

MANDELA, MY HERO



David Dean

NELSON MANDELA IS LOVED AND RESPECTED WORLDWIDE FOR HIS COURAGE, INTEGRITY AND CHARISMA. BUT HIS SOFTER SIDE CAME TO THE FORE ONE MEMORABLE DAY.

By HELEN LYMAN

I first met Nelson Mandela when my husband Princeton and I had only been in South Africa a few months — a very turbulent few months. Mandela had been released from prison two years earlier. There was progress toward a majority-rule government, and most South Africans, “black,” “white,” and “colored,” were passionate about avoiding civil war. But the political reality was still a dizzying roller coaster ride. One day some seemingly insurmountable difference would suddenly be, at least partially, resolved — but then the next day the newspapers would be full of the graphic descriptions of riots following a township killing. After each horrific

event all sides would blame each other and call off negotiations. The outcome of this march toward a democratic government was still unknown.

It was during these unsettled times that my husband and I arrived in South Africa. We had high hopes and some fears of what his tenure as the American ambassador would bring. The African National Congress, Mandela's political party, did not harbor friendly feelings toward the United States. The U.S. had come to the anti-apartheid movement rather late and, in the ANC's opinion, was still not giving it enough support. The white-ruled South African government, for its part, did not trust us because it felt we were *too* aligned with the forces intent on replacing it.

By April 1993, conditions were not much improved. But fortunately, there were men like Nelson Mandela who were able to convince most black South Africans to give nonviolence a bit longer to prove itself. Another was Chris Hani, who, like Mandela, had great charisma and popularity. He was a dynamic young man with the ability to control the youth vigilantes, who were becoming dangerous.

A Planned Excursion

That's how things stood one day as we, and the DCM and his wife, were sitting in our living room in Cape Town. We were waiting to hear that a visiting congressional delegation had boarded their bus and were on their way to see the Cape Flats townships. We were all exhausted from ensuring that the delegation was having a safe, informative trip, which we hoped would send them back to the U.S. with more determination to aid the South African struggle.

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Today the group had a full day planned, leaving the four of us free. This Sunday seemed made for hiking on the famous Table Mountain. Nature had blessed this part of the country by surrounding it with two oceans and then adding several magnificent mountain ranges and forests.

It was relaxing to be in the presence of good friends with whom I could just be myself, sip my coffee, wear my old jeans, sink into a soft chair, anticipate

the planned hike, and wait for the call that would signal the end of our responsibilities for the visiting Americans. We felt we had earned this rare chance to be out of the spotlight and just enjoy ourselves the way other people did.

When the phone rang, I eagerly reached for my backpack with no premonition of what was to come. Once I realized, from my husband's part of the conversation, that something had gone wrong, my disappointment was overwhelming. But the horror of what had happened quickly put all thoughts of beautiful, peaceful Table Mountain out of my head. Chris Hani had been assassinated and we knew immediately that the country had lost the very man, after Mandela, most capable of keeping order in the townships. We had lived through the American riots after the assassination of Martin Luther King, and feared for the future of South Africa's hope for a peaceful transition.

Soon we learned of the ANC's plans to have two memorial services for Chris Hani. One would be for the diplomatic community and would take place in Johannesburg, the major business city in the country. The other would take place a day earlier on a football field in Soweto, a teeming black township of five million people. My husband decided to attend both of these services. I objected on the grounds that the one in Soweto was sure to be dangerous; there had already been several reports of violence around the country. He insisted that he would be safe — so I insisted that, if it was not dangerous, I would go along. I thought that argument might keep him safely at home. But my plan backfired and, along with my husband, I found myself being driven to the football field accom-

panied by an armed American security employee. There was one bulletproof vest, my husband's size, hanging in the car.

To the Stadium

As we drove toward the stadium, I became increasingly fearful as we heard the angry shouts of the young men walking to the service. Fires had been set, and rocks were being thrown at the steel military and police vehicles that were visible all along the road. Although we arrived early, the stadium was already packed and people were standing everywhere in order to see, including the rooftops of the small buildings around it.

So it was that we found ourselves the only diplomats and, indeed, the only white faces that I could see, at the entrance of a football field crowded with 10,000 agitated ANC and communist mourners.

Once inside the stadium, the ambassador and I were taken over by four huge men wearing red shirts with "Communist Party" printed in large black letters on the front and back of the shirts. Trying to smile and not show our nervousness in the midst of the chaos and noise, we explained who we were and were greatly relieved when we realized that these tough looking young men had become our self-appointed body guards. We sincerely hoped that they were up to the job. Very unceremoniously, two of these hefty men held my husband's arms down by his sides, lifted him off the ground and literally carried him through the crowds. The two others did the same for me. Thus they transported us safely across the length of the stadium, to the platform where they thought we belonged.

During this time my heart rate was going through the roof and I felt we had been stupid to come to this event. In our protected white world we could not comprehend the feelings of the masses around us. Later, much later, we were able to joke that, were we to have appeared on American TV surrounded by men in Communist Party shirts, our stay in South Africa might have ended quite abruptly. Politically

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correct or not, they kept us from any threat of harm and, looking over the livid faces of the crowd chanting anti-everything slogans, we were grateful for their protection.

We sat through increasingly irate speeches and became ever more concerned about where this outrage would take the crowd and where it would take the country. When Nelson Mandela finally arrived on the scene, even he seemed in danger of losing control of the crowd; he was booed several times when he spoke out against taking revenge. In the end, to our great relief, he did manage to quiet the people,

partly by stressing the fact that it was, after all, a white woman who had taken down the license plate number of the car of Chris Hani's assassin. After his speech Mandela was told of my husband's presence and we were informed that he was coming over to greet my husband.

I was (and am) used to standing in the background while my spouse conducts business at receptions and dinner parties and all manner of social occasions. I am rather shy, and especially uncomfortable around celebrities. So it was with relief that I stepped back as a world hero stepped up to speak to the American ambassador who, by attending a memorial service, was expressing his support of Mandela's goals for South Africa. Mandela noticed me in the background and our eyes met. Although he did not know me, he seemed to size up the situation immediately. I could feel him thinking: "Awwww, poor thing, she's shy." And then, in spite of the tension we could still feel in the stadium — in spite of the concern he must have had about what he needed to say and do in the next few days to keep the black population's anger from erupting into a violence that would kill his dreams of a peaceful change of government — over he marched to give me a hug.

Nelson Mandela is loved and respected worldwide for his charisma, courage, and the fact that he is a strong leader whose integrity is legendary. But as that encounter demonstrated, it is his kindness and sensitivity to others that have made him *my* hero. ■