

frontline: the long walk of nelson mandela: interviews: fatima meer

Mandela has done his autobiography. But some time ago, he had reservations about people writing their biographies ...

Nelson wrote me a letter in 1971, in which he expressed very strong reservations about writing an autobiography, and I find his reasons interesting and would like to share them with you. I will read an extract from that letter ... he wrote in March first 1971:

"The trouble of course is that most successful men are prone to some form of vanity. There comes a stage in their lives when they consider permissible to be egoistic and to brag to the public at large about their unique achievements. What a sweet euphemism for self praise the English language has evolved. Autobiography they chose to call it, where the shortcomings of others are frequently exploited to highlight the praiseworthy accomplishments of the author. I am doubtful if I will ever sit down to scribble my background. I have neither the achievements of which I could boast, nor the skills to do it. If I lived on cane spirit every day of my life I still would not have had the courage to attempt it. I sometimes believe that through me creation intended to give the world the example of a mediocre man in the proper sense of the term (remarkable self assessment in 1971). Nothing could tempt me to advertise myself had I been in a position to write an autobiography. Its publication would have been delayed until my bones had been laid and perhaps I might have dropped hints not compatible with my vow. The dead have no worries if the truth, nothing but the whole truth about them emerge. If the image I have helped to maintain through my perpetual silence was ruined, that would be the affair of posterity, not ours."

So I replied to this letter and I said to him that maybe these sentiments may be true about a autobiographies, but it would never be true of his autobiography, and if he had such great objections to writing an autobiography, I'd love to write his biography. I thought this was just chit chat. I never thought that one day I would be writing his biography. I then got a message from him ... through somebody who had been very recently released from Robben Island, saying that he wants me to write this biography. I didn't think that that was possible. Then Winnie arranged for me to visit him, I think it was in 1972 or 1973 or thereabouts. During that visit, he again raised the question of his biography, and he said that I should go into the Transkei and visit the mother of Paramount Chief Sabata ... that she had raised him, and she would be the best source from where I could gain knowledge about his childhood. I still didn't do anything about that biography. I was so far removed from the Transkei, and, moreover, I became banned and restricted and so on. But later in the mid 1980s, I started a school for African

matriculants, and one day I asked a class of bright students, what did they think of Mandela. And their response was, "We don't know him." Then I decided ... we have to write his biography.

At that point, I had his eldest daughter, Makaziwe, staying with me. So with her I went to the Transkei, saw the relevant people, and got this biography going ... The other aspect which contributed richly to this biography was that Winnie and I had been in prison together in 1976, and Winnie, being as cute as she is in prison, knowing all the ins and outs and how to survive, requested the authorities to allow me to coach her in sociology. So she was allowed to come to my cell, where we decided to start on her autobiography. Well, we were then released, and we were both banned, so as banned people we were not allowed to communicate with each other. So that autobiography went into the freezer. But when these young people said to me that they didn't know Mandela, I thought, "Well I'd take the information that Winnie had given me," and with Maki I went to the Transkei, and so I had the material.

You have raised a whole lot of interesting points. First on that letter where he talked about his mediocrity, is this false modesty? I don't know, but I rather think it wasn't false modesty because when Nelson wrote letters, he was in a position where he could open out his heart and be himself. I found that that was the texture that came out of nearly all his letters. There were so many of them from 1970 unto almost the time that he was released.

Don't you think it was a bit of a falsely modest streak in him?

I know that remains with him. He does understate, and he does overdo the compliments and the praises. This is a part of both Mandelas--Winnie does that too. Winnie, of course, is not modest. But with Nelson the modesty is overplayed. I remember once he phoned me after he had been released from prison and he said to me, "Did Joe Slovo get in touch with you?" I said, "No, what did he want to get in touch with me about?" And he said, "When big people talk, I don't ask such questions." So obviously ... a put on.

What do you make of him sending this letter, saying all these things about people who write autobiographies, and then in no time at all, immediately rising to your bait and saying, "Okay, let's go for it." Well, his whole statement was about autobiographies. I had suggested ... a biography. That was a different kettle of fish. It was somebody else who was going to stand aside, evaluate and interpret him. At that point in time, he found that acceptable.

What do you recall of that trip to the Transkei which maybe gave you a sense of just how important his roots in the Transkei were?

