guys are good. They mean well, they are with us." Nelson didn't believe him. He was very skeptical about the Indians and their interest in the liberation struggle. He didn't trust them. He says so himself ... I mean he threw Yusuf off a platform once in Sophiatown ... wherever it was. We weren't married of course, but we heard about it afterwards ... but we came back to the party set-up. I think that too helped in his transformation. He got to know people personally in a social set up, and he got to realize that these are people like himself, who mean that they want to be part of the liberation struggle, and that they want to help in every which way they could. And he trusted us afterwards.

...

The Black Pimpernel. Nelson and his antics/escapades ... What do you ladies remember of those days?

Hodgson: Well, of course, I remember, as I say, going sometimes to take Winnie to spend a few hours with Nelson, when he was staying in Wolfie's flat, in fact, when he was underground there. I knew that sometimes my husband was meeting him. I knew he was a wanted man, and so on and I was very involved with Cecil Williams. As a result of Cecil driving him, he was forced into exile, [had to] leave the country. So yes, I knew about all that ... I didn't see too much of him in that time.

Cachalia: Well, I always thought this term Black Pimpernel was rather strange and funny as far as he was concerned. He quite relished the idea that he was underground and evading everybody and the police and such ... He came to my home one day, in Vrededorp, dressed as a night watchman. I recognized him instantly. So it didn't work too well, his disguise.

Cachalia: It didn't work too well at all, but he did all kinds of silly things. When he was underground he used to take great risks. I

mean, coming to me and me going to him, wherever he was. At one point, we stayed together for about eight to ten days, the time of the 14-day detention clause he was still underground sort of ... there was a strike that was called, and we feared that we going to be all picked up before the strike ... so we tried to get away from the homes where we lived in and my sister ... arranged for us to go and stay with her patients ...

Your husband, Rica, was a bomb man ... any recollections of Nelson and Jack Hodgson and bombs ...

Hodgson: Well, no, I can't because I didn't want to know and I shouldn't have known. I wasn't told things that were not my business. It was quite correct. Sometimes I couldn't avoid it like when bombs were being mixed in my home and my kid was even joining in ... I know that they were part of the whole deal together and they obviously met together. Even before that, in 1956, the treason trial, Jack was banned and wasn't supposed to be at a meeting, but was out one night at a meeting. And the phone went. It was round about 10:30. I recognized Nelson's voice but he didn't say who was speaking. He said, "I'm going to give you a message ... Please memorize it. Give it to Jack as soon as he comes in." Which I did. It was mumbo jumbo to me ... when Jack came in, he said, "No, that doesn't mean the usual raids," which we'd had so many of. "It means arrests ... so I must now go out and warn people." Jack came back ... and said that he's been told to go into hiding ... he packed a bag ... so I did take him away somewhere else. And I was arrested that night. They, in fact, never came for Jack that night. [They] came for me. So there you go. But Nelson phoned, and must have phoned many other people to give the information that there were going to be arrests ... you see, he was that kind of man, and I'm sure he got information from police or who, I don't know.

He didn't listen, and went to this meeting in Pietermaritzburg, where he was told specifically not to go?

Cachalia: Oh, he always wanted to defy authority, in a sense, and he took great chances all the time when he was underground. They could have got him much earlier if they were cleverer, but they weren't. But he was there for the taking, in many occasions. Walking down 15th Street and coming to my home was a chance. The neighbors could have given him away. But nevertheless, he loved it.

You are saying that it was inevitable ...

Hodgson: Sure, for sure.

They would have got him.

Cachalia: They would catch him.

What do you remember of the arrest ... what are your memories?

Hodgson: When Nelson was finally arrested at Howick with Cecil, on the way back from the Pietermaritzburg meeting, it was a helluva shock to everybody. But I suppose in those days, you see, the

special branch were not as clever as they became much later on. They did some very stupid things over the years, and I suppose we just thought we could get away with things forever. It was a terrible shock, because Nelson was a very important guy in the whole outfit. So, yes, I remember that, and I remember going to see him in jail on one occasion. Can't remember where ... anyway, I know that he's sent out a message that by then he was onto healthy foods, and he wanted things like dried fruit and cheese and so on, which I took him.
How do you remember ....
Cachalia: Ja, I heard of the arrest, I think over the radio. It was upsetting, very upsetting. I went to the trial and I was there when he was sentenced, the day he was sentenced. Winnie and I were standing there, and his mother was there. It was a particularly sad time. But it was only for five years. I thought, "Five years, he'll be out in no time." But two years later, they brought him back to stand trial for Rivonia, and then it was life. So ... when he was sentenced for five years, it didn't worry us too much. Five years wasn't all that long. And [with] good behavior, he might have got out even earlier. But nevertheless .... to lose him, and after he'd had this wonderful role of the Black Pimpernel was letting us down, in a way.
The Rivonia Trial, the night before sentencing, the general impression was they were going to be sentenced ... Take us back to that time ...
Hodgson: Well, the point is that I was working then for the International Defense and Aid Fund in Britain, and we were funding the political trials in South Africa, and giving aid to the families. And it's one of the things I criticize Nelson for that in his book he did not give mention to the International Defense and Aid Fund, which I think saved their lives. I mean, without that defense and paying for the best that money could buy, maybe they would not have got ... life, they would have got death instead. So it was a relief to all of us ... but the actual arrests of the Rivonia trial, that was a terrible shock. I was in Botswana then.
Cachalia: I couldn't go to the trial. I was banned ... it was just ... life imprisonment meant that they could die there, so it was a really a very difficult period for all of us. I almost felt that it was the end of our political career in this country, because here were so many of our leaders going for good.
How did Winnie respond to the Rivonia Trial?
Cachalia: She was very brave. Winnie was extremely brave. I think she was at the trial on the day that she wasn't banned at that time. She was banned afterwards. I can't remember very clearly. But I think she was there. But she was very brave. She made statements afterwards that the struggle will carry on, and so on, so forth, but she took it in her stride.

