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ON

Winnie Mandela

Ruth Weiss

She has been dubbed the 'African Queen' and the 'Mother of the Nation'. Nomzamo Winifred Mandela, wife of the South African leader Nelson Mandela, imprisoned for life for his work for the African National Congress.

The trouble is that superlatives come easily when writing about Winnie, as she is usually referred to. Serene, full of guts, regal, beautiful, powerful, symbol of the struggle – all of these and more are words found in anything written about her, except of course in police records. Here the words read 'terrorist, troublemaker' and, the worst of all epithets, 'Communist'.

It is hard to avoid such adulation. In August, a fire destroyed the small shack to which she had been banished in 1977, situated in a so-called 'location' in Brandfort, an insignificant small town in the desolate Orange Free State. Winnie Mandela moved back to Orlando, her home in Soweto, from which she had been forcibly removed. In November, the Brandfort house rebuilt, she was supposed to return. She refused. Defying a government order, she visited Cape Town to see her husband and returned once more to her Soweto home, only to be arrested again. Within eight days she was arrested three times, made a court appearance on charges of breaking her banning order: all to the embarrassment of the police, the state and the delight of the media.

Winnie Mandela turned from queen to harridan in the face of the police harassment. She screamed abuse, forced them to drag her out of her home, as she clutched at doors, frames, anything that would give her support.

In December, after her first refusal to return to Brandfort, her

banning order was suddenly changed. She was no longer under ban, she could live anywhere she chose: except Soweto.

Only in South Africa, surely, is it an offence to want to go home. Home, where she lived so briefly with the husband whom she married in 1958, when she was 24, he 40 years old and she his second wife. She describes herself as the 'most unmarried married woman' and that is what she is, despite her two daughters by Nelson, her grandchildren from her eldest child, married to a prince of the royal house of the Swazis.

Nomzamo Madikizela – she hates 'Winnie', considering it like so many other things an imposition by the white aggressor to have to carry a European name, but accepts it, because that's what she has been called for so long and so affectionately by millions – was born in the Transkei in 1934. She came to Johannesburg, because her father, a respected teacher in her small home town, had arranged for her to study social work, an unheard of adventure for black women of her time. She trained at Baragwanath Hospital, today the largest hospital in Africa south of the Sahara and quite naturally became involved in African National Congress activities.

One day she took a call. Nelson Mandela, already a powerful figure of whom she and thousands others stood in awe, said he needed help. Congress was short of funds. Could she assist with fund raising?

'It was our first contact. We received hundreds of calls every day and by chance I was on the phone . . . naturally I agreed and that's how we met'. Their courtship, like their marriage, was overshadowed by political events. Mandela could not step outside his or any other house without



being accosted, greeted, hailed. At the time of their meeting and marriage, he was on trial with others for high treason.

Winnie Mandela said: 'I have never really lived with him . . . when we married, he was involved in the treason trial . . . he was banned and we had to get permission to get married. That was the only time when I lived with him continuously, during those six days which he was granted for our wedding. Then he had to travel to Pretoria every day, where the trial took place. He belonged to the defence group, he worked until late at night, came back at dawn and in the morning left again for ANC meetings. I only saw him when he came home to change.

When Mandela and the other accused were found not guilty in 1961, he returned home, triumphant: but it was the end of the little time together they had enjoyed. For on the day of the end of the historic trial, Nelson Mandela went underground. During this time he made speeches, wrote open letters to the government, secretly left the country – and in between found time for unheralded but moving meetings with his wife. Someone would come to the door and take her by car to an unknown destination, frequently changing vehicles and drivers, until she ended up in a house where her husband was waiting. The lifeline was run by – to her still today unknown – white friends.

Finally Mandela was captured, given away by an informer. His subsequent trials and life imprisonment are history. Winnie Mandela could easily have slipped into the role of 'Mandela's relic'.

Instead, she became a leader in her own right. She might have lived in the shadow of the great man during their brief time together, but she emerged to become not only totally responsible for their children but a powerful leader, outspoken and fearless.

The chronicle of harassment alone proves this. First arrested in 1958 when she joined the ANC Defiance Campaign against the pass laws, Winnie Mandela has never known life without police interference. In 1959 she was charged – but found not guilty – under the Terrorism Act. She was banned in 1962 under the Suppression of Communism Act. It was this banning order which originally restricted her to Orlando and meant that she had to give up her work as a medical social worker, a profession she had pioneered. Further banning orders followed in 1965 and 1966, she faced several charges of contravening the banning orders and finally in 1969 she was held in solitary confinement for 18 months. On her release new banning orders were imposed which she again defied, resulting in a six-month jail sentence in 1974. She had a brief respite from bannings when the streets of Soweto witnessed the children's uprising in 1976. She became involved with the Black Parents' Association, was banned again and finally banished to Brandfort in 1977.

Once Winnie Mandela told an interviewer that she knew why the white man fought for power, because if he lost it, 'he will lose it forever . . . when I gain it, I will keep it forever . . .'