No particular incident, but going to ... the encampment of the paramount chief, seeing the hut in which he had been brought up, visiting the school where he had been a student in his early youth

... then talking to his cousin, whose name I forget at the moment. Sitting in that little sitting room, seeing the pictures on the wall, as you find hung in very humble homes, of him as a very young man, family pictures, church pictures and so on. Seeing also the way in which the current paramount chief worked with all the people coming in with their problems, and he presiding over them. It gave me a sense of what the idea of chieftainship, custody, guardianship over the people, and all that meant. I could then picture how as a boy he must have grown up in this environment, sitting, listening to the judgments being passed by Jongintaba, whom he admired tremendously. Not saying anything, but taking in everything. From some of those letters when he was talking about your biography and certain corrections, he's extraordinarily punctilious about the history of his clan.

He was very knowledgeable about the Thembu history, I would say Transkei history, generally. And he disagreed with me on the information I had gleaned about the Thembu from the government blue books. He corrected me and I'm sure his version was the correct one. His version was the oral version, which had been passed on from one generation to the next. Whereas, the blue book version is the official version, which we all know we have to now discount to a large extent.

You mentioned Winnie. I understand that Winnie came to see you before they were married.

That first time that we met Winnie, we didn't think that she was his beloved ... we had a call from Nelson asking us to go to the station and pick up Miss Madikizela. We thought nothing of that request. We thought it must be a relative or somebody whom we have to pick up. At the station we met this absolutely vivacious, beautiful, young woman, and we took her home.

But I must say I was not very impressed with Winnie. I didn't see her as in my league--snobbish or whatever you call it. I handed her over to my niece, who was also staying with us at the time. Winnie spent a week or two weeks--I don't remember exactly how long. But one day I found her perusing through some photographs which she took out of the handbag, and they were the photographs of Nelson in various postures and poses, and the boxing one dominated that portfolio. Then I realized that something was cooking between her and Nelson ...

What was your evaluation at the time?

She was very nice. I mean she was a lovely young person. She was not really politically involved or interested in politics or politically mature. And maybe I misjudged her, because later on when we were working on her autobiography, I realized that as a high school student, she had become involved in non-European unity movement politics, and that her interest in that had continued when she was a

student, a social work student at the Jan Hofmeyr school. So I obviously misjudged her.

You knew Nelson. He was a mighty political leader already by this stage ...

He was, yes. He was one of the political leaders ... there were a number of others. Certainly you didn't place him ahead of Chief Luthuli. Not at that stage. But he was very important.

At the time, if you were to be asked to give an honest evaluation, is this girl suitable for Nelson Mandela ...

Well, I don't know. You see the other factors would have entered into it. Not simply her suitability. The fact that we had known Nelson's first wife and she had stayed with us, Evelyn. The fact that now there was this other woman. There were these conflicting approaches in my mind. I would think they were there in my mind at the time. I know that Moses Kotane made a terrible statement when Nelson introduced him to Winnie at the fort where the treason trial was going on, and he said that "Well, such beauty intimidates a revolutionary, does not suit a revolutionary." Nelson had thought that very amusing, and turned round and Winnie hadn't heard. So he turned round and he'd repeated that to Winnie, to tease her. Winnie had been furious and said to him that she didn't appreciate Nelson's sense of humor on that score. You see, Winnie always wanted to be understood and accepted beyond her physical appearance. She wanted to be accepted for herself. She was a very strong personality all along. She gave the appearance of tremendous shyness, and maybe that left me to misjudge her, when I first met her.

You just said tremendous shyness. But you have also described her as being vivacious.

Ja.

I find that contradictory.

Winnie's eyes, they were so bright that they lit up her whole face.

I am not talking about vivaciousness that is communicated through words or deeds, but the kind of a radiance that is reflected in the face and particularly in her eyes.

Which is compatible ...

Shyness, very shy, yes.

Talk to me about her shyness.

Very compatible with her shyness, because it is so compatible with her femininity. She was intensely feminine. Yet, this woman harbors within her a tremendous assertiveness and strength that comes out later at the appropriate time. When she is being courted by Nelson, she is all seductive and shy and vivacious and beautiful. The assertiveness is not there. It comes later as a wife, when she feels challenged by him on many scores.

Talking of challenging ...