Winnie and Nelson, together in the early days, do you remember seeing them together?

Hodgson: Oh, absolutely. Yes. I remember very clearly, shortly after they got married, and they must have both been at my house for a meal, and I said to Nelson, "I've never eaten a real African meal. I would like to eat a real African meal." He said, "Okay, you're invited. Come to my home next Sunday and have lunch with us." So we duly went, and what was prepared for lunch--roast chicken and roast potatoes, and peas, and tinned peaches and cream. I mean, the same lunch that I would have given them almost. So I said, "So where's the African food?" Nelson said, "What do you want me to do? Go and grub for roots for you? What do you want me to give you?" They were very happy together, and I mean those occasions when I used to take Winnie to be with him, that they could have time alone together, they were really very, very deeply in love. I mean, he yearned so much for her. I felt very sorry for her and later too, as I thought it's terrible for a young and beautiful woman to be deprived like that ...

We go forward in time to the widow's tea party. There must have been a point when Mandela told you about this ... tell me about how you responded when he first put it to you.

Hodgson: My reaction was also a bit of horror, but I thought well, it's reconciliation. This is it. Mandela wants to placate the old president's wives, widows ... and we must play our part. Then Amina and I were sort of acting at the presidency as the hostesses, and we were greeting the people as they came in. And I have to say, they came in separately, but they all walked in looking as if they were about to get a slap in the face. They didn't look a bit comfortable and they all kind of huddled together in the lounge, in one corner. They started to be a little bit friendlier when the Afrikaans press people arrived. They were the first to come and start speaking to them. When the press people asked me what I thought about it, I said, "My husband would be turning in his grave. He was a hard liner, he would not have approved of this at all. But if they're prepared to stand up for Mandela, I'm prepared to sit down at the table with them." I mean that was it, and somehow we got through ...

Cachalia: It was actually a very nice tea party. We didn't know what to say to these old girls, but I started talking to two of them in Afrikaans, and the one said to me, "Oh I am so familiar with this room that we were sitting in." Because she stayed there ... those years ago when she was the president's wife ... She said she knew the house inside out, every picture on the walls she knows.

Hodgson: And one of them said to Mandela, "I'm so pleased to see that you're looking after the Pierneefs." I mean for God's sake, you know. I said to Mandela, "You better see that you get some African art in here soon."

Cachalia: Mrs. Botha really capped it all. She was so absolutely happy to be there. She didn't want to leave Mandela's side at all. She kept saying to him, "Now don't go away, you must stay by my side." And he said, "Yes, Come Mrs. Botha" ... It was just so funny. But before that she had on this magnificent gown, according to her, that she had a sort of a suit with a jacket, and she had coasters

...

Hodgson: African bead work.
Cachalia: African bead work coasters that was all placed on either side of this jacket that she had. She said, "Don't you think this is lovely" ... She said, "This is my African ... my native bead work" ... so she was quite funny, but very talkative and very sweet, in a sense ... very bubbly sort of an old girl.
Hodgson: One thing that struck me very much though, Walter was not, of course, invited with the ladies, but he was determined to just come and have a look. He brought his wife in, you see. When he walked into the room, Mrs. Diedricks I think was sitting with Mrs. Vorster. And I think Mrs. Vorster started to stand up when Walter Sisulu walked in the room. And Mrs. Diedrick kind of did that, like "don't stand for him," you see. But when Mandela walked in they all very happily stood up to greet him, that's for sure. I mean they were really very funny. They all put their feet in it. I mean one said, "I have never sat down with Africans before." They didn't know what to do. They were at a total loss. Of course, some of ... our women were really ... there was Adelaide Tambo in this wonderful long flowing plum velvet gown, with a hat on, and Duma Nokwe's old mother nearly blind in a little black dress with slippers and a little white woolly cap with a pom pom on top, you know ... for them it must have seemed really, really strange. They were funny. I mean, when we had the press conference outside, the photo call, Mrs. Vorster was sitting in front of Nelson and he called Mrs. Biko to come over to be in the picture. And Mrs. Vorster started to stand up to give Mrs. Biko, a much younger woman, her chair. Nelson said, "Sit down, you are so undisciplined, just like your late husband was." It was very funny.
Cachalia: Funny moments those.
Hodgson: Of course, Vorster was the man in charge when Biko was killed.
Cachalia: That's right. It's probably why Mrs. Vorster thought she should get up for her and give Mrs. Biko the seat. When I was introducing the women and I introduced Mrs. Vorster, I said to her, "You know, I hated your husband." She says, "I am sure you did," quietly ...
Did you see Mandela working his magic ...
Hodgson: Oh yes.
... do you have any recollections of how he worked these particular

