

The Man Nobody Knows

By **ALAN COWELL**

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For all his influence, Nelson Mandela is all but invisible. Since August 1962, the man most black South Africans look up to as their leader has been out of view — imprisoned for leading the banned African National Congress in its armed resistance to the apartheid system. During his confinement, Mandela's fame has grown into legend, assuming an almost mythical importance in the litanies of the nation's defiance. Yet he is visited regularly only by his family, and he remains unseen by his millions of supporters.

Mandela was born in 1918, the eldest son of a chief in what is now the nominally independent homeland called Transkei. Trained as a lawyer, he joined the African National Congress in 1944, and was a leader of the congress's nonviolent campaigns against apartheid during the 1950's.

After police killed 69 unarmed black protestors at Sharpeville in 1960, Mandela and other congress leaders increasingly abandoned their hopes for peaceful change, and in 1961 formed the congress's military wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe, the Spear of the Nation. "The choice is not ours," a congress pamphlet declared at the time, "it has been made by the Nationalist government which has rejected every peaceable demand by the people for rights and freedom."

Mandela was arrested in 1962 after helping to direct the first months of Umkhonto we Sizwe's sabotage campaign. His comrades — black nationalists and white Communists — were captured the following year. When their trial ended, Mandela was jailed for life.

At the trial, Mandela spoke of "the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities."

"It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve," he declared. "But if need be, an ideal for which I am prepared to die."

Since then, Mandela's incarceration has honed the message. No stigma of compromise or doubt is attached to his name. And his fame has spread not only throughout Africa, but also to countries such as England, where a song entitled "Free Nelson Mandela" recently reached the top-10 on rock-music charts.

In the absence of Mandela and his colleagues, the African National Congress has continued its campaign of armed resistance, directing guerrilla operations from its exile

headquarters in Zambia.

Inside South Africa it is illegal to do or say anything that might aid the congress, which South African authorities contend is controlled by its Communist members and by the Soviet Union. Yet, judging from numerous conversations with young and militant blacks, the congress remains the principal custodian of black yearnings for equality.

There are many in South Africa who say the nation's anguish will not end unless the white regime negotiates with Mandela and the congress. But the prospects of such an encounter seem remote.

Last January, State President P. W. Botha offered to release Mandela if he renounced violence — an offer Mandela could not accept without dividing his own organization and seeming to abandon his followers. The authorities' motives were never spelled out, but they may have included a desire to seem reasonable in the eyes of the Reagan Administration and thus to justify Washington's policy of "constructive engagement." They may, too, have reflected a desire to neutralize Mandela's support. Although there has been no suggestion that Mandela is infirm, a further consideration may have been to arrange events so that he does not die in prison — an event that would cause massive black anger, whatever the circumstances of death.

Mandela declined his own freedom, presenting the authorities with counterdemands for the legalization of his organization and the freeing of his fellow prisoners. His 23-year-old daughter, Zinzi, made his rejection known at a rally in Soweto on Feb. 10.

"My father says: 'I cannot and will not give any undertaking at a time when I, and you the people, are not free,' " she declared. " 'Your freedom and mine cannot be separated.' "