

# OBITUARY

MAMA WINNIE  
MADIKIZELA-MANDELA



**LIMPOPO**  
**PROVINCE**



*In memory of our beloved*

**MAMA WINNIE NOMZAMO MADIKIZELA MANDELA**

**26 September 1936 - 02 April 2018**



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## EARLY YEARS

Nomzamo Winifred Zanyiwe Madikizela was born in the village of Mbongweni, Bizana, in the then Transkei on 26 September 1936. She was the fifth of nine children. Her father, Columbus, was a local history teacher, who was later to be appointed Minister of Forestry and Agriculture in Kaizer Matanzima's Transkei homeland. Her mother, Nomathamsanqa Mzaidume (Gertrude), was a science teacher.

She received her primary education in Bizana where she did her Junior Certificate (Standard 8 / Grade 10) at Mfundisweni Secondary School and later completed her matric at Shawbury High School. While attending school, Winnie would help her father to labour on the farm.

It was at Shawsbury, a Methodist Mission School at Qumbu, where Winnie distinguished herself as a person with exceptional leadership qualities. It was also there, under the tutelage of teachers who were all Fort Hare graduates, that she became more politicised. Due to financial constraints, Winnie's sister, Nancy, dropped out of school and worked casual jobs to enable Winnie to continue with her education.

## MOVE TO JOHANNESBURG

In 1953, Winnie was admitted to the Jan Hofmeyr School of Social Work in Johannesburg, where Nelson Mandela was patron. It was in Johannesburg that she experienced the harsh realities of apartheid on a daily basis. It was also in Johannesburg where she discovered her love for fashion, dancing and the city.

She completed her degree in Social Work in 1955, finishing at the top of her class, and was offered a scholarship to study in the USA. However, soon after receiving the scholarship offer, she was offered the position of medical social worker at the Baragwanath Hospital in Johannesburg, making her the first qualified, black member of staff to fill that post. She declined the USA scholarship offer, and decided to pursue her dream of becoming a social worker in South Africa. In the midst of her harassment by the apartheid government in the late 1980s, she was able to complete a Bachelor of Arts degree majoring in Political Science and International Relations, at the University of the Witwatersrand.

Whilst working at the hospital, Winnie's interest in national politics continued to grow. She moved into one of the hostels connected to the hospital and found that she was sharing a dormitory with Adelaide Tsukudu, the future wife of former African National Congress (ANC) president, Oliver Tambo. Indeed, Adelaide would confide in Winnie while they were in bed at night about the brilliant lawyer she would soon marry, and his legal partner, Nelson Mandela. It also transpired that Tambo happened to be from Bizana, like Winnie, making them members of the same extended family.

It is worth reiterating that Winnie was already politically interested and involved in activism long before she met her future husband. She was particularly affected by the research she had carried out in Alexandra Township as a social worker to establish the rate of infant mortality, which stood at 10 deaths for every 1,000 births.

During her time at Baragwanath, Winnie's popularity began to grow, with stories and photographs about her appearing in newspapers.

## **LIFE WITH NELSON MANDELA**

Winnie was twenty-two when she met Nelson Mandela, and he was sixteen years her senior. He was already a well-known anti-apartheid activist and one of the key defendants in the Treason Trial, which had commenced in 1956.

Despite government restrictions on the movements of treason trialists, Winnie and Nelson got married on 14 June 1958 in Bizana. The wedding caught national interest and was reported in publications such as Drum Magazine and the Golden City Post.

Their marriage was often put to a test by the vicious apartheid state. The Mandela residence was a site of frequent police raids. Added to the turbulence of their early married life, in July, Winnie found out she was pregnant with her first child.

In October 1958, Winnie took part in a mass action which mobilised women to protest against the Apartheid government's infamous pass laws. The Johannesburg protest was organised by the president of the ANC Women's League, Lilian Ngoyi and Albertina Sisulu, amongst others. Winnie travelled with Albertina from Phefeni station in Soweto to the city centre where the protest was taking place. About 1 000 women were arrested during this protest.

