

Rolihlahla Mandela was born in Mvezo, Transkei, on July 18, 1918, to Nonqaphi Nosekeni and Nkosi Mphakanyiswa Gadla Mandela.

His father died when he was 12 and he became a ward of the Thembu Regent Jongintaba Dalindyebo where he heard stories of his ancestor's valour.

At primary school in Qunu his teacher Miss Mdingane gave him the name Nelson, in accordance with the custom to give all school children "Christian" names.

His university studies were cut short when he was expelled for joining a student protest but he completed his BA by correspondence and graduated in 1943.

He and his cousin Justice fled in 1941 when the Regent began arranging their marriages. In Johannesburg he did his law articles and registered to study for an LLB. He finally graduated in 1949 while in the last months of his imprisonment, he obtained an LLB through the University of South Africa.

He only joined the African National Congress in 1944 when he helped form the ANC Youth League.

In 1944 he married Evelyn Mase and they had two sons and two daughters one of whom died in infancy. They divorced in 1958.

In 1952 he and 19 others were convicted for their part in a civil disobedience campaign and sentenced to nine months hard labour suspended for two years.

With a two-year diploma in Law he started in 1952 first black law firm with Oliver Tambo.

He was arrested in a countrywide police swoop on 5 December 1955, which led to the 1956 Treason Trial. He was in the last group of 28 acquitted on 29 March 1961.

The police killing on 21 March 1960 of 69 unarmed protestors led to the country's first state of emergency and the banning on 8 April of the ANC and the Pan Africanist Congress.

In 1958 he married a social worker Winnie Madikizela and they had two daughters. The couple divorced in 1996.

When he and his colleagues were acquitted in the Treason Trial he went underground and planned a national strike for 29, 30 and 31 May. In June 1961 he helped to establish the armed wing of the ANC.

On 11 January 1962 using the adopted name David Motsamayi, he left South Africa secretly and travelled around Africa and visited England to gain support for the armed struggle. He received military training in Morocco and Ethiopia. He was arrested in a police roadblock outside Howick on 5 August 1962 and charged with leaving the country illegally and inciting workers to strike. He was convicted and sentenced to five years imprisonment which he began serving in Pretoria Local Prison.

In October 1963 he joined ten others on trial for sabotage in what became known as the Rivonia Trial. Facing the death penalty his words to the court at the end of his famous 'Speech from the Dock' on 20 April 1964 became immortalized:

"I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished 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. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die."

On 11 June 1964 he and seven others Walter Sisulu, Ahmed Kathrada, Govan Mbeki, Raymond Mhlaba, Denis Goldberg, Elias Motsoaledi and Andrew Mlangeni were convicted and the next day were sentenced to life imprisonment.

His mother died in 1968 and his eldest son Thembi in 1969. He was not allowed to attend their funerals.

On 31 March 1982 he was transferred to Pollsmoor Prison in Cape Town with Sisulu, Mhlaba and Mlangeni. Kathrada joined them in October. In 1986 he initiated talks with the government about an ultimate meeting with the ANC.

He spent over three months in hospital with Tuberculosis and the last 14 months of his imprisonment in a house at Victor Verster Prison from where he was released on 11 February 1990.

In 1993 he and President FW de Klerk jointly won the Nobel Peace Prize and on 27 April 1994 he voted for the first time in his life.

On 10 May 1994 he was inaugurated South Africa's first democratically elected President. On his 80th birthday in 1998 he married Graça Machel, his third wife.

He stepped down in 1999 after one term as President. He continued to work with the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund he set up in 1995 and established the Nelson Mandela Foundation and The Mandela Rhodes Foundation.

Nelson Mandela never wavered in his devotion to democracy, equality and learning. Despite terrible provocation, he never answered racism with racism. His life has been an inspiration to all who are oppressed and deprived, to all who are opposed to oppression and deprivation.

He died at his home in Johannesburg on 5 December 2013. He was 95.