

ROBBEN ISLAND: THE DARK YEARS

AN EXCERPT FROM A LONG WALK TO FREEDOM
BY NELSON MANDELA

The following excerpt recounts Mandela's imprisonment, along with six other political prisoners who were taken together to Robben Island.

We landed on a military airstrip on one end of the island. It was a grim, overcast day, and when I stepped out of the plane, the cold winter wind whipped through our thin prison uniforms. We were met by guards with automatic weapons; the atmosphere was tense but quiet, unlike the boisterous reception I had received on my arrival on the island two years before.

We were driven to the old jail, an isolated stone building, where we were ordered to strip while standing outside. One of the ritual indignities of prison life is that when you are transferred from one prison to another, the first thing that happens is that you change from the garb of the old prison to that of the new. When we were undressed, we were thrown the plain khaki uniforms of Robben Island.

Apartheid's regulations extended even to clothing. All of us, except Kathy, received short trousers, an insubstantial jersey, and a canvas jacket. Kathy, the one Indian among us, was given long trousers. Normally Africans would receive sandals made from car tires, but in this instance we were given shoes. Kathy, alone, received socks. Short trousers for Africans were meant to remind us that we were "boys." I put on the short trousers that day, but I vowed that I would not put up with them for long.

The warders pointed with their guns where they wanted us to go, and barked their orders in simple one-word commands: "Move!" "Silence!" "Halt!" They did not threaten us in the swaggering way that I recalled from my previous stay, and betrayed no emotion.

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We were immediately joined by a number of prisoners who had been held in the general section of the prison, a squat brick building not far from Section B. The general prison, known as sections F and G, contained about a thousand mostly common-law prisoners. As many as a quarter of them were political prisoners, and a handful of those men were put with us in Section B. We were isolated from the general prisoners for two reasons: we were considered risky from a security perspective, but even more dangerous from a political standpoint. The authorities were concerned we might "infect" the other prisoners with our political views.

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Robben Island had changed since I had been there for a fortnight's stay in 1962. In 1962, there were few prisoners; the place seemed more like an experiment than a full-fledged prison. Two years later, Robben Island was without question the harshest, most iron-fisted outpost in the South African penal system. It was a hardship station not only for the prisoners but for the prison staff. Gone were the Coloured warders who had supplied cigarettes and sympathy. The warders were white and overwhelmingly Afrikaans-speaking, and they demanded a master-servant relationship. They ordered us to call them "baas," which we refused. The racial divide on Robben Island was absolute: There were no black warders, and no white prisoners.

Moving from one prison to another always requires a period of adjustment. But journeying to Robben Island was like going to another country. Its isolation made it not simply another prison, but a world of its own, far removed from the one we had come from. The high spirits with which we left Pretoria had been snuffed out by its stern atmosphere; we were face to face with the realization that our life would be unredeemably grim. In Pretoria, we felt connected to our supporters and our families; on the island, we felt cut off, and indeed we were. We had the consolation of being with each other, but that was the only consolation. My dismay was quickly replaced by a sense that a new and different fight had begun.

QUIZ

POLITICAL DRAMA

Politics and drama mix. Sometimes, artistic work is used to fuel and reflect upon the politics of a nation. At its best, the work transcends that moment and points to a more hopeful future for all of us, regardless of birthplace and identity, or maybe just gives voice to our pain. The following artists, plays, and creations have contributed both to a revolutionary movement and a powerful aesthetic.

1. This playwright and leader of the Velvet Revolution, imprisoned during the years of Communist control, eventually became the president of the Czech Republic.
2. Created the Theater of the Oppressed.
3. This woman headed the Federal Theatre Project, part of Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration, which funded the creation of many socially-focused theatrical works, including a pro-union production of *The Cradle Will Rock*.
4. This musical, currently being revived off-Broadway, follows the rise of the Nazi Regime, contrasting its fascism with the freedoms of the Kit Kat Club.
5. This play by Irish writer Brendan Behan centers on a player in the Catholic-Protestant violence of Northern Ireland.
6. This dancer-choreographer created the highly political work *Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin/The Promised Land*.
7. This Nigerian playwright won the Nobel Prize for Literature, and was frequently arrested and detained for his intellectual and political views, which he documented in his work *The Man Died*, written in 1979.
8. Name one of the NEA 4, the group of artists who challenged the National Endowment for the Arts' request that all artistic work which received funding be "decent."
9. This German theatrical reformer used drama as a social and ideological forum to convey many leftist causes. He often worked with composer Kurt Weill.
10. The name of Voltaire's play, which features a character criticizing everything from marriage to the military. Later given a musical score by Leonard Bernstein.

NELSON MANDELA REVISITS HIS OLD CELL ON ROBBEN ISLAND

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