

Maisels and his ‘most famous client’



It was to my late father, IA (Isie) Maisels QC that Mandela turned to when he was released from detention in February 1990. Mandela wanted to reach out to the Jewish community because he was concerned that the African National Congress’s (ANC’s) approaches to the Palestinian Liberation Organisation might have offended the Jewish community.

by HELEN MAISELS TRISK | Jul 16, 2020

My father’s response was simple. “This was not the case at all,” he said. It was understandable that a movement fighting for democracy in its own country would go where support was offered. This was Isie’s response to Mandela on the telephone,

and he then arranged a meeting for Mandela with the leadership of the Jewish community. That meeting led to a relationship of mutual co-operation and respect. After it - and unquestionably it was historic - the *Washington Post* published an interview with Isie in which he told the newspaper, “Mr Mandela assured those present that neither he nor the ANC had sought to cause offense to the Jewish people and [he asserted] his own, and the ANC’s unswerving opposition to antisemitism and their appreciation of the efforts of many Jewish people in the common effort to bring justice and peace to all peoples of South Africa.”

Isie’s relationship with Mandela dated back to the mid-fifties, when Isie was leader of the defence team in the celebrated Treason Trial (1956-1961). Mandela was one of 156 accused in the trial, and Isie quipped, “He was my most famous client.” All of the accused in the Treason Trial were acquitted of high treason.

As a very young child, I remember Mandela coming to our house at 52 Young Avenue, Houghton. He came regularly with Albert Luthuli, ZK Matthews, Walter Sisulu, and others of the ANC leadership to consult Isie, often over lunch at home. My father spoke of them all with great admiration. These were formidable men who would lead the country one day, he said.

Growing up as the youngest of four siblings, we were all exposed first-hand then and for many years to come to the iniquities of the apartheid regime that these outstanding leaders and the people that they led had to endure.

This awareness coupled with both my parents' active involvement in the Jewish community was a unique privilege.

Mandela had a history of dealings with Jewish lawyers, but none of them was as actively engaged in the Jewish community as my father was. Isie, at the same time as running not only this trial but an extraordinarily busy practice as the pre-eminent advocate of his day, still managed to become the leader of every single major Jewish organisation in South Africa. In later years, he became the first South African to be appointed a governor of the Jewish Agency.

Mandela knew of Isie's commitment, both to the South African Jewish community - something he shared with my late mother, Muriel - and to broader Zionist ideals, hence his telephone call to Isie in February 1990.

Our family treasures a Rosh Hashanah card signed by Mandela (on behalf of the Treason Trial accused) in 1960. It goes alongside two other unique pieces of memorabilia: a 1961 letter signed by all the Treason Trial accused when they heard that Isie had accepted an appointment to Federation (of Rhodesia) Bench, a reproduction of which hangs in the lobby of Maisels Chambers in Sandton, and while in Pollsmoor Prison, Mandela sent Isie an 80th birthday card saying, "Take it Easy Isie!"

At a dinner for Mandela that took place at my parents' house in early 1994, at which my husband and I were present, Isie, at Mandela's request, introduced him to the then Israeli Ambassador Alon Liel and his wife.

It was on that night that Isie, then 88 years old and about ten years after he left active Jewish leadership but still influential, arranged for the establishment of diplomatic relations between Botswana and Israel.

It was a fascinating evening, and I asked Mandela how he knew that one day he and the ANC would triumph. His answer was simple, "History taught me that!"

Mandela exuded an extraordinary aura. In his presence, you knew that you were in the company of a great leader. Much like my late father, he was an austere man, but

kind and courteous with a dry sense of humour and a twinkle in his eye.

Isie died in December 1994 aged 89. Mandela came to prayers at my parents' house, where my husband gave him one of Isie's yarmulkes. He could not attend the funeral (Sisulu attended in his place), and sent apologies to my mother.

Some years later, Mandela spoke about that yarmulke.

Our family continued to have contact with Mandela through a book launch of the late Rabbi Cyril Harris's biography, at which Mandela told our son, Simon, then aged five years old that he wanted to tell him all about his famous grandfather.

The naming ceremony of the advocate's chambers in March 2002 to Maisels Chambers was performed by Mandela who said of Isie in his speech to the large assembled crowd of dignitaries, judges, advocates, and attorneys, "He defended us at considerable cost to himself. He was a giant of the legal profession,

respected and admired as a great lawyer. Let us honour him for his leadership and courage and generosity of spirit ... only someone of the calibre of Isie Maisels could help us go forward. He served justice with distinction. His name will always be remembered by all our people.”

• *Helen Maisels Trisk is the daughter of Isie Maisels, who headed up the defence team during the 1956-1961 Treason Trial. She is a consultant and the vice president of WIZO South Africa.*

Reference:

Trisk. H. M. (2020). [Maisels and his 'most famous client'](https://www.sajr.co.za/news-and-articles/2020/07/16/maisels-and-his-most-famous-client), from the *South African Jewish Report*, 16 July 2020 (online). Available at <https://www.sajr.co.za/news-and-articles/2020/07/16/maisels-and-his-most-famous-client> . Accessed on 6 November 2020