The arrested women took a decision not to apply for bail immediately, but to rather spend two weeks in prison as a sign of further protest. During these weeks, the pregnant Winnie saw first-hand the squalid conditions of South African prisons, and her commitment to the struggle only intensified. Eventually, Nelson and Oliver Tambo were called to arrange their bail, and the ANC raised money to pay the convicted women's fines.

It was an event which took Winnie out of her husband's shadow in the eyes of the public, but also one which alerted national security to her potency as a voice of political dissent - independent of her famous husband. Shortly afterwards, she was sacked from her post at Baragwanath hospital. Following the trauma of incarceration, on February 4 1959, Winnie gave birth to a daughter she named Zenani.

On March 30 1961, nine days after the police murdered sixty-nine people during an anti-pass demonstration in Sharpeville, a police raid on the Mandela home saw Nelson arrested and Winnie left by herself, in what would become her overarching experience of marriage.

## **WINNIE'S CONFIDANTES AND SOURCES OF INSPIRATION**

Winnie had a few people who inspired her: Lillian Ngoyi, who, along with Helen Joseph, were the only two women accused in the Treason Trial; Albertina Sisulu; Florence Matomela; Frances Baard; Kate Molale; Ruth Mompati; Hilda Bernstein (who was the first Communist Party member to serve on the Johannesburg Council in the 1940s); and Ruth First. These were people Winnie considered as both trusted confidantes and sources of inspiration.

This is significant, because as Winnie's political activism intensified, the possibility increased of her inner circle becoming infiltrated by people who would attempt to gain her trust as allies, only to reveal themselves later as informers.

Political differences occurred within the family when the Apartheid government introduced the Bantu Authorities Act in 1951. Her father, Columbus, sided unequivocally with Kaizer Matanzima and was subsequently rewarded with a cabinet position in the Transkei homeland looking after agriculture. For Winnie, this was a huge betrayal which was tantamount to siding with the Apartheid government. Winnie's other relatives joined the resistance, thus her family was split into two.

## **TREASON TRIAL**

On 29 March 1961, the verdict from the Treason Trial, delivered by Justice Rumpff, declared all of the accused 'not guilty.' This event followed quickly after another, equally joyful happening, which was the birth of her second daughter, Zindziswe on 23 December 1960. She was named after the daughter of Samuel Mqhayi, the famous Xhosa poet. However, Winnie's joy at having a second child and seeing her husband's name cleared was immediately tampered by the news that the ANC executive required him to go into hiding. Nelson had not discussed this with his wife, simply taking the support of his family for granted. Such was life of an activist couple engaged in a revolutionary struggle. They would often meet clandestinely in highly covert places; often with Nelson in disguise. Their most intimate and prolonged encounters occurred at the Lilliesleaf farm in Rivonia.

On Sunday 5 August 1961, the police finally apprehended Nelson while he was driving from Durban to Johannesburg. It was to be the beginning of his 27 year incarceration.

With Nelson in jail and in virtual isolation for the first four months of his detention, the police, sensing Winnie's potential to carry the cause, slapped her with a banning order on 28 December 1962. This restricted her movements to the magisterial district of Johannesburg; prohibited her from entering any educational premises and barred her from attending or addressing any meetings or gatherings where more than two people were present. Moreover, the banning order also stipulated that media outlets were no longer permitted to quote anything she said, effectively gagging her voice too.

This was also a time of increased police harrassment and intimidation, with regular aggressive raids occurring on her house.

At the end of May 1963, Mandela was transferred without warning to Robben Island. In June of that year she was first permitted to visit her husband in jail.

Once there the couple were allowed to meet for just 30 minutes, separated by dual wire mesh, no seats, and a security detail in easy listening distance. They were not permitted to speak to one another in Xhosa; only English or Afrikaans.