Well, I think that Winnie now literally felt that she was being

driven by Nelson. She makes an interesting comment about this overwhelming, overpowering effect that Nelson had. She felt that you disappeared under Nelson's dominance. She makes that point ... sort of decidedly. And that was what was coming out ... in their marriage, this was part of the problem. She was a social worker. She went back to her social work after she married him. He would have liked her to have just stayed at home. She was a daughter in law because the home did not belong to her ... Nelson's Orlando home, which was presided over by her mother-in-law. She had a very good and a very caring relationship with her mother-in-law, but at the same time, there was this need to assert herself--her own rights, her own personality. It was always there. Always. Even up to now, that is part of Winnie Mandela.

What did Nelson's mother make of Winnie at first?

Aah, I wouldn't know. When I first met Nelson's mother, she was the gracious hostess in his house. Nelson wasn't married and he had separated from Evelyn.

Tell me about Nelson's relationship with his mother in that interim period.

No, I can only say that what I observed. When she prepared the dinner and she laid the table, and she called us to dinner. She didn't join in the conversations, which took place in a part of that front room, that typical Orlando front room which had been equipped as his office with this looming picture of Lenin, with his beard, addressing a large mass. We sat and we talked, and she served us some soft drinks. But she didn't enter into the conversation. Even at table ... it's my recollection she didn't sit and eat with us. She served us. But Nelson's behavior towards her was both full of respect and love.

But a very traditionally African mother son sort of relationship.

Oh yes, I think so. I mean, there wouldn't be all that kissing and embracing that would go on in the more modern young mother son relationship.

You mention this big picture of Lenin.

Ja, there was this looming picture of Lenin addressing a vast crowd, which one couldn't miss. It overpowered the whole room, and it suggested to me his own interest in Leninism, in socialism.

Mandela was himself a keen reader of biographies. Have you any recollections ... whether one can draw inferences about him consciously grooming himself for such leadership.

By the time he had gone into the underground, he had challenged the government, he had called for a national strike, and from the underground he was phoning the press, and giving them information or responding to the government through the press. He had gone overseas, met a lot of African leaders, canvassed a lot of funds for the ANC, had set up the MK (Umkhonto we Sizwe). By that time, he

could not but have been infused with a sense of leadership and destiny.

What biographies did he read?

No, I don't recollect what biographies he read. But I know that he was reading Nehru, he was reading Ghandi, he was reading a number of European writers. But you know his reading was very widespread. The point is that when you are a prisoner on Robben Island, your reading is really restricted to what is available in that library. So he was reading a lot of ancient civilizations, and things like that ...

This question of destiny ... how did Mandela convey this sense of a destiny beyond prison.

Ja. In all his letters, one does not get the impression of a man who sees himself in entombed in the prison destined to die in that prison. There is always this hope that he is going to come out and he is going to take over in the affairs of the world, particularly his South African world. I think there is the expectation that he would be controlling it, that he would be shaping it. There is one passage here, in the letter written to Ismail [Fatima's husband] in January '85, in which he says:

"As I watched the world aging, scenes from my younger days in ----- House, (that's the flat in which they lived together) and Umgeni Road come back so vividly, as if they occurred only the other day, prodding endlessly on text books, traveling to and from Milner Park, indulging in a bit of agitation, now on opposite sides and now together, some thoughts, some fruitless polemics, kept me going throughout those lean years by a litany of dreams and expectations. Some of which have been realized, while the fulfillment of others still elude us to this day. Nevertheless, (this is the pertinent part of this passage) nevertheless few people will deny that the harvest has merely been delayed, but far from destroyed. It is out there, our rich and well-watered fields, even though the actual task of gathering it, has proved far more testing than we ever thought." He is talking about fruitless polemics and opposite sides. What was he talking about there?

Well, he's talking about the fact that when he first met ... in another letter he writes or maybe in the same letter that Ismail was his first friend across ... the color curtain. He doesn't say color line or anything. Color curtain. And that [Ismail] had introduced him to so many people. Now when Ismail met him ... [Mandela] was an Africanist, and he changed. There were other influences, but Ismail's influence was one of the important ones. So obviously they must have argued about things. They must have argued about socialism for one thing, because Ismail was a member of the communist party then, and he wasn't, you see. And they must have worked - Ismail was already a member of the united front where Indians, Africans and coloreds were mobilizing together in Natal this had been done, and

in the Transvaal, with Dadoo leading that movement. So they must have argued about ... these must have been the polemics where sometimes they agreed, sometimes they disagreed.

