

Unbowed, Winnie Mandela Endures

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JOHANNESBURG, Aug. 17 — To Winnie Mandela, commitment is a balm that heals the souls of black people in a land where race can determine destiny.

Mrs. Mandela, the apartheid foe and wife of Nelson Mandela, the jailed leader of the outlawed African National Congress, is a vigorous symbol of resistance to South Africa's system of racial separation. A woman rich in grace and dignity, she wears her pride in her blackness like a fine silk robe. In at least one way, she says, to be black in South Africa is to be blessed.

"We are lucky in the sense that each home is a political institution by virtue of our blackness," she said in an interview at her lawyer's office in Johannesburg. "Blackness alone is commitment because you are born into racism. You are born into a society that has distorted values by those of another culture.

"We sucked from our mother's breast the thirst for human dignity. We sucked from our mother's breast the yearn for liberation."

Mrs. Mandela, who will be 49 years old next month, remains unbowed in a struggle for equality that is saturated with pain. She is what is called a banned person, meaning that she may not address public gatherings or meet with more than one person at a time.

Since 1977 she has lived in forced exile in a black township outside the city of Brandfort in the remote Orange Free State. She is under 24-hour surveillance there and must report to the police every Monday. At the police station or anywhere else, she has always refused to use entrances or accommodations marked "Nonwhite."

"That, I believe, is the best way to teach the community that they have human dignity," she said.

Within the last two weeks, her home — she calls it her prison — has been raided by policemen who used rubber bullets and whips to break up a demonstration outside. It has also been set on fire. The clinic she runs was badly damaged in the blaze, which she says she believes was the work of government security forces.

Her husband was sentenced in 1964 to life in prison on charges of sabotage and plotting a violent revolution. President P. W. Botha, in a speech on Thursday, repeated his offer to release Mr. Mandela if the nationalist leader renounced violence. But Mr.

Mandela, who is regarded by many South African blacks as their true leader, remains adamant in his refusal to accept any conditional release.

Mrs. Mandela and her family are allowed a maximum of 30 visits a year, each of 40-minute duration, with Mr. Mandela at Pollsmoor Prison near Cape Town. Five visits are allowed at Christmas and New Year's.

The regular visits are all used up, save for one reserved for emergencies, she said. For this couple, privacy has become a foreign concept. Since last year, they have been allowed to have so-called contact visits: they may sit in the same room, although apart, and are watched by guards.

Like her husband, who is 67 years old, Mrs. Mandela was born in what is now the nominally independent homeland called Transkei. As a child, she became aware of how the color of a person's skin could cast shadows over life's possibilities.

Her father was a school principal and, by blood rights, was to be a chief in the village. But he refused to accept the traditional position because it would have meant, in the eyes of the village, that he was a government servant or "stooge" who no longer had the interests of the people at heart.

Even with her royal blood, she recalls, she was nothing more than a peasant in the eyes of the white man. Poverty was constant. Her mother, who died when Mrs. Mandela was 9 years old, walked to the river to gather herbs to wash the family's clothes because there was no soap. Her mother struggled to find food for the next meal.

Mrs. Mandela says she first wore shoes when she went to high school, because her father could not afford them before then. He sent her off to high school with pocket money that was the equivalent of 25 cents and that was expected to last for six months, she said.

"When I went to secondary school, I noticed the difference between the white child and the black child," she said in her soft, determined voice.

"White children were dressed beautifully and they traveled in their parents' cars," she said. "But as black children, we learned to do without the bare necessities of life because our parents could not afford things."

Mrs. Mandela, who has two adult daughters, finds solace and joy in her work in the township near Brandfort that is now her home. She has become a part of, in fact a leader of, the community, to which she plans to return when her modest dwelling and clinic are restored.

It is a poor patch of land in an area that has been devastated by drought. Black farmhands have been laid off by their white employers, leaving them with no homes and no jobs. So they find their way to the township of about 10,000 people, where the only

form of social life is the daily funeral and where hopelessness is a constant, sullen companion. There, they seek help. Mrs. Mandela tries to provide it. Each morning, she makes her rounds, gathering scores of children and taking them to the nursery school she operates in the hall of a Methodist Church. For these children, the soup and the milk they get at the school are the only real meal of the day.

From there, Mrs. Mandela begins her work at the clinic. She sees many infants who fall ill after their poverty-stricken mothers give them a concoction of braised flour and unsterilized water as a formula. There are also many victims of stabbings and other violence, the byproducts of staggering frustration.

After a full day at the clinic, Mrs. Mandela visits the elderly who cannot travel to her medical center. She takes them soup and finds out what is ailing them. At her home, someone is always coming by to seek advice or guidance. Many of the visitors are delinquent children, products of broken homes who look for comfort in Mrs. Mandela's gentleness and strength. They find an abundance of both.

"I find myself strength from the knowledge that each step I take the nation is behind me," she said, as her face gave in to a warm smile. "I find my strength in the knowledge that whatever is done to me is not being done to me as an individual, but it is being done to me as a symbol.

"To me, the more vicious the acts of terror are, the more they confirm a recognition of our position," she said. "That if such anger and sadism are directed at me, then the impact of the struggle of my people is getting somewhere. And we shall get there."