## **RIVONIA TRIAL**

Nelson was unexpectedly moved from Robben Island back to Pretoria barely a month after his initial transfer. The reason for the move soon became clear; however, as his close colleagues within the ANC had been arrested in a swoop on Lilliesleaf Farm. Nelson was to be tried with them in the infamous Rivonia Trial, in which he and his co-accused escaped the death penalty, but were handed life imprisonment on Robben Island.

With her husband in jail, the authorities increased the pressure to make Winnie's life as difficult as possible, with her children Zenani and Zindziswa, particularly targeted. On numerous occasions, Winnie enrolled them into schools, only for the security police to find out and have them expelled by the schools. This was in addition to the continued raids on her house; her banning order and frequent last minute refusals to visit her husband in jail.

## **BANNING ORDERS AND JAIL**

In 1965, a new and more severe banning order was handed to Winnie. Previously her banning order had limited her movements from 'dusk to dawn' but her new banning order barred her from moving anywhere other than her neighbourhood of Orlando West. This had several ramifications, including the necessity for her to give up her job as a social worker. Subsequently, she was hounded out of job after job with the police approaching anyone bold enough to give her employment and insist that by some mechanism they fire her. Due to her continued struggles and that of finding her daughters a school, Winnie eventually sent them away to Swaziland and with the help of Lady Birley (wife of Sir Robert Birley, an ex-headmaster of Eton College) and Helen Joseph, she was able to enrol them at Waterford Kamhlaba private school.

Meanwhile in South Africa, Winnie's activism continued unabated. From her highly restricted position, she organised assistance for political prisoners. On the night of 12 May 1969, Winnie woke up to the familiar sounds of a police raid. Her children were home for the school holidays. After turning the house upside down, they tore Winnie away from her daughters and bundled her into a police van. She had just fallen foul of Prime Minister John Vorster's 1967 Terrorism Act, No 83, which allowed the arrest of anyone perceived to be endangering the maintenance of law and order. It stipulated that anyone could be arrested without warrant, detained for an indefinite period of time, interrogated and kept in solitary confinement without access to a lawyer or a relative.

Winnie was kept in solitary confinement for seventeen months. For the first 200 days, she had no formal contact with another human being except her interrogators. During her interrogation, Winnie was kept awake for five days and five nights without respite in an attempt to break her will.

On 1 December 1969, Winnie's trial finally began. She and her co-accused were represented by Joel Carlson, an old friend of Winnie and Nelson's, and a well-respected human rights

lawyer. After many complications, Winnie's release was finally secured. She had spent a total of seventeen months in prison with thirteen of those in solitary confinement, and nothing in the way of a conviction by the end of it.

Winnie's first banning order expired while she was in jail. However, almost immediately upon being released she was served with another, lasting five years. This forbade her from leaving the house between 6pm and 6am and made it virtually impossible to see her husband on Robben Island. Before the second banning order took effect, however, Winnie travelled to the Transkei to see her father. Since their last meeting, Columbus had both aged visibly and become disillusioned with the state of the so-called 'independent' homeland. It had become clear to him that the homeland system was a strategy to prevent black South Africans from attaining full freedom and political rights in the country.

Despite the banning order, Winnie managed to visit Nelson again in prison. However, a half-hour meeting through glass, observed and recorded by security police and subject to extreme self-censoring was a distinctly unsatisfactory experience.

Meanwhile, Winnie's life outside of jail took an almost opposite turn to her husband's. While Nelson and his ANC cadres on Robben Island accommodated themselves to being politically inert and concentrated their efforts on intellectual pursuits, Winnie found herself at the coalface of the struggle. The police raids were relentless, with intrusions into her home sometimes happening up to four times a day. Her house was routinely burgled, vandalised and even bombed.

During this time, with her husband in jail and the ANC in exile, Winnie became an inspiration and a symbol of resistance for South Africa's disenfranchised youth. To the Apartheid regime, she became a dangerous opponent in her own right, as opposed to merely being the wife of Nelson Mandela.