You were talking about Winnie ... Nelson teaching Winnie to drive a car ...

Yes. She related it to me ... when they were newly married, Winnie didn't know how to drive a car. Nelson decided ... it was time she learnt how to drive a car. And he volunteered to teach her, never realizing that that lesson would bring out all the fire between them, but in a manner which was different from the fire in the bedroom. So there was this conflict. He found her almost unteachable, and it is ... I mean, from that point onwards, this one thing often recurs, when he relates to Winnie ... or he talks of Winnie or about Winnie, or talks about her to her, he often says you are highly undisciplined.

Talking of undisciplined ... he was one to talk of this. During his Black Pimpernel phased he was undisciplined to the point of cavalier and reckless.

It would be sort of double edged. He would be very conscious of the indiscipline and indiscretion of others, but in himself, he would take his chances. I mean, if he didn't take his chances, where would he be today? If he sort of retained himself in a cautious groove or something, now you wouldn't have the Mandela that you have. So Mandela had to have that adventurous streak. Of course, that adventurous streak is reflected in the fact that he goes underground, he becomes referred to as the black pimpernel.

I recall ... he was underground. Now he comes and he stays with us. Here, in this house, in Sydenham. At the house of two friends, both of whom had already been banned, and were in the eye of the authorities. So how safe was that? But he was comfortable. So he comes here. It's comfortable to be with friends ... the very next morning, he is in front of the mirror shaving away, and the phone rings, and I answer it and another friend, wants to know whether Mandela was delivered safely. So I am absolutely flabbergasted. I say to him, "What Mandela are you talking about. There's no Mandela here." Then I say to Nelson, "Oh, so and so phoned and wanted to know whether you were here." So he just flew into a rage, and he said, "Don't they know of such things as telephone tapings." You see what I mean. He was enraged that the other person was reckless, but his own recklessness did not really occur to him. He took chances even when they were living in that house in Liliesleaf. He took chances. He would have the family visit him over weekends. Winnie would take the children over there. They took their chances. They had to live. They had to live dangerously and they did so. This episode when he came and stayed with you. Was this before his

Africa trip ... this must have been shortly before his arrest.  
... This was before his Africa trip, because then he came back and he came to Durban, and he reported on his Africa escapade to Chief Luthuli. Then, of course, he has another what you might call bit of adventuresome or recklessness. We had a lovely party. He wanted to meet all his friends, and he wanted to meet them together, and he wanted to do it as a lovely big party. So at the house of G.R. Naidoo ... also in Sydenham, there was this party, and we all arrived there. All his friends, and we had a lovely, lovely party and there was he was. all dressed up in his guerrilla uniform, looking very splendid. Very broad shouldered, not the man you see today. His face also was rounder. Then he left from that house, and on the way he was arrested, driving his boss's car, who was Cecil Williams.

It was straight from that party.

Straight from that party. He told me about it and I have an excerpt in his book ... He talks about how he saw the police car following, how he thought he would jump and then realized that that would be fatal, they would just shoot him. So he stayed put. He had a diary with him and his gun, and he hid it in the upholstery of the car. He doesn't know what happened to the diary or the gun to this day. There were lots of his comrades in Johannesburg who said don't go down to Natal.

Oh ... No, I didn't know that.

But going to this party with lots of people, the more people you have, the higher the chances of some kind of informer ...

Of course.

It was madness. When he came back from this African trip ...

But don't you think that history sort of ... what's the word I'm looking for?

Absolves him.

Well, justified it. I mean, it was a nice fling, and whatever happened later on, justified that fling. It was all part of his destiny. You can't plan things too much. Take your chances.

Your point is had he been much more cautious, he would not have been the Nelson Mandela we have now.

Yes, that's right ...

When he returned from his Africa trip we have heard he came back ...

A changed man.

Well, not fundamentally but in the sense of more conscious of his African identity and perhaps also more "guerrilla-ish."

Ja, guerrilla-ish, but you see, he had already shed his Africanism.

It was through the shedding of his Africanism that the ANC also broadened its whole world view and its South African perspective.

When he went overseas, I think the strongest support ... which is often recognized as not being African, from Tunisia, from Morocco.



