

ZENANI MANDELA interview 1986, USA - ORIGINAL TRANSCRIPT

Text: Princes Mandela-Dlamini, daughter of Winnie & Nelson Mandela.  
Slightly edited interview, USA 1986

Davis: What is your earliest memory of your father?

Z: The only memory of my father is um what I have, is I remember we were on a farm, called Lilliesleaf at Rivonia, and we were chased by these bees, and he put me - I was on his shoulders, I think we were out for a walk, I was on his shoulders, and we were running and running and running, and these bees came after us, and he threw me on the ground and he lay on top of me. I don't know what happened to the bees, probably they just passed us by. Those are the only memories I have of him as a kid.

Davis: You don't have any stronger memory of anyone telling you not to tell anyone about seeing your father, or anything like that.

Z: No, I think I was a little bit too young, that's the only thing I remember about him. Um - nothing else, my mother was always afraid because I always mentioned this beautiful farm my father used to take me to, and she was always afraid, that, you know, they'd get to catch Daddy and things like that, but I always spoke about it to my friends, that's the only memory I have of him.

Text: 12 years later, she was allowed to visit her father on Robben Island prison.

Davis: Tell us about seeing your father when he was on Robben Island for many years.

Z: There are these restrictions for all political prisoners in South Africa, is 4 to 16. The first time I saw my father I was 16 years old. On Robben Island. That was the first time I saw him.

Davis: What happened when you saw him?

Z: There's an age restriction for all political prisoners in South Africa, 4 to 16 years of age. And when you're 16, it's the only time you can see your parents. The first time I saw my father, I really didn't know what to expect of him. After hearing everybody speak about this great man, and you know he was something like a god for some people, people admired him so much, but - the first time I saw him, as I was walking towards the prison, the prison, you know, where see our father, I really didn't know what to expect of him. And when I first saw him he was just somebody else, down to earth, very down to earth. A very loving man, and he was also I must say a very very modern person.

Davis: He kept saying to you Who are you, or something like that?

Z: Ah, the first time we saw us, you know, he just said, we looked so, we've grown up, from the first time he saw us, and Mummy had been sending him pictures of us, but you know pictures sometimes never ever, you know, they can never show the real person. And he was just so amazed that we had grown so much, and, you know, I don't know, it's just that - I don't remember what was it?

Davis: Could you tell us the farm story again, how - maybe a little more detail.

Z: Ah, the only thing I remember, I was on his shoulders, and we were running away, because - I just didn't understand why we were running away. And then he threw me down, and you know, he slipped on top of me, so he was on top of me so that something should pass. And when I asked Mummy a few years ago, you know you remember Daddy we were on this farm and things like that, she said, No, you were chased by bees. So that's all I remember. And another thing I remember about Lilliesleaf is there - there was a river nearby, and there was this boat that I used to like rowing on, and I remember the big willow trees that my father always used to take me on. Other than that, there's nothing I remember of Daddy.

Davis: How about the separation, the separation from your father and then after that the frequent separations from your mother.

Z: I don't think it really - my father's separation really affected me so much, because I was still too young to understand what was actually going on. But as a growing kid, when I got to being a teenager, and things like that, and needed somebody to ask questions on certain issues, Daddy was, Daddy or Mummy were never around, because both - Mummy

was in and out of prison just as much, so I missed that. And Zindzi always was lucky enough to always have me to fall back on, but I had nobody else to fall back on.

Davis: Your mother said that the police seemed to make a point of arresting her on the day that you were due to return home from boarding-school, do you remember coming home and finding your mother not there?

Z: A lot of times I remember coming home and being told, "Your mother's just been picked up this morning." And me, I always felt depressed, sometimes I used to cry a lot, but er as the years went by, I told myself that if I cried, what would I expect Zindzi to do, Zindzi was much younger than me, and that, that made us both very very strong.

Text: In 1975, Zanani married Prince Dlamini of Swaziland.

Davis: The first contact visit with your father, do you have strong memories of that?

Z: Ah, I think I was the first person to ever have a contact visit with my father on Robben Island, when my daughter was 6 months old. And it was it was a real real surprise for me. It was in 1977, December, we had gone with my husband to see my father, my father had never met him before. And um - it was just so - I was so excited to know that they gave us a contact visit, for the first time I could feel, I could touch my father like any other child could touch their father, and he was able to hold one of his grandchildren and he was just so happy, you know, we just had no - I just have no, I have no words to explain the feeling I had.

Davis: I know your father writes a lot of letters, um, does he feel very strongly about the family, does he feel that he's been forced to neglect the family, do you think?

Z: Well, I don't think he feels that way, he's very much closely in touch with everybody in the family, and he gives us advice where we really needed it, and if we ask for it. But also, I must explain that my father is a very very traditional man. So, he does things very traditionally.

Davis: What does that mean?

Z: For instance, er, I got married the traditional way, and he, he said to me when I kept on saying, No, Daddy, I want a white wedding, I want a small wedding, he said to me, My daughter, you must listen to me, um - tradition is so important to us, we have to preserve our traditions, so I want you to get married the way the Swazis would like you to get married, and the elders of the family would like us to get married. And I got married traditionally, I didn't get married in church, or anything.

Davis: How about your mother's character, what do you feel about that?

Z: Ah, I find my mother has a very very strong will, she's full of life and she's a very very you know loving mother, she tries, she tries to fill the gap that was there of not having a father, she tries to fill the gap of mother and father at the same time. And um - I admire both my parents very very much, I'm proud to be their daughter. Um - I think she's just a wonderful person. I've never seen Mummy cry, if she does cry, I suppose she does it when we aren't there, she doesn't want to break in front of us, she's a very strong woman.

Davis: She often looks after the grandchildren for long periods?

Z: Yes, he enjoys looking after the grandchildren, her grandchildren mean so much to her now that we've grown up. And they really keep her busy right now.

Z: Oh, because we were grew up in Swaziland, and we went to school in Swaziland, I didn't get that political education about the police, but - I think, because I always thought the police were always coming to arrest my mother in plain clothes especially, that, that brought a different light to me of the policemen in South Africa, meaning, the police was always taking away my parents, all the time, you know, I had - my mother was taken away by the police, my father was taken away by the police, and actually witnessing it, so I had a different fear of the police than in this country, in the States, where you always got the police because you're are in trouble, and or, you know, because someone is beating you up. I could never do that, because I always associated the policemen in South Africa for harrassing my parents, and for separating me from my parents.

Text: Cutting the wedding cake for the firstborn.

Z: I know the custom at home is, you cut the cake when your first child is born, that's the custom I know, and Mummy and Daddy's wedding cake has always been there, because when I was born, my father wasn't there, so the cake is always waiting, it's still there waiting for Mummy and Daddy to cut it. That's the, that's the story I know.

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