Up until the 1970s, the years of constant police harassment, jail time and intimidation had done absolutely nothing to quash Winnie's revolutionary spirit. Indeed, her conviction was strengthened.

In May 1973, Winnie was arrested again, this time for meeting with another banned person, her good friend and photographer for Drum magazine, Peter Magubane. She was handed a twelve month sentence to be served at Kroonstad's women's prison. She was released after six months. She was imprisoned in Kroonstad along with her friend Dorothy Nyembe until September 1975. Her banning order expired in September 1975 and to her great surprise, was not immediately renewed.

## **SOWETO UPRISING AND ANOTHER BANNING ORDER**

By the mid-1970s, unrest amongst the South African youth had become increasingly volatile. The struggle for liberation in South Africa was increasingly being taken up by the country's youth and Winnie found herself settling into a new role as the symbolic mother to this burgeoning student movement. In May 1976, just a few weeks before the student uprising in Soweto, Winnie along with Dr Nthatho Motlana, helped to establish the Soweto Parents' Association. In the weeks that followed the violence of June 16, Winnie and Dr Motlana had their hands full attending to youth and parents who had been arrested, injured or killed in the riots.

For the state, a simple scapegoat had to be found for the Soweto uprisings and Winnie fit the bill. Once again she was detained. The police held her in custody for five months, eventually releasing her in December 1976 without charge. In January 1977, she was served with a fresh five year banning order.

## **BRANDFORT: BANISHMENT**

In the early hours of the morning of May 15, a police contingent arrived at her doorstep to take her away to the police station. The police were instigating Winnie's domestic exile to a dusty town in the middle of the Free State, a place that would keep her for the next eight years of her life.

Brandfort lies around 400 kilometres South West of Johannesburg and 50 kilometres North of Bloemfontein. Prior to her arrival in Phathakahle township in Brandfort, the Department of Bantu Affairs had informed locals that a dangerous female – indeed, a terrorist – would be moving there and that they should avoid contact with her at all costs.

In the end, Winnie's banishment to Brandfort backfired. Instead of being demoralised by her isolation and the endemic racism of local shop-owners, Winnie continued much as before, flouting racist Apartheid legislation and dumbfounding conservatives with her audacity not to be cowed by unjust segregationist laws. Part of what kept Winnie motivated was her exceptional ability not to become demoralised and her inexhaustible tenacity to keep busy.

While she was living out her banishment, she established a local gardening collective; a soup kitchen; a mobile health unit; a day care centre; an organisation for orphans and juvenile delinquents and a sewing club. While in Brandfort, Winnie was very close to the Moahlodi's family and Bra Custa Kitsa and the Free State leadership.

After spending eight years in Brandfort, Winnie's banishment finally came to an end in 1986. She was at last free to return home to her house at 81 15, Vilakazi Street, Orlando West.

## **WINNIE RETURNSTO JOHANNESBURG**

When Winnie returned to Johannesburg, the place she had come to identify as home, in 1986, she found it was a changed and more dangerous place than the one she had left behind. In 1985, Oliver Tambo, from his position in exile, had made a call to all South Africans to “make the country ungovernable” and people had heeded his call in droves. The youth were running riot and the government's imposition of a series of states of emergency had done nothing to quell the resistance.

Nonetheless, shortly after returning home, Winnie again set to doing what she had always done and looked for ways to help those she saw as vulnerable. To this end, Winnie established a place for disenfranchised youth to feel at home, organise, and socialise. This informal grouping of youngsters became known as the Mandela United Football Club (MUFC). There already existed in Soweto a Sisulu Football Club.

During the long years that Nelson had been in jail, Winnie was forced to become a soldier on the ground. During her decades of police intimidation and harassment; her emotional

brutalisation (having had her family torn apart and her closest friends betray her); and her physical imprisonment and banishment, Winnie had developed combative defences against a world that was unfailingly hostile.