ladies?
Cachalia: Oh yes, he was all over them ... he went to Mrs. Diedricks, I think he was fond of her in the sense because ... she was the only one of all the wives that had written to him, a very lovely letter when he became president, and offered reconciliation from her sort of point of view. So he liked her very much for that. He went and had a long talk with her, and told her that he'd got her letter and he was very thrilled that she had written. Then he talked to the other women, in turn, but most of our women didn't have too much to say to the other women. There was really very little rapport between them, you know. I mean a woman like Mrs. [Tambo] who was a giant in her days, going to jail over and over again for passive resistance, and defiance campaign ... I said to her, "Go and talk to one of these aunties," and she says, "Amina, what must I say to them?"
Hodgson: We tried, but it was not easy ... we were easy, but they were not. Most of us were easy, but ...
Cachalia: I think they were a bit intimidated too. They probably felt we might take out our wrath and insult them or whatever. Nobody did that, but I think they felt a little bit intimidated.
Hodgson: Ja, they were feeling guilty, sure.
Cachalia: They said they didn't know what there husbands were doing all those years. They just reared their children and did their housework, and they don't know what went on in the political world.
Hodgson: By the time it was over had the ice melted a little bit. Was it Mandela that had done it for them?
Cachalia:Yes, I think so. And the sherry helped ... the women were quite at ease towards the end, and said their good-byes and Nelson came to me and said, "You must invite them for coffee one of these days." And I said to one of them, "Would you like to come for coffee to my home?" and they said, "Oh, we'd love to." Haven't done it till this day, I must admit. One day I will, if they're still alive. Somehow Mandela comes across as if he really really means it.
Hodgson: He does.
With Clinton you can see the cracks ... Neville Alexander argues that Nelson is a bit of an actor and that it is not all totally real. And yet it seems to be.
Cachalia: I think it starts off as a bit of a showman's bit. But I think he also really and truly comes up with these ideas because he

feels it is so important for the country and for people to reconcile, and it sort of blends the little bit of showmanship and that really blends, but basically that's what he wants. I mean even going to Betsy Verwoerd, all the way out to Oranje, I thought was so ridiculous ... I was so appalled at going there, but having gone and having been there, and seen what the reaction of these people, and

then getting them to listen to what this man Nelson Mandela is talking about, and telling them, made me feel that it was worth it in the end, to go there.
The visit with Betsy Verwoerd, were you involved with that?
Cachalia: Ja, I thought that was really crazy, going all the way to Oranje, to visit this old girl who couldn't come and see him in Pretoria because her doctors advised her that she couldn't travel. But she was hale and hearty when we got there. I said to him, "Why are we going to Oranje?" He says, "To reconcile with Mrs. Verwoerd." I mean it was just the craziest place one could think of going. I mean we were the first blacks to go there in any case. I don't think any other people had ever been there...
Cachalia: ... we had a lovely tea with them ... and Mrs. Verwoerd sat there, quite comfortably, talking, that she loved being there she said, and she loved living there, and she thinks she'll never leave there ... there were no photographers allowed in there, so I had a camera and took a few shots of Nelson and the old girl ... and that was about it ...
... How did Mandela and her get on?
Cachalia: Oh yes, there was lots of communication. He was informing her what South Africa is going to be like and what he is going to do, and what the country is going to do, and she was listening very intently ...
Finally, when you were driving back from Oranje with Nelson Mandela, it was a difficult tense time with Winnie. How he did not seize what for a normal friendship might have been an opportunity to let it all hang out a bit ... He is fundamentally different from the rest of us ...
Hodgson: Yes, I think one instance that strikes me is when Winnie was on trial, and she was at that stage with this man Dali, who was also her legal advisor. Nelson was going to the court one day, and we met in the lift and he said, "When are you going to go to court?" I said, "No, I don't think I want to go to court." So he said, "You must. Please Rica, you must come to court and give support to Winnie." Now I mean really, she was so blatant with this man. I went and regretted it. I never went again. But that was the kind of man that Nelson was. Yes, absolutely different. Where would another man have cared, you know.
You mean above and beyond the call of duty.
Hodgson: Absolutely. Absolutely. I mean why did he single me out that I should go? I regretted, really regretted having gone, because the way she was behaving with this young man in front of Nelson. I just thought it was too terrible. But he is such a forgiving guy ...
I mean yes, there may be the political angles, there are, of course, but he is a very forgiving person, and a loving person, and a warm person.

Hodgson: He is loving and warm and joking and has charmed all of us in different ways. And yet he does seem to inhabit a different sort of dimension.
Cachalia: He is a loner. He's intensely protective of his inner thoughts and ideas, that he will not divulge. And his personal life he is very protective of. He now and again lets slip something, but on the whole, he'll never let that wall crack.