These were the places from which his greatest support came and his training. His training was done in Algeria. You see. So I can't see him coming back more African, but he had by then come back far more confident in himself, and far more confident in the status and role of the ANC because he had managed to garner such a lot of support for it. So this was probably being misread as an Africanism. Certainly, he was very imbued with the sense of Pan Africanism, but it was not in a racial sense at all.

You said at this party he was wearing his guerrilla uniform. We have heard he was told to shave off his beard, but he refused. Did he enjoy that role ...

No, it wasn't that kind of enjoyment. It was almost a kind of a puckish enjoyment, as if, "Well, we've done all these things and we've got away with it. We've beaten them," because in those days, there was a great game also going on between us and the special branch--to beat the special branch. Or to get an opportunity of telling the special branch off. You never lost such opportunities. So there was also an open fight going on between you in the movement and the special branch, so there was a puckishness about it all. Not an arrogance, not an arrogance at all.

Which suggest that that Black Pimpernel label is fairly close to the mark. [He] took great delight in tweaking the ...

That's right. Tweaking the king's beard. That's it ... tweaking whoever, the prime minister in those days ... even before he went, when you had that big conference in 'Maritzburg and there is was decided that he would go underground and make this call for a national strike. It gave him great pleasure. That kind of tweaking, puckish pleasure when he phoned the newspapers and said, "We are going to do this, and we are going to do that, you see."

So there was almost a sense of fun ...

Well, we all had fun in the struggle. We had our bad moments, but there was a lot of fun in the struggle and all that fun is gone now.

Talking of fun going ... the Rivonia Trial.

No, I was never at the Rivonia Trial.

Did you come into contact at all with Winnie during that period.

Telephonically. Very often.

Tell me about what you might recall about her frame of mind.

All I can tell you is that there was another heroic state of mind.

Winnie did not at any point curl up and shed tears that her husband had now been arrested. And she was left in this little house with an aging mother-in-law and two very young children. Now, that thought never occurred to her. She always placed Nelson ahead of anything else. She was refused permission to go to the trial. They said that she was a tremendous distraction, and they gave her permission on condition that she did not, by her dress or by any action, in any way, upset the crowd. So she eventually got this permission and she

came. But then she was not allowed to talk to him for a while, because they were both banned and as banned persons they were not allowed to talk to each other ... but the very presence of Winnie at that trial brought extra attention to that trial. Winnie Mandela, sitting there, became in herself a focus of attention, and she gave the trial an added dimension.

Are you saying that maybe this was the moment that suddenly people became aware of her as a political being?

Well, she had already been banned by now ...

In the public eye ...

In the public image, yes. Yes. I think that it is at that trial that she emerges--this beautiful young woman, totally committed to her husband. This was the image, and it inspired a great deal of respect and love for her. She lived with that image and the press built on that image. Right up to the time that she released herself from Brandfort. She released herself from Brandfort in the hell of the mid- 1980s, when the youth were on an absolute and utter rampage, and when the conflict between the youth and police was at its brutal high. And she entered into that conflict, defied the police, defied her banning order and made that statement [about] the youth were doing it all the time--fighting the government with their matches and their necklaces. And she made that statement and that statement was something that the world just could not identify with. After that, of course, another image is concocted by the media ...

During the Rivonia Trial, at a private level, did she convey fears?

I don't think Winnie believed that he would get the death sentence. She was not overpowered by a sense of losing Nelson. At that point they were very much in love. There was no sense of her living a life without him. I mean, she would live a life without him, but he would be there always, reachable somehow, through letters, visits and so on. The other image of Winnie that came up very strongly at that point was her caring for the very frail mother-in-law. That was the other image. She brought her mother-in-law to the trial, took her to the trial, and there was this very obvious caring and loving relationship with the mother-in-law.

One gets a sense that the two of them were the heroes ... Winnie occupies that same sphere.

More and more after he is imprisoned, she develops this stature and the stature becomes stronger as she goes on. The media helps a great deal to build it, but she herself has enormous charisma. She still has enormous charisma and it is that charisma that carries her through. Even when she is being irrational or unacceptable or whatever, it is this charisma that carries her through. She had this all along. Now, once Nelson is put into prison, the other factor are also, of course, the police. The police also help in this image because they convert her into the victim. The police have now lost

Mandela. They can't pursue him. They can't harass him. But there is his wife. So there is a Mandela. And so you find them hovering around her house, harassing her, and this goes on all the time. So the police also help in developing this Mandela, whether you call her a second Mandela or a joint Mandela but there are two Mandelas

...