On April 13 in Munsieville, Winnie gave a speech that would become immediately infamous. Addressing a crowd of listeners, she declared that “together, hand in hand, with our boxes of matches and our necklaces we shall liberate this country.” This speech was immediately used by her detractors to portray her as endorsing violence generally, and the practice of necklacing, in particular.

As events in South Africa began to reach fever pitch in the late 1980s, with international calls for Nelson Mandela's release resulting in massive pressure on the Apartheid government, life on the ground was more precarious and dangerous than ever.

In Soweto the MUFC were quickly gaining a reputation for operating with impunity as a kind of vigilante mafia under the tutelage of their coach, Jerry Richardson, who later revealed himself to have been a police informer during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC).

On 28 July 1998, the MUFC became embroiled in a conflict with pupils from Daliwonga High School and as a consequence, Winnie and Nelson's beloved house in Orlando West was set on fire and burnt to the ground. Winnie relocated to Diepkloof and the MUFC moved with her. Shortly after the move, grim stories emerged about kidnappings, assaults and torture by members of the MUFC. One of the stories of kidnapping and death involved a young boy called Stompie Seipei. The regime tried in vain to place responsibility and culpability for Stompie's murder at the door of Winnie Mandela. Winnie was cleared by the courts of the murder of Stompie.

## **FREE NELSON**

On February 2 1990, FW De Klerk used the opening of parliament to unban the ANC along with 31 other organisations. Political prisoners who had not committed violent crimes were to be released and executions of prisoners on death row were to cease. Nelson Mandela was released from jail on 11 February 1990. The couple were finally reunited after almost 30 years of separation.

Both being titans of the liberation struggle, Winnie and Nelson's schedule after his release was extremely hectic. Winnie was appointed the ANC's head of Social Welfare in September.

On April 13 1992, Nelson Mandela called a media conference to announce that he was separating from Winnie. The divorce was finalised in March 1996.

## **TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION (TRC)**

Winnie appeared before the TRC in 1997, regarding assaults and atrocities carried out by the MUFC. At the end of Winnie's own testimony, the Chairperson of the TRC, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, implored her to admit that whatever her intentions might have been in Soweto in the late 1980s, that “things went wrong.”

Winnie responded that indeed “things went horribly wrong” and she apologised to the families of Stompie Seipei and Dr Abu-Baker Asvat.

## **PUBLIC REPRESENTATIVE**

Following the attainment of democracy in 1994, Madikizela-Mandela became a Member of Parliament and Deputy Minister of Arts and Culture. Upon leaving Cabinet and Parliament, she dedicated her energy on working with different communities, especially people affected by HIV and AIDS, and poverty.

## **80<sup>TH</sup> BIRTHDAY**

On 15 September 2016, in a pre-birthday celebration, Winnie celebrated her 80 birthday at the Mount Nelson Hotel in Cape Town. The event was attended by family, friends and politicians from across the political spectrum, including President, Julius Malema, and Patricia de Lille.

## **CONCLUSION**

The life of Madikizela-Mandela encompasses commitment to community upliftment, opposition to apartheid and determination to build a non-racist, non-sexist and democratic South Africa. Her courage and leadership abilities have triumphed over years of political harassment, personal pain and a wave of media controversy.

In 2016, she was awarded Order of Luthuli in Silver for “her excellent contribution to the fight for the liberation of the people of South Africa. She bravely withstood constant harassment by the apartheid police and challenged their brutality at every turn”.

She passed away on 2 April 2018.

Winnie Madikizela-Mandela is a woman of substance, a mother of the nation and undisputed heroine of the Struggle.

**END**



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**FRANS MOHLALA HOUSE**



**ANCLimpopo**

**Source:** South African History On-line ([www.sahistory.org.za](http://www.sahistory.org.za)) and  
South African government website ([www.gov.za](http://www.gov.za))