

# 491 Days

Prisoner Number 1323/69

**WINNIE MADIKIZELA-MANDELA**

Foreword by Ahmed Kathrada

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# Contents

Foreword by Ahmed Kathrada ix

Introduction 1

## **Part One Journal 3**

Chapter 1 Arrest 5

Chapter 2 Detention 9

Chapter 3 Acquittal and Re-detention 17

Chapter 4 State of Mind 23

Chapter 5 The Decision 25

Chapter 6 Health 29

Chapter 7 Interrogation 36

Chapter 8 Interrogation and Other Issues 40

Chapter 9 Attitude of the Interrogators 54

Chapter 10 May Diary 57

Chapter 11 June Diary 62

Chapter 12 July Diary 66

Chapter 13 My Husband 74

Chapter 14 New Trial 78

## **Part Two Letters 97**

Background 98

Epilogue by Winnie Madikizela-Mandela 232

Twenty Years in the Life of Winnie Mandela 241

Sixteen Months in the Life of Winnie Mandela:

12 May 1969 to 14 September 1970 244

Acknowledgements 251

As the South African security system sought to destroy all opposition after Nelson Mandela was sentenced to life imprisonment in 1964, his wife Nomzamo Winnie Mandela experienced almost constant harassment. Her longest and most tortuous period of police detention lasted sixteen months, from 12 May 1969 to 14 September 1970. This little-known period is documented in a recently recovered prison journal she kept secretly and details the trauma this young mother of two small children endured. Her words and those in letters by her and Nelson Mandela reproduced here highlight both the effect of apartheid's brutality and the strength of a defiant spirit.

## State of Mind

*The thought of beginning another period of detention was almost too much to bear.*

### MY STATE OF MIND DURING THE FIRST TWO WEEKS OF MY RE-DETENTION

Perhaps because I already had experience of what I would go through in solitary confinement, the first two weeks were the most gruesome period I've ever gone through. I went through the following phases:

- (a) I was lucky if I got my three times a day treatment once a day. I had to literally beg for my tablets from the matrons and the wardresses. I just could not sleep at all even when I did get all the tablets sometimes. I was alarmed when I found myself walking in my sleep. On four occasions I remember finding myself standing near the door. I tried to think how I got there but could not reconstruct any movements. This happened when I did fall asleep for a short while.
- (b) I had horrible nightmares and woke up screaming in the night. I discovered I spoke aloud when I thought of my children and literally held conversations with them. I cried almost hysterically when I recalled their screams on the night of my arrest. I just cannot get this out of my mind up to date. I spent the whole day walking up and down my cell hoping to exhaust myself so that I could sleep at night.
- (c) I realised that although I was not sleeping I did not either feel tired or

drowsy during the day. I could not bear the glare of the light day and night. I was growing more and more tense each day.

- (d) I suffered from loss of appetite and because I ate so little, my colleagues' food was reduced to almost a quarter of our daily rations. This was enough for me but serious punishment for my colleagues. I then decided to throw my food in the sanitary bucket. [Unnamed accused] suffered most as she is a heavy eater. I told No. 9 and 7 who were also poor eaters to dispose of their food as I did if they had not finished it. We whispered to each other at night.
- (e) The blackouts which I have now had for the whole year of my detention grew worse and lasted longer. If I stood up suddenly I fell down. When I recovered I felt the blood rushing to the upper part of my body especially the head. I would then put my head between my knees.
- (f) I filled the long and empty endless hours by reconstructing the story of my life in my mind. I was nine years old when I lost my mother, I can hardly remember her but I longed for her and cried bitterly when I thought of her. I remembered my hard childhood years without her, how poor my family was although my father was the school principal. I recalled how I had to wash his khaki shirt and iron it overnight, his baggy trousers often full of holes and I ironed them so badly because I was too young. The secret childhood tears I shed when the school children teased me about my shabbily dressed father. Mother's illness had drained his pockets and we were nine children. Mother was ill for years and every penny was spent on doctor's fees all over the district. When she died I had to nurse my three-month-old baby brother. All this came to my mind as though it had happened yesterday. I cried when I remembered how I cried as I was forced to leave school, put my baby brother on my back and go to look after cattle. Father could not afford even to hire a herd boy which was common practice those days.
- (g) I could feel the blood pressure was dropping again. My pulse was raised and I had the attacks of breathlessness even during the day, this I never had before. I often had these at night if I lay flat.
- (h) I worried a great deal about how I felt and worried more about the 'boys' in our group. I thought endlessly about how I could save my colleagues from this mental agony. I felt it was my duty to do something to save them no matter how drastic it would be as long as Nelson and my people would understand.

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