Nelson and Winnie are in many ways very alike.

Many ways. I'll tell you what the likeness is. Both of them have this common touch ... at any public gathering or public places, they go and meet and touch and shake hands, regardless of whatever bodyguard or whatever the people. So this closeness. I watched Winnie once when she was deputy minister of Arts and Culture, move office from Cape Town to Pretoria. She hadn't been to the Pretoria office for a long while, and the first person she embraced was the cleaner whom she met at the bottom. When she got to her office, the cleaning ladies were the first people who came up to her, and she embraced them. You see. But I watched this so often in Winnie. And you see the same trend in Nelson. So there is this, which is very common to both of them.

Also very common to both of them, is their ability to live in any circumstances, and appear there to be living as kings and queens. Now when I visited Winnie in Brandfort, in that workers cottage, she was walking around in a kind of an imperious fashion, even in this very humble cottage. When I met Nelson for the first time after years at Victor Verster, there was the same thing. A kind of a big man, a big statesman, sort of an emperor or somebody totally in control, regardless of whether this was just an ordinary house. But he exuded that kind of presence. Both of them have that kind of presence as well.

... Nelson, throughout his escapade in Africa, sought to live in the crummiest of lodgings, even when heads of state would offer him better accommodation, he would say no, he was fine where he was, because in his mind there was always this thought, "Well, we are struggling. People are struggling. I can't be living it up like that." I suppose in his mind he thought that time will come. Now same with Winnie. She lived like a queen in the Orlando house, which was pretty crummy. And I mean now she lives it up ... well, wherever she is living. But it is also near Orlando, in that same area. But she lives it up. She will dress up to the tee, as Nelson. Both of them are great lovers of beautiful clothes. But both of them can also do ... walking barefoot or doing without much finery or anything like that. In other words, they take advantage of the opportunities as they come, provided they deem the opportunities to be justifiably deserved.

... I am interested in how the authorities used Winnie's pain, harassment, the problems her children endured, as a means of getting

at Nelson in jail. In an interview Mandela emphasized the psychological torment of apartheid.

Yes, yes ... There was psychological torment beyond words, that both Mandelas suffered. For Winnie it was the sense of insecurity in her own little house, with the police raiding at will. It became worse for Nelson in that here was his beautiful young wife, and one of the strategies the system used, was to try and to torture him with stories about her infidelity. I don't think Nelson could take that.

It really upset him very much. Sometimes his friends would actually relate this to him, which made it worse. And he had to muster all his faith and all his love and all his confidence in her, in the bleakness of his cell, to overcome this trauma.

There was a specific story, when he was out of the cell in the yard doing some exercise, and he came back to find some newspaper cuttings ... allegedly Winnie was a co-respondent in a divorce case. In a divorce trial. That was the Brian Somane trial. Brian Somane was actually a friend of Nelson's. When Nelson was imprisoned, he had actually turned to Brian Somane, to look after Winnie. The girls were at school in Swaziland. Brian was helpful in that he would transport them to Swaziland. Brian Somane, in the meanwhile, was a police plant, or was police himself. I don't know the details about him. This whole business of co-respondent was fictionalized and nothing ever came of it. I think it was Bizos who defended her in that trial. And they never became divorced. They simulated the whole divorce proceedings.

So Brian Somane in his capacity as a security police informer/plant went along with an elaborate scheme.

With an elaborate scheme. Ja. Both him and his wife must have conspired in this scheme. But I mean for Winnie now to be painted as ... adultery, infidelity ... I mean adultery is okay, but infidelity directly strikes at Nelson's heart. What kept Nelson going over those ... years were Winnie's visits. Every visit that Winnie made to Robben Island, she made it a special event. She dressed up to please Nelson. And the short time that they spent together, even though it was divided by the glass pane, it was a very important event. Now after each visit, Nelson would write her a letter recounting the visit. So he would savor it, you see. It was very special for him. So now to strike at Winnie and say that she was not true to him, I mean, that is worse than slashing his wrists or stabbing back or depriving him of food or whatever.

Mandela has said since that this was his only regret. What is your sense of his dilemma of the choice between family and the cause.

... What he missed and what was painful to him, were the children. He always felt that they were his responsibility, and he had somehow let them down. He also had a need to have the children growing up with him, because that kept him in touch with the new generation. He

expresses this in this passage, in a letter he wrote to me in March, 1971. He says:

"My son Gatho, one of my best pals, visits me twice yearly. We seem to be in agreement on most issues ... but now and again he clears the cobwebs from my mind, by taking a different view on matters which I have come to regard as axiom. At times, I have suspected that he sees in me something of a useful relic from past, and is sort of souvenir to remind him of the days when he regarded me as knowing everything under the sun when he gulped down everything I told him. His independence of mind, fresh ideas, have made my conversations with him enjoyable, and this is why I believed it would get, if I spoke to the children (this is a reference to my children) I realize now why I prefer Rashid and sisters to you. I have lived with my generation all these years, the generation that is inclined to be conservative, to lean backwards most of the time. I am keen to know a bit more about the new ideas stirring among the modern youth, but news about the children tend to remind me of problems about which I prefer never to think.... "

... He said that he was most concerned about the children. Did he have a sense that Winnie could take care of herself.

He felt that Winnie could take care of herself. He was quite devastated when she was put into prison, and it was at that point that he wrote to me a letter also, expressing his very deep concern about the children.

On the release day ...

I was in London ...

When you watched this release ... How did you feel?.

... oh it was a tremendous moment you know. Seeing them coming out hand in hand, so happy with each other. And Nelson just took that huge crowd from whom he had been isolated, for what was it, [27] years with aplomb. I remember that I then appeared the next day on another British TV program, and they had a psychiatrist there, and the psychiatrist was holding forth, very expansively, about how the truth would suddenly strike Nelson, and he would be totally collapsed by it. They asked me, and I said "No, I don't think so. I think he is going to take that in his stride. I don't think there is going to be ... it's not a false euphoria. This isn't a euphoria at all. It is a real rejoicing." I said I didn't think that what the psychiatrist said was going to happen, would happen.

When the two came out, Nelson and Winnie, there had been tensions. In what ways had their relationship changed in that 27-year interim.

Look, whatever the tensions were, they were more in the nature of conflicts that appear in any marriage, appear and disappear, and are mended. At the point, when he was released, there was no tension between them. There was no conflict between them. They were as one and very happy to be together. There are images of Winnie looking

like a very shy bride, and talking about how she doesn't know whether she should bring his slippers to his bedside, or his clothes to him, you know. Dutiful wife kind of image emerges.

On the other hand you were telling us how he overpowers her. She had become this very independent woman in her own right. Suddenly she had this husband ...

No ... we are now going back and we are talking about the young Winnie and the young Nelson, and their brief period together. It would be incorrect to say that this was her impression that she should be careful that if she didn't watch it, she would be totally overpowered by him. She asserted herself. And I think that Nelson, to a very large extent, respected this self assertion. I don't think he snuffed it.

How did she assert herself?

Well, you were referring to the motor car incident. He was teaching her to drive, and she had her own mind as to how he should be teaching her. Not this way, but another way.

Why did things fall apart between them?

Things fell apart between them because in one respect Nelson was now the supreme negotiator. He also felt that during that period, he should observe law and order of the apartheid state, because things were about to change. That made sense. Winnie still had that rebellious streak in her, and there were a lot of people who were like her, who didn't quite identify with the negotiation process that was going on. So there was a cleavage within the country. Nelson represented the negotiating part, she represented a continuation of the rebellious part. There were many people who felt that, "Well, we won. Now why must we negotiate? We must now take over." Do you see? Winnie was caught in between these two strains in dealing with the new situation.

... Then, of course, the media played up. The media had begun to monsterize her. That monsterization was a very key factor in the whole rupture in that relationship. That monsterization, of course, had occurred while Nelson was still in prison. But it reached a position where it wasn't just the media that was monsterizing her. There were elements within the movement that was agreeing with this monsterization. And Nelson was pulled into this situation and he was put in a position where he had to choose between his wife and the welfare and the future strength of the African National Congress. This, I am saying, is my impression.

Did he consult with you before the separation announcement?

Both of them did. I am not going to go into that.

Did she expect this to happen?

It happened gradually. It didn't happen all of a sudden. He moved out of the house. She pleaded with him to return ... he didn't and then you had the break. It took some time.

Was she angry ... how would one characterize her feelings?

Oh, there was a lot of pain because even after he made that statement he was concerned about her and her safety and so on and so forth. She was angry. She was very angry.